

# Chassidism

## Historical Background

The Ba'al Shem Tov and the Beginnings of Chassidism:

The Ba'al Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov (the 'Master of the Good Name') was born in Podolia in 1700 and was known to be of humble origins.

He was a synagogue sexton and an assistant teacher who spent several years in solitude and meditation. He became a 'ba'al shem' or miracle-worker, curing people with amulets and charms. The main tenets of his beliefs are known, but he left no written works apart from a few letters and several of his sayings that were noted by his disciples.

The Ba'al Shem Tov established contact with the ascetic kabbalists of his day. He guided the kabbalists away from seclusion to inclusion and leadership of the community. This was the new type of 'tzadik', or righteous leader. According to Chassidic belief, the tzadik is the foundation of the world, and could hasten salvation through his mentoring actions. The tzadik had an attachment to God, and acted as an intermediary between God and the people, bearing a responsibility for their spiritual well-being.

The basic assumption of Chassidism is that 'there is no place empty of Him'. God is everywhere, divinity exists in everything. The central role of the tzadik is to release all of the divine elements that exist in the material world. Joy is a fundamental tenet of Hasidic teaching.

The Ba'al Shem Tov believed that his teachings could serve as a guide to the people and bring Redemption closer. He had a mystical vision on Rosh Hashana in 1747, in which he saw his soul ascending to heaven. He described the dream to his brother-in-law in a letter, in which he stated that the Messiah would come when the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings became widespread. He was not sure what path to take to achieve this goal, but when the Ba'al Shem Tov died in 1760, his teachings were wellknown.

Rabbi Dov Baer, also known as 'The Maggid', the great Maggid of Hasidism, transferred the movement's center from Podolia to Volhynia, and sent out emissaries to spread Chassidic teachings in Galicia, White Russia, Lithuania and central Poland.

Prayer was regarded as a central link to the upper spheres, and considered more important than religious study. The Hasidic movement also initiated prayers according to the Sephardi prayerbook, which had been adapted by Rabbi Isaac Luria in Tzfat. It was different than the established Ashkenazi version used by

Polish Jews. The importance of kavanah - inner devotion was stressed, including cries, movement and fervor during worship.

On the Sabbath, the Se'udah Shlishit (the third meal eaten on the Sabbath) was when the Rebbe would generally preach, tell stories about the tzadikim, and chant Hasidic melodies. It became customary to travel to the Rebbe on holidays and Sabbaths. Eventually, they designed their own special ceremony. The 'Melaveh Malkah', was a fourth meal where every word and story uttered by the Rebbe was treated with the utmost significance.

Some Hasidim made their way to the Holy Land, but many communities continued to grow in Poland, Belorus and Lithuania. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi was a great talmudic scholar who eventually formed his own school of Hasidic thought, known as Chabad, which is the Hebrew acronym for wisdom, understanding and knowledge.

From its inception, opposition to Hasidism began in Vilna, which was known as the 'Jerusalem' of Lithuania. Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon (genius) of Vilna banned contact with the Hasidim, and had them excommunicated. He opposed the Hasidic notion of the tzadik as idol-worshipping, and their beliefs as arrogant and valueless. The conflict between the Gaon of Vilna and the Hasidim continued for many years and even served as a pretext for the establishment of the great yeshivot (academies of Talmudic study) throughout the region.

To this day, large numbers of Jewish visitors continue to visit various sites of Hasidic interest in the Ukraine. Among the famous sites are: Uman, the burial place of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, and Gadyach location of the tomb of Shneur Zalman, the Alter Rebbe and founder of the Lubavitch Hasidic movement.

Famous Hasidic Quotations:

Ba'al Shem Tov:

"My teaching is based on three kinds of love: love of God, love of Torah and love of humanity."

"Why do we say "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob?"

This is to teach you that Isaac and Jacob did not merely mimic the tradition of Abraham. Each encountered God in their own unique way."

Rabbi Nachman ben Simcha of Bratslav:

"The world is a very narrow bridge. The key to crossing is to not be afraid."

"When you are about to leave Egypt-any Egypt-do not stop to think: how will I earn a living out there? One who stops to make provisions for the way will never get out of Egypt."

“No matter where I go, it is always to Israel”.

“There are men who suffer terrible distress and are unable to tell what they feel in their hearts and they go their way and suffer and suffer. But if they meet one with a laughing face, he can revive them with his joy. And to revive a man is no slight thing.”

“He who is able to write a book and does not, it is as one who has lost a child”.

The Lubliner Rabbi:

“Better an insincere peace than a sincere quarrel”.

The Belzer Rabbi:

“Let a person do good deeds with the same zeal that an evil person does bad ones.”

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson:

“ In a sense, we have all wandered away from our true selves. Birth is the beginning of our soul’s journey, sent off from its divine source to live in an unnatural state, a land of materialism. Throughout our lives, therefore, we crave to be reunited with our real selves.

We search for our soul, for the G-dly spark within ourselves. We long to reconnect with our source”.

From Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk:

“The Rabbi once asked Jacob of Radzyman: “What is the purpose of man’s creation” Jacob replied: “Man was created in order to perfect his soul”. The Kotsker shouted: “Jacob! Is this what we were taught in Przysucha?” “Man was created in order to increase God’s glory!”

“Where is God’s dwelling? God dwells wherever man lets Him in.”

“The prohibition against idolatry includes the prohibition against making idols out of the mitzvot. We should never imagine that the chief purpose of a mitzvah is its outer form; rather it is the inward meaning.”

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pzhysh:

“The sins which people commit-those are not their great crimes. Temptation is powerful, and strength is slight! The great crime is that people can turn at any moment and they do not do so.”

The Maggid of Mezrich:

“We learn three things from a child:

1. Keep yourself busy.
2. You don’t need a reason to be happy.
3. If you want something cry and cry until you get it.”

## Miscellaneous Hasidic sayings:

- Work for peace within your family, then within your street, and then within your community.
- It's easier to abandon evil traits today than tomorrow.
- Three times the Torah asks us to love: twice in Leviticus we are commanded to love human beings: then in Deuteronomy our love is directed to the Holy One. Only after we have learned to love people can we come to love the Holy One. “
- People can see their reflection in water only when they bend down close to it; and the human heart too, must lean down to the heart of another so that it may see itself reflected there within.
- A rebbe was asked: “What purpose do atheists serve in this world?” He responded: “God created atheists so that people would not rely on God to help the poor or say that the poor and all those who suffer will receive their ultimate reward in the world to come.” (The doubt created by atheists encourages all Jews to conclude that when it comes to the less fortunate, we cannot rely on God's help or future justice in the afterlife - we must help those in need today with our own hands. E.N.)
- Fools believe that the money which they have lying in their coffers is theirs, while the money they give away to charity is theirs no longer. Actually, quite the reverse is true. Only those possessions which are given away for sacred purposes remain one's property, but those possessions which a man greedily amasses for himself are not his at all. Such gains will not remain with him for longer than a fleeting moment.

