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# THE HASIDIC ANECDOTE IN MARTIN BUBER AND SHMUEL YOSEF AGNON

By

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## *Hasidism as the Jewish Teaching*

In this centennial year of Martin Buber's birth, his thought, philosophy, and biblical exegesis have been given considerable study. His literary merit—particularly in his retelling of Hasidic tales—has also been mentioned. Besides mentioning this literary work, however, it is important to focus on the place of Hasidism in Buber's total perspective. Buber saw Hasidism as a concentrated expression of "Jewish teaching." By this he meant that Hasidism represented more than Jewish dogma, philosophy, or legalism. Hasidism expressed Judaism as a pattern of living. Hasidism, he explained, "was not a teaching which was realized by its adherents in this or that measure, but a way of life."<sup>1</sup> When selecting which of the various Hasidic texts he should utilize Buber had this principle in mind. Those texts which demonstrated the "way of life," rather than those concerning theology were of paramount importance to him. He ordered the tales in a "biographical" arrangement so that the pattern of life involved could become clear. His object was to present "the best account of the character and way of a certain Zaddik. . ."<sup>2</sup> Naturally his subjective and selective approach did not yield an objective, historically rigorous picture of Hasidism. Scholars of Jewish mysticism have sufficient grounds for their criticism of "Buber's Hasidism."<sup>3</sup>

The worth of Buber's reconstruction of Hasidism needs to be evaluated in different terms. Walter Kaufmann refers to this reconstruction as "great religious stories," and they need to be looked at from that perspective.<sup>4</sup> Buber's transformation of Hasidism was part of an attempt to revive Jewish religiosity, a religiosity that had been drained of power and effectiveness. By rendering the tales of the Hasidism in new and striking language, Buber hoped to overcome the "postulate of the hour—to demythologize religion"<sup>5</sup> In his own eyes Buber saw himself as a new disciple of Hasidism. He was to bring the older tradition into a new world, to revive the "teaching" by addressing its lesson to new lives in a new context. He characterized modern times as "the hour when we are in danger of forgetting for what purpose we are on earth," and added that "I know of no other teaching that reminds us of this so forcibly."<sup>6</sup> Because he fulfilled the disciple's task of transmitting the master's message to future generations Buber claimed that "more adequately than the direct disciples, I received and completed the task. . ."<sup>7</sup>

What was this task to which Buber found himself called? We can discover it by analyzing the ways in which Buber used Hasidism. He retold Hasidic tales in the course of describing "the way of man." He collected anthologies of Hasidic anecdotes. These two uses of Hasidism complement one another. In the first an editorial comment, either implied or directly stated, expands the meaning of Hasidism; it makes the modern implication of the older tra-

dition more explicit. The second approach allows the text to speak for itself. It reveals the religious dynamics of the original story without making any direct correlation with modernity. Buber chooses the essay rather than the novel to demonstrate Hasidism's relevance to modern man—his one narrative work *For the Sake of Heaven* is more a loosely connected collection of tales rather than an integrated novel. A master of narrative, however, could use the juxtaposition of events, character, and personality to make comments that reveal the modern situation in relationship to Hasidism. When we analyze Buber it would be useful to have a "control" text, another version of the same tales against which to measure his variations. While the original texts may be useful when we are concerned with Buber's anthologies, they are less helpful when looking at his essays. We need to look at someone who, like Buber, comments, even obliquely on the tales he tells. That author need not be an essayist. He can be a narrator who uses the Hasidic tale creatively.

Just such a narrator with whom Buber can be compared is Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Both writers were steeped in Hasidic literature. More directly, they proposed joint editorship for a book of Hasidic tales. Despite the failure of that proposal, they continued to have "a warm relationship" throughout their lives.<sup>8</sup> Agnon even dedicated a collection of Hasidic stories to Buber.<sup>9</sup> At one point, Buber hinted at the influence that Agnon exerted on his response to Hasidism. Introducing a collection of essays on Hasidism, Buber wrote: "Right now while writing this introduction I have opened a bundle of folios and fragments of Agnon's hand dating from 1921-1924 and have spread them around me. What an influx of living tradition!"<sup>10</sup>

Agnon's irony is often a useful contrast to Buber's lyrical exaltation of Hasidism. The same story appears in very different contexts in each author's work. While Agnon may be presumed to have more literary liberty—after all he is writing fiction—the divergencies in view cannot be attributed to differences of genre alone. Agnon and Buber are divided by the task that each assigns to himself, and more fundamentally, by the way in which each regards Jewish religion. In this essay the two authors will be compared in order to discover what the basic approach to Hasidism reveals about the way each understood Jewish religion. Discovering the differences between Agnon and Buber at that level will help reveal how Buber conceived of his task when he retold Hasidic tales. Similar stories utilized by both authors as well as the use of identical themes will provide the basis for our comparison.

Before contrasting Agnon's and Buber's usage of an identical story, we can look at their use of a common theme. A basic Hasidic motif is that of an ordinary man who unifies God through his everyday activities. Alien or distracting thoughts are "redeemed" by being redirected to holy purposes. The sacred and the profane are united, secular actions take on a holy aspect. This theme occurs in essays by Buber and as an underlying current in many of Agnon's stories. In *Agunot*, the short story from which Agnon took his pen name, the alienation and disjunctive relationships characterizing his protagonists are punctuated by reference to the divine thread binding Israel's prayers into a unity. The single-mind absorption of Ben Uri in building the ark—a unity of purpose so often exalted in Hasidic lore—is the catalyst of disaster. While the hero of *Agadat HaSofer*, the *Tale of the Scribe*, seems to exemplify this theme, the use of it is ironic. Raphael, the scribe, binds the

quality of morning to evening, sets God always before him, and rejects any imputation of secularity when he hears that Torah scrolls are being mass produced. All this "unity" of being is, however, illusory. The scribe has actually negated the secular. Rejecting the non-holy he cannot understand his wife's sorrow and his own need of other people. His tragedy springs directly from the false piety of his "unification."

The parade example of Agnon's use of the unity theme is the story *HaMalbush*. The story opens with a tailor sitting and stitching at the end of day. Agnon injects a sense of urgency—the garment must be completed for the lord of the manor. Only one thing needs to be done—that which will make it into a "garment" rather than merely sewn materials. Agnon allows his readers to guess the nature of this last requirement. We are not far off if we assume that missing feature to be unity. One distraction after another deflects the tailor from his task. True, no distinction between holy and profane exists—pious thoughts about prayer, washing of the hands, and the like, are as divisive as "carnal" thoughts about liquor, dinner, or displaced anger. The message of the story seems to be that religion may idealize unity of self, but that here below such ideals are out of place. Not only here below. Just as the lord of the manor is just but his servants are cruel, so too, Agnon explains that the Lord above is merciful, but his servants are not. Religion is too far removed from actual life to place realistic goals before men. The three stories *Agunot*, *Agadat HaSofer*, and *HaMalbush* emphasize how far modern men have come from the Hasidic goals of unity and exaltation of the everyday.<sup>11</sup>

Buber does not reproduce any of these stories except for a section of *Agadat HaSofer* to be discussed below. He, too, however, emphasizes both the demand for unification and the difficulty men have in realizing the demand. Two of his stories and essays stand out in this regard—the stories about Enoch the Cobbler and the tale called "Patchwork."<sup>12</sup> Enoch the Cobbler tells of a man who "as he sewed together the upper leather and the sole, he joined together God and His Shekina." The ideal is to bind all reality into a total unity. Buber admits the difficulty of this task. He notes the "fundamental" distinction between holy and profane in Judaism but adds "the wish still awoke every again to invest the holy with effect and influence in the realm of the profane," and by creating this story, he comments, "This wish now entered into fulfillment."<sup>13</sup> In "Patchwork" Buber again notes the difficulty of attaining unification and its importance as a "wish" rather than a final fulfillment. The story tells of a disciple of the Rabbi of Lublin who sought to fast from one Sabbath to the next. For six days the fast progressed without temptation. Then on the final day he suffered a final thirst. Unwillingly the hasid felt himself drawn to the well and tempted to break his vow. By strength of will he overcame his impulse. Turning from the well he felt a surge of pride. Recalling the duty of humility he turned back to the well to break his pride. As if by providence, no sooner had he reached it than his thirst vanished. He completed his fast. Buber relates his own surprise to find that the Rabbi, far from praising the disciple, scolds him. "Patchwork," he declares. The difficulty of unification is very real, but the desire for unification, the goal of unity must always be present. Details are insignificant compared to that objective. Buber views Hasidic stress on the unity theme as both a criticism

of modern man and a hope, a wish, which can lead to lives constructed in its image.<sup>14</sup>

The difference between Agnon's irony and Buber's lyricism can be traced to the way in which each sees Jewish religion. For Agnon, that religion is a static, stultifying force; for Buber it prepares the way for revelation. This contrast is evident in the way both utilize a tale which stresses the exception, rather than the rule, in Hasidic life. The tale concerns a Hasid who abandons the frenzy of enthusiastic ecstasy for quiet stillness. Both Buber and Agnon begin this narrative by referring to the talmudic precedent of rabbis who moved so uncontrollably during prayer that "if you left him in one corner, when you returned he was in the opposite one." Both continue by noting the Hasid who, in exception to this tradition, remained absolutely still. For Agnon this is the case with Raphael in *Agadat HaSofer*. On the ecstatic holiday of Simhat Torah when all were dancing in wild frenzy, Raphael's chanting created a stillness, a rigid quiet. Symbolically the story refers to Raphael's petrified life, his religiousness which finally sacrifices both himself and his wife to the ultimate stillness—death.<sup>15</sup>

Buber's view of the story is different. He relates the story of Yehuda Loeb who remained seated while the great Zaddik of Lublin prepared to say the benediction on Sukkot (is it just a coincidence that Simhat Torah falls on the additional day at the end of Sukkot?). These preparations consisted of violent motions that sent all other observers reeling and swaying. Yehuda Loeb, however, waited for the blessing itself and "looked up at the now motionless, exalted master and heard the divine blessing."<sup>16</sup> The quiet of religion is a waiting for Buber, not a petrification. Silence is an attending, a listening. Agnon uses the story to illustrate the static nature of religion. Buber ignores such an implication and reveals that even in its motionless moments religion is dynamic—it is a dynamic waiting.

This distinction between dynamic and static religion can also be found in the way identical stories are retold in the anthologies each author made of Hasidic tales. Agnon stresses the magical, implausible, and often ridiculous content of these anecdotes. These tales are remnants from an older time; they represent a religiousness that has now been outgrown. Buber tells the same stories as a means of illustrating *religion in progress*. For him they demonstrate the vitality which can animate a religious tradition. His retelling of the stories stress the values and ideals which can reawaken religiousness even in modern man. The choice of subject matter made by each author is characteristic. Agnon praises books, Buber exalts people. Buber presents Hasidism as a religion of sensitivity and human responsiveness, Agnon points out extremism and excess. Out of various tales told in common we should look at three. These three are representative of distinct types—they concern religious leadership, religious creativity, and religious inspiration. Using these stories as the basis of comparison we can see how Buber and Agnon diverge in their description and evaluation of the religious aspects of Hasidism. In each case Agnon emphasizes static forms while Buber discovers the evolving expressions of religiosity.<sup>17</sup>

The first example focuses on religious inspiration. What does it mean to have religious insight, to perceive a hidden reality? The story is called Or-Haganuz—The Hidden Light, and from it Buber takes the Hebrew name

for his anthology of Hasidic tales, using the story as a dedication for the book as a whole.<sup>18</sup> The narrative unfolds through dialogue between the Hasidim and anonymous respondents (note that the answer is always couched in the plural). Light is hidden for the righteous—but where can it be found? In the Torah—but then wouldn't the Zaddikim have found it? They have and they reveal it in their lives. The key word is "finding"—the light can be found both by the Zaddikim and in the lives of the Zaddikim. Religion is a process of discovery—either through study of books and literature or through association with those whose lives are religious texts themselves. The "light" is a metaphor for religious truth; "finding" emphasizes that such truth is discovered through a continuing process and is not a final result.

Agnon tells the story as a miracle tale.<sup>19</sup> Whenever the Baal Shem Tov (note the singularity here, not the "Zaddikim" but the Besht is involved) was presented with a problem, he would look through one or another of the holy texts. The disciples were curious—could answers to current problems be found in unrelated sources? The Besht answered that from the light hidden in the books he could see "from one end of the world to the other" and so could solve all questions. Books, far from stimulating creative lives, are props for a miracle. The books and their meaning are static, they have no real power. Only magic seems to be the potent force at work.

In another story Buber gives books a power of their own, but it is not a "magical" power. He entitled the tale "The Book."<sup>20</sup> The story is narrated in the first person by one who as a young child had been brought by his father to see Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, the author of *Toldoth*, a collection of teachings culled from the Besht. The innocent wonder of youth pervades the tale and gives it a charming simplicity. The boy relates that his father continually studied Rabbi Yaakov Yosef's work and pondered its meaning. Once he found a particular passage puzzling. Taking up his son he harnessed the horses and rode away to see the sage. Yaakov Yosef, on his death bed, was courteous to his visitors. When told the reason for their visit, he seized the book, and explained the passage in a strong, enthusiastic voice. The boy related in amazement "it seemed to me that the bed was lifted high above the earth." Buber finds in this story, one can deduce, an example of the close unity between book and author, creator and creation. The artistic work gives renewed strength to its originator. A book is more than words, it is testimony to a vital life-force.

Agnon's version of the tale is freighted with ritualism and pietistic formula.<sup>21</sup> The narrative begins with a panegyric in praise of Rabbi Moses and his excessive love for the book *Toldot*. The haste of his visit to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef is conveyed not by mundane images—Buber's harnessing of the horses—but by saying "he took his talit and tefillin." Ritualism rather than realism provides the central focus. At the same time the naive wonder of the child is transformed into grotesque realism. The bed of which Buber wrote "it seemed lifted high above the earth," is described by Agnon as literally hanging from the rafters. When Rabbi Yaakov Yosef becomes filled with holy fervor the bed swings like a pendulum causing the walls to quake. The old Rabbi who has just been compared to a one year old babe produces a veritable earthquake! From what does this new strength derive? Not from the dynamic influx of creative artistry but from name magic. When pronouncing the name

of the Besht the Rabbi renews his fervor. The climax of the story comes when Yaakov Yosef points to the stars and announces: "These stars look small to us, but in truth each star is a world itself; so it is with every word of my master..."

Here as previously, Agnon's view of religion emphasizes the static while Buber's is more dynamic. Agnon restricts religious power to that which is sealed and present in the given word. Buber's version gives priority to the on-going creative process that restores power to the creator. Agnon sees the individual rabbi as a mystical, magical figure. He possesses a certain quality, a talent, a spiritual gift. Buber envisions a more dynamic leader whose power derives from his ability to stimulate, to initiate a process, to become creative. Agnon's leader has acquired his power; Buber's has the power of creative inspiration, but possesses no specific talent, no single "gift."

The implications of this distinction underly the variation between Agnon and Buber in retelling a tale about Simha Bunam.<sup>22</sup> Both versions agree that Rabbi Bunam was once tempted to tell a joke—more than that—that he felt an obligation to do so. In both cases Satan attempts to dissuade him—if he voices such a secular, profane anecdote his position as rabbi would surely be in danger. Both authors have Rabbi Bunam respond to Satan with an Aramaic statement—you are ignorant of the higher secrets; Rabbi Pinhas has already taught us that all joy—even jokes—have their origin in the Garden of Eden. The story goes on to assert that the telling of the joke served to enhance Rabbi Bunam's status. Buber sees that enhancement in existential terms: the nature of Rabbi Bunam's leadership grew. Those who had been far removed now were joined to him. He extended his care and concern over a greater area. An inner transformation had occurred in the hearts of his auditors. Agnon is more matter of fact—Rabbi Bunam began receiving more petitions and requests than ever before. His reputation as a wonder working, miraculous figure was enhanced. The leader, for Agnon, is made by his status, by the static insignia of office. Buber considers leadership legitimated only by a dynamic vitality—the ability to unify his followers, the power to stimulate creative religious life.

Henri Bergson has spoken on two types of religions—static and dynamic. Static religion provides men with support, with myths and explanations which settle the unrest in human souls. Dynamic religion is in absolute contrast to static. It pushes aside boundaries and definitions. Dynamic religion transforms the way in which we look at life. Its power transforms static religion:

. . . just as when an artist of genius has produced a work which is beyond us, the spirit of which we cannot grasp, but which makes us feel how commonplace were the things we used to admire, in the same way static religion, thought it may still be there is no longer what it was, above all it no longer dares to assert itself. . .<sup>23</sup>

Buber stands for dynamic religion, Agnon for static. Buber's intention seems to make Agnon's vision of Hasidism no longer tenable. In short, Buber sees a renewed possibility for Judaism—a modernized Jewish religiosity—while Agnon sees only a Judaism of the past. Buber's aim in his Hasidic stories is to free Jewish religiosity from that ritualism and supernaturalism which play so important a role in Agnon's tales. Buber transforms a book-centered, static approach to religious life into a humanistic, process-oriented religiosity.

Comparing Agnon and Buber brings into sharp relief these objectives. Judaism may have been defined classically by its concern for law, its respect for authority and wonder working rabbis, by its submergence in books. Buber seeks to rescue modern Judaism from that past. His rendering of Hasidic tales points to alternative Jewish approaches. The Hasidic tales, even if not historically accurate, has the power to evoke a modern Jewish response. Buber hopes for this response rather than for a historical curiosity within his reader. His literary form has a more than literary intention—the recreation of a vital and changing Jewish life-style. Buber's emphasis on Hasidism as "teaching," as directed to a "way of life," is demonstrated in the literary techniques and use of themes that we have seen. He restructures Hasidic literature in order to build a new Judaism—one in which the human life rather than the book is central. In many ways the relationship between Agnon and Buber was ironic—one cannot escape the suspicion that Agnon saw this irony. The two authors stood for antithetical reconstructions of Hasidism; they were unalterably opposed in their view of the relevance of Hasidism for modern man. Bergson saw static and dynamic religion as inextricably intertwined although diametrically opposed to each other. "Thus do we find interposed," he suggests, "transitions and differences. . . between two things which are as a matter of fact radically different in nature and which, at first sight, we can hardly believe deserve the same name."<sup>24</sup> The same is true of Agnon and Buber. Hasidism included within itself both static and dynamic elements. Agnon chose to emphasize one side of the Hasidic tale, Buber the other. By contrasting one with the other we have discovered how very different they are. Despite similarities Agnon's Hasidic tale and Buber's are two radically different phenomena and need to be distinguished from one another. This essay has been a step in that direction.

