

Geulas Yisrael #60 Pinchas

Moshe, Chassidut and Religious Zionism

Moshe Taragin

It was a moment of crushing finality. Moshe had been sentenced to die without entering his coveted land of Israel. Perhaps, he hoped, the decree would be reversed. Perhaps the impressive string of military victories was a harbinger of a change in policy. Sadly, Moshe was informed that the bitter decree will stand and that he will not pass across the Jordan river. The righteous have little margin for error. Their relationship with Hashem is that sensitive and delicate. Everything of grandeur and elegance always is.

Moshe's first response to this devastating news is courageous. Heroically, he doesn't attend to his personal affairs, but, instead, worries about finding a capable successor. There are plenty of scholars, prophets and judges suited to replace him. What deeply concerns him though, is identifying a leader with the emotional versatility to encompass a diverse population. Moshe deeply understood the complexity of the human condition and the frailty of religious compliance. His leadership exhibited extraordinary range: he faced off against Pharo, split the sea and scaled the heavens. Just the same, he prayed for sinners, and restored the confidence of a broken people. Imagine leading a hopeless and broken nation through 38 years of desert futility and inevitable death!

Moshe could walk with angels just as he could comfort castaways, and he was desperate for a successor with the same *breadth and range*. Fortunately, Hashem selected the perfect candidate- someone who had personally witnessed these traits in Moshe. Yehoshua, Moshe's prize disciple was appointed as his successor.

It is easy to be a leader for the righteous and the holy. It is more difficult to understand the complexity of life and to embrace different levels of religious commitment. It is easy to be a Rebbe for tzadikim, not so easy to be a Rebbe for every Jew.

## The Chassidic Revolution

Moshe set the tone for Jewish inclusion throughout history. No Jew is ever too far gone for redemption or reentry. Sin, no matter how severe, doesn't disqualify halachik Jewish status. Even conversion out of Judaism doesn't affect Jewish status; once a Jew always a Jew, and no sin, however severe, disqualifies a Jew from our collective destiny. Moshe's leadership model of patience, tolerance and optimistic hope has always shaped Jewish history.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chassidut radically revolutionized Jewish identity. We aren't just forged in the *image* of God but are *imbued* with a Divine essence known as חלק אלוה ממעל ממש. Therefore, Jewish sanctity is impregnable. No matter how severely a Jew sins or how far he veers from religion, he still stands in the presence of Hashem. You can't run away from yourself, and, as an element of Hashem is lodged within us, we can't run from Him either.

This dramatic revolution of Jewish identity was crucial to our survival during a very gloomy and depressing period of our history. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Central European Judaism was deeply splintered, disorganized, and financially impoverished. Many Jews were no longer drawn to classic Torah study, which seemed unattainable to the common man. The new message of Chassidut lifted our national spirit: As Hashem resided in each Jew, saints and sinners alike were now included in Jewish experience. It may be more difficult to discern Hashem in some Jews but an aspect of Him is always there. This grand doctrine affirmed the potential for repentance, but also asserted inclusion of every Jew even before any religious improvement or revision.

Sadly, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries would radically transform Chassidut *itself*. Two traumatic events would convert Chassidut from an ideology of *inclusion* into a culture of *insulation*. The first trauma was institutionalized secularization. It was one thing to accept an *individual* wayward Jew who fell into religious malfunction. He still possessed the inner element of Hashem and should be embraced. What happens, however, when large groups of Jews don't innocently *fall* into religious breakdown, but *actively* secede from ritual and community? The splintering of Classic Judaism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was unforeseen to the original Chassidic thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not only were these

splinter groups institutionalizing, but they were also organizing into movements which competed with the traditional leadership for resources, communal influence and political power. The average shtetl was overwhelmed by an all-out war between traditionalists and newly formed Jewish alliances, all vying for the same resources. Did these Jews still possess that "inner element" of Hashem? Even if they, could traditional Jews or Chassidim, still live side-by side with them?

For many Chassidic groups the answer to that question was decided in 1948, when the state of Israel was established by these same secular groups. Watching our long-awaited dreams being hijacked by secular Jews "stressed" the doctrine of inclusiveness. Chassidut turned inward and away.

But it wasn't just secularization that led to insularization. The holocaust disproportionately eviscerated Chassidic communities. Entire Chassidic fraternities were annihilated, and many other branches were severely depleted. As Chassidut was lodged primarily in Central Europe, it faced the full onslaught of the Holocaust. Seeking to rebuild, restock and "respirit" itself, Chassidut turned inward into itself, and away from cultural inclusion. The *ideas* of Chassidut continue to affirm the holiness of every Jew, but most Chassidic communities are tightly woven into insular societies with little direct contact with those "other" Jews. One obvious exception is Chabad which, in this respect, is a throwback to the original inclusiveness of Chassidut. Most of the other branches have turned inward.

#### Zionism and Neo-Chassidut

History is full of irony. Secular Zionism caused classic Chassidut to retreat from inclusiveness, but also led to the flourishing of Chassidic ideas in a different sector. Religious Zionism views the state as an instrument of Jewish inclusion. Secular Jews may have abandoned ritual and tradition, but through commitment to the state of Israel, they still identify with land, people and history. Through the state of Israel, they remain *incorporated* within Jewish destiny. Classic Chassidut theorized about inclusion and provided a different lens through which to view religious malfunction. Zionism has provided an actual instrument for inclusion of "wayward" Jews.

This is part of the reason that Chassidic ideas has experienced a powerful renaissance in the religious Zionist community. Ironically, neo-Chassidut is flourishing specifically in a society which embraces the state of Israel. These transformative ideas continue to provide a lens through which to view Jews who don't adhere to classic religion. While Chassidut may have provided the *lens*, the state of Israel has provided the *container* to include every Jew regardless of their religious level.

Jewish history is ironic. You just have to pay attention.