Hasidic Texts on Leadership and Blessing
Nehemiah Polen
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Personal Spiritual Growth, Communal Leadership, and Blessing in Hasidism

Hasidism provides diverse approaches to personal growth and cultivating an open, compassionate heart. Our class will introduce major hasidic thinkers and texts with a focus on leadership, personal and communal transformation, and blessing. We will study models of personal growth, master-disciple relationships, charismatic figures, and peer-to-peer influence. We will examine the idea that hasidic leaders aim to reconfigure their knowledge at ever-deeper levels of mastery and ever-wider horizons of comprehension. throughout the course a central focus will be careful reading and analysis of the original texts.

Each piece will be read with careful attention to (1) the source materials in scripture, rabbinic literature and the kabbalah; (2) the exegetical problem(s) motivating the piece; (3) technical terms and concepts; (4) the homiletic message and spiritual implications; (5) the overall trajectory and architectonic; (6) the new exegetical light cast on the sources by reading with hasidic eyes.

You will be asked to demonstrate understanding of each level of the text, to read and translate with fluency. Each student will summarize at least one reading for class discussion, and write a final paper/essay on a major theological/spiritual theme.

Partial listing of topics:

- The Baal Shem Tov on spiritual growth: “The end of knowledge is not knowing”
- The Baal Shem Tov on teachers and students
- The living cosmos: A hasidic theology of divine omnipresence
- Hasidic tales: creative wisdom and inner epiphany
- Sacred Time: Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev on why the New Year begins in the fall
- Sacred Space: Constructing the Tabernacle in every generation
- Coming into one’s own self: A hasidic personalist theology
- The transformative power of music: niggun as spiritual practice
- Prayer and the quest for unification
- Seeing the world with eyes of blessing
- Varieties of hasidic meditative and contemplative practice
- Theology of Dual Intensification.
- Enoch Consciousness
- Dibbuk Haverim: the centrality of fellowship and friendship.
- Hasidic hermeneutics and approaches to Torah interpretation.
• Devekut, especially the technique of cleaving to the letters.
• The role of music, dance, and stories -- a theology of hasidic storytelling. How telling a tale creates a sacred geography, a narrative extraterritorial domain of safety and exploration.
• Charisma and miracles.
• Embodiment--sonic and breath theology, fervor, enthusiasm, trembling and dance
• The holiness of everyday life. Mitzvot to be found in every aspect of existence.
• Defamiliarization: avoiding habituation
• Why, on the path of sacred service, one must fall from one’s spiritual level.
• The zaddik; each individual’s role as local zaddik to mend the world.
• God invested in physicality, in our corporeal limbs.
• The meaning of “Messiah” and how to prepare oneself for the messianic advent.
• “Know Him in all your ways”:
  • the role of laughter on the spiritual path;
  • how to make tough ethical choices;
  • the hasidic view of evil and good;
  • how the sefirot are realized in human beings;
  • why one must pray for one’s enemies;
  • why the greatest teachers have just one thing to teach;
  • how to turn everyday activities into sacred acts
• Spiritualization that caps but does not replace the physical; that crowns but does not push aside the concrete.
• a tunneling through boundaries which bridges distinctions without collapsing the distinctions…spiritualization and universalization without displacement or supersessionism.

PRIMARy TEXTS (partial listing)

• Keter Shem Tov Hashalem (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2004)
  #70 Va-yar Hashem ki sar lirot: integrating the parts of the self; Moshe puzzled by his own name.
• #90 Enoch the shoemaker—Ecclesiastes 9:10.
• The letter of the Baal Shem Tov: Keter Shem Tov Hashalem, pp. 4-5.
• Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, as presented by Rabbi Nathan of Nemerov: Azamra—finding grace notes in oneself and others.
• Sefat Emet, Ve-Avraham Zaken Ba Ba-Yamim: Savoring and recalling all one’s days
Suggested secondary readings (partial listing)


Ada Rapoport-Albert, “God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship”

Rachel Elior, “Between Yesh and Ayin: the Doctrine of the Zaddik in the Works of Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin.”

Arthur Green, “Typologies of Leadership and the Hasidic Zaddik”; “The Zaddiq as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism”; “Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat”