



THE WAY OF MAN

ACCORDING TO THE
TEACHING OF
HASIDISM

MARTIN BUBER

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The Teaching of
HASIDISM

By
Martin Buber

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II. THE PARTICULAR WAY

Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz once said to his teacher, the 'Seer' of Lublin: 'Show me one general way to the service of God.'

The zaddik replied: 'It is impossible to tell men what way they should take. For one way to serve God is through learning, another through prayer, another through fasting, and still another through eating. Everyone should carefully observe what way his heart draws him to, and then choose this way with all his strength.'

In the first place, this story tells us something about our relationship to such genuine service as was performed by others before us. We are to revere it and learn from it, but we are not to imitate it. The great and holy deeds done by others are examples for us, since they show, in a concrete manner, what greatness and holiness is, but they are not models which we should copy. However small our achievements may be in comparison with those of our forefathers, they have their real value in that we bring them about in our own way and by our own efforts.

The maggid¹ of Zlotchov² was asked by a hasid: 'We are told: "Everyone in Israel is in duty bound to say: When will my work approach the works of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?" How are we to understand this? How could we ever venture to think that we could do what our fathers did?'

¹ i.e., preacher.

² Town in Eastern Galicia.

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The rabbi expounded: 'Just as our fathers founded new ways of serving, each a new service according to his character: one the service of love, the other that of stern justice, the third that of beauty, so each one of us in his own way shall devise something new in the light of teachings and of service, and do what has not yet been done.'

Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. 'It is the duty of every person in Israel to know and consider that he is unique in the world in his particular character and that there has never been anyone like him in the world, for if there had been someone like him, there would have been no need for him to be in the world. Every single man is a new thing in the world, and is called upon to fulfil his particularity in this world. For verily: that this is not done, is the reason why the coming of the Messiah is delayed.' Every man's foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never-recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, and be it even the greatest, has already achieved.

The wise Rabbi Bunam once said in old age, when he had already grown blind: 'I should not like to change places with our father Abraham! What good would it do God if Abraham became like blind Bunam, and blind Bunam became like Abraham? Rather than have this happen, I think I shall try to become a little more myself.'

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The same idea was expressed with even greater pregnancy by Rabbi Zusya when he said, a short while before his death: 'In the world to come I shall not be asked: "Why were you not Moses?" I shall be asked: "Why were you not Zusya?"'

We are here confronted with a doctrine which is based on the fact that men are essentially unlike one another, and which therefore does not aim at making them alike. All men have access to God, but each man has a different access. Mankind's great chance lies precisely in the unlikeness of men, in the unlikeness of their qualities and inclinations. God's all-inclusiveness manifests itself in the infinite multiplicity of the ways that lead to him, each of which is open to one man. When some disciples of a deceased zaddik came to the 'Seer' of Lublin and expressed surprise at the fact that his customs were different from those of their late master, the 'Seer' exclaimed: 'What sort of God would that be who has only one way in which he can be served!' But by the fact that each man, starting from his particular place and in a manner determined by his particular nature, is able to reach God, God can be reached by mankind as such, through its multiple advance by all those different ways.

God does not say: 'This way leads to me and that does not', but he says: 'Whatever you do may be a way to me, provided you do it in such a manner that it leads you to me.' But what it is that can and shall be done by just this person and no other, can be revealed to him only in himself. In this matter, as I said before

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it would only be misleading to study the achievements of another man and endeavour to equal him; for in so doing, a man would miss precisely what he and he alone is called upon to do. The Baal-Shem¹ said: 'Every man should behave according to his "rung"'. If he does not, if he seizes the "rung" of a fellow-man and abandons his own, he will actualize neither the one nor the other.' Thus, the way by which a man can reach God is revealed to him only through the knowledge of his own being, the knowledge of his essential quality and inclination. 'Everyone has in him something precious that is in no one else.' But this precious something in a man is revealed to him only if he truly perceives his strongest feeling, his central wish, that in him which stirs his inmost being.

Of course, in many cases, a man knows this his strongest feeling only in the shape of a particular passion, of the 'Evil Urge' which seeks to lead him astray. Naturally, a man's most powerful desire, in seeking satisfaction, rushes in the first instance at objects which lie across his path. It is necessary, therefore, that the power of even this feeling, of even this impulse, be diverted from the casual to the essential, and from the relative to the absolute. Thus a man finds his way.

A zaddik once said: 'At the end of Ecclesiastes we read: "At the end of the matter, the whole is heard: Fear God." Whatever matter you follow to its end, there, at the end, you will hear one thing: "Fear God",

¹ i.e., Master of the Name (of God). So the founder of Hasidism, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760), was surnamed.

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and this one thing is the whole. There is no thing in the world which does not point a way to the fear of God and to the service of God. Everything is commandment.' By no means, however, can it be our true task in the world into which we have been set, to turn away from the things and beings that we meet on our way and that attract our hearts; our task is precisely to get in touch, by hallowing our relationship with them, with what manifests itself in them as beauty, pleasure, enjoyment. Hasidism teaches that rejoicing in the world, if we hallow it with our whole being, leads to rejoicing in God.

One point in the tale of the 'Seer' seems to contradict this, namely, that among the examples of 'ways' we find not only eating but also fasting. But if we consider this in the general context of hasidic teaching, it appears that though detachment from nature, abstinence from natural life, may, in the cases of some men mean the necessary starting-point of their 'way' or, perhaps, a necessary act of self-isolation at certain crucial moments of existence, it may never mean the whole way. Some men must begin by fasting, and begin by it again and again, because it is peculiar to them that only by asceticism can they achieve liberation from their enslavement to the world, deepest heart-searching and ultimate communion with the Absolute. But never should asceticism gain mastery over a man's life. A man may only detach himself from nature in order to revert to it again and, in hallowed contact with it, find his way to God.

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prompts and enables him to do so; another man has a divided, complicated, contradictory soul, and this, naturally, affects his doings: their inhibitions and disturbances originate in the inhibitions and disturbances of his soul; its restlessness is expressed in their restlessness. What else can a man so constituted do than try to overcome the temptations which approach him on the way to what is, at a given time, his goal? What else can he do than each time, in the middle of his doing, 'pull himself together', as we say, that is, rally his vacillating soul, and again and again, having rallied it, re-concentrate it upon the goal—and moreover be ready, like the hasid in the story when pride touches him, to sacrifice the goal in order to save the soul?

Only when, in the light of these questions, we subject our story to renewed scrutiny, do we apprehend the teaching implied in the Seer's criticism. It is the teaching that a man can unify his soul. The man with the divided, complicated, contradictory soul is not helpless: the core of his soul, the divine force in its depths, is capable of acting upon it, changing it, binding the conflicting forces together, amalgamating the diverging elements—is capable of unifying it. This unification must be accomplished *before* a man undertakes some unusual work. Only with a united soul will he be able so to do it that it becomes not patchwork but work all of a piece. The Seer thus reproaches the hasid with having embarked on his venture without first unifying his soul; unity of soul can never be achieved in the middle of the work. Nor should it be

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supposed that it can be brought about by asceticism; asceticism can purify, concentrate, but it cannot preserve its achievements intact until the attainment of the goal—it cannot protect the soul from its own contradiction.

One thing must of course not be lost sight of: unification of the soul is never final. Just as a soul most unitary from birth is sometimes beset by inner difficulties, thus even a soul most powerfully struggling for unity can never completely achieve it. But any work that I do with a united soul reacts upon my soul, acts in the direction of new and greater unification, leads me, though by all sorts of detours, to a *steadier* unity than was the preceding one. Thus man ultimately reaches a point where he can rely upon his soul, because its unity is now so great that it overcomes contradiction with effortless ease. Vigilance, of course, is necessary even then, but it is a relaxed vigilance.

On one of the days of the Hanukkah feast, Rabbi Nahum, the son of the rabbi of Rishyn,¹ entered the House of Study at a time when he was not expected, and found his disciples playing checkers, as was the custom on those days. When they saw the zaddik they were embarrassed and stopped playing. But he gave them a kindly nod and asked: 'Do you know the rules of the game of checkers?' And when they did not reply for shyness he himself gave the answer: 'I shall

¹ i.e., Ružyn (District of Kiev). Rabbi Israel of Rishyn was the founder of the famous 'Dynasty of Sadagora'.

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tell you the rules of the game of checkers. The first is that one must not make two moves at once. The second is that one may only move forward and not backward. And the third is that when one has reached the last row, one may move wherever one likes.'

However, what is meant by unification of the soul would be thoroughly misunderstood if 'soul' were taken to mean anything but the whole man, body and spirit together. The soul is not really united, unless all bodily energies, all the limbs of the body, are united. The Baal-Shem interpreted the biblical passage 'Whatsoever thy hands find to do, do it with thy might' to the effect that the deeds one does should be done with every limb, i.e., even the whole of man's physical being should participate in it, no part of him should remain outside. A man who thus becomes a unit of body and spirit—he is the man whose work is all of a piece.

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they should all be made starting-points—not singly but in their vital connection.

→ The practical difference is that in Hasidism man is not treated as an object of examination but is called upon to 'straighten himself out'. At first, a man should himself realize that conflict-situations between himself and others are nothing but the effects of conflict-situations in his own soul; then he should try to overcome this inner conflict, so that afterwards he may go out to his fellow-men and enter into new, transformed relationships with them.

Man naturally tries to avoid this decisive reversal—extremely repugnant to him in his accustomed relationship to the world—by referring him who thus appeals to him, or his own soul, if it is his soul that makes the appeal, to the fact that every conflict involves two parties and that, if he is expected to turn his attention from the external to his own internal conflict, his opponent should be expected to do the same. But just this perspective, in which a man sees himself only as an individual contrasted with other individuals, and not as a genuine person, whose transformation helps towards the transformation of the world, contains the fundamental error which hasidic teaching denounces.

Y The essential thing is to begin with oneself, and at this moment a man has nothing in the world to care about than this beginning. Any other attitude would distract him from what he is about to begin, weaken his initiative, and thus frustrate the entire bold undertaking.

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Rabbi Bunam taught:

'Our sages say: "Seek peace in your own place." You cannot find peace anywhere save in your own self. In the psalm we read: "There is no peace in my bones because of my sin." When a man has made peace within himself, he will be able to make peace in the whole world.'

However, the story from which I started does not confine itself to pointing out the true origin of external conflicts, i.e., the internal conflict, in a general way. The quoted saying of the Baal-Shem states exactly in what the decisive inner conflict consists. It is the conflict between three principles in man's being and life, the principle of thought, the principle of speech, and the principle of action. The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow-men is that I do not say what I mean, and that I do not do what I say. For this confuses and poisons, again and again and in increasing measure, the situation between myself and the other man, and I, in my internal disintegration, am no longer able to master it but, contrary to all my illusions, have become its slave. By our contradiction, our lie, we foster conflict-situations and give them power over us until they enslave us. From here, there is no way out but by the crucial realization: Everything depends on myself, and the crucial decision: I will straighten myself out.

But in order that a man may be capable of this great feat, he must find his way from the casual, accessory elements of his existence to his own self: he must find

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his own self, not the trivial ego of the egotistic individual, but the deeper self of the person living in a relationship to the world. And that is also contrary to everything we are accustomed to.

I will close this chapter with an old jest as retold by a zaddik.

Rabbi Hanokh told this story:

There was once a man who was very stupid. When he got up in the morning it was so hard for him to find his clothes that at night he almost hesitated to go to bed for thinking of the trouble he would have on waking. One evening he finally made a great effort, took paper and pencil and as he undressed noted down exactly where he put everything he had on. The next morning, very well pleased with himself, he took the slip of paper in his hand and read: 'cap'—there it was, he set it on his head; 'pants'—there they lay, he got into them; and so it went until he was fully dressed. 'That's all very well, but now where am I myself?' he asked in great consternation. 'Where in the world am I?' He looked and looked, but it was a vain search; he could not find himself. 'And that is how it is with us,' said the rabbi.

V. NOT TO BE PREOCCUPIED WITH ONESELF

Rabbi Hayyim of Zans¹ had married his son to the daughter of Rabbi Eliezer. The day after the wedding he visited the father of the bride and said: 'Now that we are related I feel close to you and can tell you what is eating at my heart. Look! My hair and beard have grown white, and I have not yet atoned!'

'O my friend,' replied Rabbi Eliezer, 'you are thinking only of yourself. How about forgetting yourself and thinking of the world?'

What is said here, seems to contradict everything I have hitherto reported of the teachings of Hasidism. We have heard that everyone should search his own heart, choose his particular way, bring about the unity of his being, begin with himself; and now we are told that man should forget himself. But if we examine this injunction more closely, we find that it is not only consistent with the others, but fits into the whole as a necessary link, as a necessary stage, in its particular place. One need only ask one question: 'What for?' What am I to choose my particular way for? What am I to unify my being for? The reply is: Not for my own sake. This is why the previous injunction was: to *begin* with oneself. To begin with oneself, but not to end with oneself; to start from oneself, but not to aim

¹ i.e., Nowy Sacz in Western Galicia.

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at oneself; to comprehend oneself, but not to be pre-occupied with oneself.

We see a zaddik, a wise, pious, kindly man, reproach himself in his old age for not yet having performed the true turning. The reply given him is apparently prompted by the opinion that he greatly overrates his sins and greatly underrates the penance he has already done. But what Rabbi Eliezer says, goes beyond this. He says, in quite a general sense: 'Do not keep worrying about what you have done wrong, but apply the soul power you are now wasting on self-reproach, to such active relationship to the world as you are destined for. You should not be occupied with yourself but with the world.'

First of all, we should properly understand what is said here about turning. It is known that turning stands in the centre of the Jewish conception of the way of man. Turning is capable of renewing a man from within and changing his position in God's world, so that he who turns is seen standing above the perfect zaddik, who does not know the abyss of sin. But turning means here something much greater than repentance and acts of penance; it means that by a reversal of his whole being, a man who had been lost in the maze of selfishness, where he had always set himself as his goal, finds a way to God, that is, a way to the fulfilment of the particular task for which he, this particular man, has been destined by God. Repentance can only be an incentive to such active reversal; he who goes on fretting himself with re-

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penance, he who tortures himself with the idea that his acts of penance are not sufficient, withholds his best energies from the work of reversal. In a sermon on the Day of Atonement, the Rabbi of Ger warned against self-torture:

'He who has done ill and talks about it and thinks about it all the time does not cast the base thing he did out of his thoughts, and whatever one thinks, therein one is, one's soul is wholly and utterly in what one thinks, and so he dwells in baseness. He will certainly not be able to turn, for his spirit will grow coarse and his heart stubborn, and in addition to this he may be overcome by gloom. What would you? Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way—it will always be muck. Have I sinned, or have I not sinned—what does Heaven get out of it? In the time I am brooding over it I could be stringing pearls for the delight of Heaven. That is why it is written: "Depart from evil and do good"—turn wholly away from evil, do not dwell upon it, and do good. You have done wrong? Then counteract it by doing right.'

But the significance of our story goes beyond this. He who tortures himself incessantly with the idea that he has not yet sufficiently atoned, is essentially concerned with the salvation of his soul, with his personal fate in eternity. By rejecting this aim, Hasidism merely draws a conclusion from the teachings of Judaism generally. One of the main points in which Christianity differs from Judaism is that it makes each man's salvation his highest aim. Judaism regards each man's

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Rabbi Bunam used to tell young men who came to him for the first time the story of Rabbi Eizik, son of Rabbi Yekel of Cracow. After many years of great poverty which had never shaken his faith in God, he dreamed someone bade him look for a treasure in Prague, under the bridge which leads to the king's palace. When the dream recurred a third time, Rabbi Eizik prepared for the journey and set out for Prague. But the bridge was guarded day and night and he did not dare to start digging. Nevertheless he went to the bridge every morning and kept walking around it until evening. Finally the captain of the guards, who had been watching him, asked in a kindly way whether he was looking for something or waiting for somebody. Rabbi Eizik told him of the dream which had brought him here from a faraway country. The captain laughed: 'And so to please the dream, you poor fellow wore out your shoes to come here! As for having faith in dreams, if I had had it, I should have had to get going when a dream once told me to go to Cracow and dig for treasure under the stove in the room of a Jew—Eizik, son of Yekel, that was the name! Eizik, son of Yekel! I can just imagine what it would be like, how I should have to try every house over there, where one half of the Jews are named Eizik and the other Yekel!' And he laughed again. Rabbi Eizik bowed, travelled home, dug up the treasure from under the stove, and built the House of

Prayer which is called 'Reb Eizik Reb Yekel's Shul'.

'Take this story to heart,' Rabbi Bunam used to add, 'and make what it says your own: There is something you cannot find anywhere in the world, not even at the zaddik's, and there is, nevertheless, a place where you can find it.'

This, too, is a very old story, known from several popular literatures, but thoroughly reshaped by Hasidism. It has not merely—in a superficial sense—been transplanted into the Jewish sphere, it has been recast by the hasidic melody in which it has been told; but even this is not decisive: the decisive change is that it has become, so to speak, transparent, and that a hasidic truth is shining through its words. It has not had a 'moral' appended to it, but the sage who retold it had at last discovered its true meaning and made it apparent.

There is something that can only be found in one place. It is a great treasure, which may be called the fulfilment of existence. The place where this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands.