More importantly, however, this essay has established Buber's "message" as a new disciple of Hasidic masters. He was to transform that message by revealing it as "teaching." To do this he remolded his material so that dynamic religiousness was revealed. He selected and edited his tales so that the ritualistic and static elements could be disregarded. Buber's task was nothing less than changing a Jew's perception of his religion. In Buber's rendering, through Hasidism, the Jewish religion became a teaching rather than a set of laws and dogmas. Of course Buber wrestled with his texts and re-created their form and style. The contrast with Agnon, however, shows how well he succeeded in his aim of effecting the transformation of Hasidism into a living, dynamic religiosity.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, edited and translated by Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) p. 24.
- <sup>2</sup>Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidism*, translated by Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1947) the Early Masters, p. X.
- <sup>3</sup>See Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism," in Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1971) 227-250 and Baruch Kurzweil, *Facing the Spiritual Perplexity of Our Time* (Hebrew), edited with an introduction by Moshe Swarcz (Ramat-Gan: Baruch Kurzweil Memorial Foundation, 1976) pp. 66-82.
- <sup>4</sup>*Religion From Tolstoy to Camus*, selected and introduced by Walter Kaufmann, Harper Torchbooks, (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) p. 425.
- <sup>5</sup>Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, p. 41. Moshe Swarcz in "Martin Buber's Concept of Mythos and the Problem of Entmythologisierung," *Language, Myth and Art* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House, Ltd., 1966) 216-249, places Buber's view in the context of Christian "demythologization" and shows his developing usage of the concept of myth. Swarcz is particularly helpful in delineating the dependency of Buber's idea of myth on his theory of language.
- <sup>6</sup>Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, edited and translated by Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1960) p. 22.
- <sup>7</sup>Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, p. 62.
- <sup>8</sup>Aubrey Hodes, *Martin Buber: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971) p. 1.
- <sup>9</sup>Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Kol Sipurav Shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, second edition, (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House, Ltd., 1968) Volume 8, p. 90. For an extensive bibliography see Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1968).
- <sup>10</sup>Martin Buber, *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik and Devir, 1963) p. 5.
- <sup>11</sup>Agnon, *Kol Sipurav*, Volume 2, pp. 131-145 (*Agadat HaSofer*), pp. 405-416 (*Agunot*); Volume 7, pp. 305-320 (*HaMalbush*). Translations of the first two stories are found in S. Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1970). On the theme of unity and the garment image see David Tamar, "Covering and Interior," (Hebrew) in *Le 'Agnon Shai*, edited by Dov Sadan and Ephraim Urbach (Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency, 1966) 331-341.
- <sup>12</sup>Buber, *Origin and Meaning*, pp. 84-85, 126; *Hasidism and Modern Man*, p. 185; 146-151.
- <sup>13</sup>Buber, *Origin and Meaning*, p. 87.
- <sup>14</sup>Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, pp. 146-151.
- <sup>15</sup>Agnon, *Kol Sipurav*, volume 2, pp. 142-143.
- <sup>16</sup>Buber, *Origin and Meaning*, p. 138.
- <sup>17</sup>Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Sifreihem Shel Zaddikim* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1961) contains the stories to be dealt with here; it forms part of a larger work—unavailable to me at present—focusing on books, writers and stories.
- <sup>18</sup>Martin Buber, *Or HaGanuz* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1957) frontispiece.
- <sup>19</sup>Agnon, *Sifreihem*, p. 9.
- <sup>20</sup>Buber, *Or HaGanuz*, p. 162.
- <sup>21</sup>Agnon, *Sifreihem*, pp. 13-14 = *Sipurav*, volume 8, pp. 106-107.
- <sup>22</sup>Buber, *Or HaGanuz*, p. 410; Agnon, *Sifreihem*, p. 48.
- <sup>23</sup>Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter, Doubleday Anchor Books, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1935) pp. 209-215.
- <sup>24</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 214-215.