Most of us achieve only at rare moments a clear realization of the fact that they have never tasted the fulfilment of existence, that their life does not participate in true, fulfilled existence, that, as it were, it passes true existence by. We nevertheless feel the deficiency at every moment, and in some measure strive to find—somewhere—what we are seeking. Somewhere, in some province of the world or of the mind, except where we stand, where we have been set—but it is

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there and nowhere else that the treasure can be found. The environment which I feel to be the natural one, the situation which has been assigned to me as my fate, the things that happen to me day after day, the things that claim me day after day—these contain my essential task and such fulfilment of existence as is open to me. It is said of a certain Talmudic master that the paths of heaven were as bright to him as the streets of his native town. Hasidism inverts the order: It is a greater thing if the streets of a man's native town are as bright to him as the paths of heaven. For it is here, where we stand, that we should try to make shine the light of the hidden divine life.

If we had power over the ends of the earth, it would not give us that fulfilment of existence which a quiet devoted relationship to nearby life can give us. If we knew the secrets of the upper worlds, they would not allow us so much actual participation in true existence as we can achieve by performing, with holy intent, a task belonging to our daily duties. Our treasure is hidden beneath the hearth of our own home.

The Baal-Shem teaches that no encounter with a being or a thing in the course of our life lacks a hidden significance. The people we live with or meet with, the animals that help us with our farmwork, the soil we till, the materials we shape, the tools we use, they all contain a mysterious spiritual substance which depends on us for helping it towards its pure form, its perfection. If we neglect this spiritual substance sent across our path, if we think only in terms of momen-

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tary purposes, without developing a genuine relationship to the beings and things in whose life we ought to take part, as they in ours, then we shall ourselves be debarred from true, fulfilled existence. It is my conviction that this doctrine is essentially true. The highest culture of the soul remains basically arid and barren unless, day by day, waters of life pour forth into the soul from those little encounters to which we give their due; the most formidable power is intrinsically powerlessness unless it maintains a secret covenant with these contacts, both humble and helpful, with strange, and yet near, being.

Some religions do not regard our sojourn on earth as true life. They either teach that everything appearing to us here is mere appearance, behind which we should penetrate, or that it is only a forecourt of the true world, a forecourt which we should cross without paying much attention to it. Judaism, on the contrary, teaches that what a man does now and here with holy intent is no less important, no less true—being a terrestrial indeed, but none the less factual, link with divine being—than the life in the world to come. This doctrine has found its fullest expression in Hasidism.

Rabbi Hanokh said: 'The other nations too believe that there are two worlds. They too say: "In the other world." The difference is this: They think that the two are separate and severed, but Israel professes that the two worlds are essentially one and shall in fact become one.'

In their true essence, the two worlds are one. They

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only have, as it were, moved apart. But they shall again become one, as they are in their true essence. Man was created for the purpose of unifying the two worlds. He contributes towards this unity by holy living, in relationship to the world in which he has been set, at the place on which he stands.

Once they told Rabbi Pinhas of the great misery among the needy. He listened, sunk in grief. Then he raised his head. 'Let us draw God into the world,' he cried, 'and all need will be quenched.'

But is this possible, to draw God into the world? Is this not an arrogant, presumptuous idea? How dare the lowly worm touch upon a matter which depends entirely on God's grace: how much of Himself He will vouchsafe to His creation?

Here again, Jewish doctrine is opposed to that of other religions, and again it is in Hasidism that it has found its fullest expression. God's grace consists precisely in this, that he wants to let himself be won by man, that he places himself, so to speak, into man's hands. God wants to come to his world, but he wants
→ to come to it through man. This is the mystery of our existence, the superhuman chance of mankind.

'Where is the dwelling of God?'

This is the question with which the Rabbi of Kotzk surprised a number of learned men who happened to be visiting him.

They laughed at him: 'What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of his glory?'

Then he answered his own question:

THE WAY OF MAN

According to the Teaching of Hasidism

by Martin Buber

Martin Buber, whose death was recently mourned, was one of this century's most important representatives of the human spirit. He wrote widely in the fields of art, education, sociology, philosophy, philosophy of religion, Biblical interpretation, Judaism, and Zionism. But he was especially famous for his work on Hasidism, a mystical-religious movement which was born among the orthodox Jews of eastern Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century.

In this collection of short essays, Buber has interpreted six traditional Hasidic stories, examining and explaining the basic tenets of a way of life which lies near the center of Judaism. The theme of *The Way of Man* is perhaps best set forth in this sentence: "Any natural act, if hallowed, leads to God, and nature needs man for what no angel can perform on it, namely, its hallowing."

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