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"MADNESS AND SUFFERING IN JEWISH TRADITION AND LITERATURE"

presented at

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## I. Introduction

a) Story - Johnstown Flood.

b) Plan of Lecture - discuss depression as a historical phenomenon in Jewish tradition, especially Hasidism, which I find most interesting; then turn to contemporary Jewish fictional literature for brief analysis of madness as response to suffering. Finally -- can and does Judaism legitimate madness as a way of perceiving the world?

## II - Depression.

a) Most well known case of depression in Bible - King Saul (I Samuel). Because of his failure to follow divine commandments as delivered by Prophet Samuel, Samuel secretly seeks out an unknown young shepherd, David son of Jesse, and anoints him next King. Meanwhile - Saul afflicted with depression. This is the Scriptural description:

<sup>14</sup> Now the spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD began to terrify him. <sup>15</sup> Saul's courtiers said to him, "An evil spirit of God is terrifying you. <sup>16</sup> Let our lord give the order [and] the courtiers in attendance on you will look for someone who is skilled at playing the lyre; whenever the evil spirit of God comes over you, he will play it<sup>b</sup> and you will feel better." <sup>17</sup> So Saul said to his courtiers, "Find me someone who can play well and bring him to me." <sup>18</sup> One of the attendants spoke up, "I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and the LORD is with him." <sup>19</sup> Whereupon Saul sent messengers to Jesse to say, "Send me your son David, who is with the flock." <sup>20</sup> Jesse took <sup>b</sup>an ass [laden with]<sup>b</sup> bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them to Saul by his son David. <sup>21</sup> So David came to Saul and entered his service; [Saul] took a strong liking to him and made him one of his arms-bearers. <sup>22</sup> Saul sent word to Jesse, "Let David remain in my service, for I am pleased with him." <sup>23</sup> Whenever the [evil] spirit of God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre and play it;<sup>b</sup> Saul would find relief and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

-- I Samuel 16:14-23



Subsequently, as David becomes a national hero whose prestige overtakes that of Saul, and as Jonathan (Saul's crown prince) becomes closest friend of David, Saul's condition rapidly deteriorates, and David flees as Saul tries to kill him.

I mention this merely because of historical purposes. I prefer

~~to dwell on a much, much later period in Jewish history which I find much more interesting, and far richer in recorded cases of depression -- even though most come to us by oral transmission rather than from written clinical or even literary records. The period is the end of the 18th to mid-19th century, the era of growth of the Hasidic or pietistic movement in Eastern Europe.~~  
*I shall concentrate on a rather late of fascinating, and which is relatively rich*

B) 1. If you were to enter a synagogue of Orthodox Jews of Lithuanian extraction - Mitnagdim - service not strike you as remarkable: measured chanting, but hardly any singing; if anything -- tends towards the ~~ahedonic~~, ascetic. Usually presided over by Rabbi - Rav; scholar - leader, respected but no pretenses of supernatural. If associated with Musar (ethicist movement, 19th century Lithuania), will detect sense of brooding over own moral inadequacies, man's existential fragility, wretched vulnerability to urges and instincts, and hence encourage introspection.

2. If you enter Hasidic synagogue (whether Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Romanian -- and today even Israeli or American): identical service, yet totally different spirit. Noisy -- almost rowdy; highly charged emotionally; spontaneity: clapping hands, lively singing, dancing, colloquial outbursts; drinking; ecstasy.

Hasidic community divided into Rebbe (Zaddik) and Hasidim (hoi polloi). Former is charismatic, often by inheritance, not necessarily scholar, held in awe by Hasidim, and consulted more about personal problems than about fine points Jewish Law.

3. Hasidism founded by Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), and spawned remarkable group of charismatic leaders, many of whom had enormous impact on millions of Jews.

4. From my description, would imagine that problem of depression arises primarily in Lithuanian - Mitnagdic circles. Yet -not so. While their low emotional temperature can sometimes be depressing, it cannot be described as depression. Whereas, same is not true of Hasidim. Moreover, such cases of depression as we are aware of are not to be found <sup>primarily</sup> amongst Hasidim themselves -- they generally seemed to thrive in their closed environment -- but amongst their leaders; the greater the Rebbe-Zaddik, the more pronounced the bouts of depression, especially in early generations of the movement.

5. Let me share with you a few such cases. I am quoting especially from Elie Wiesel's Souls on Fire because of his is most recent of descriptive biographies of Zaddikim, and also because his literary skill enhances the description (of course, that contains its own caveat -- Wiesel is a writer, not a clinical reporter. ~~and~~, and his accuracy ~~is~~ may be sacrificed for literary flourish, conceit, & embellishment).



(2)

We begin at the beginning: in the fourth,

Certainly, by agreeing to follow the Baal Shem outside time, to the limit of perception, we run the risk of finding ourselves in a world which is not real. The Baal Shem himself had to pay the price. Toward the end of his life particularly, he displayed increasing signs of irritation and depression, expressing himself in ways "defying the laws of language." He who had worked so hard to make himself understood, no longer succeeded. Faces, words and incidents were forgotten; he was losing touch with his surroundings. He could be seen knocking his head against a tree or following what seemed to be a strange choreography with his body. He expressed regret at having used his powers; he was no longer himself.

One day he spoke longer than ever, and his words were more enticing than ever. His disciples were entranced, conscious of living privileged moments. Suddenly he stopped. And forgot what he had said. And forgot even that he had spoken.

Another time, during the same period, he felt himself sinking. One of his disciples saw him sway, and called out: "Master!" and this outcry brought him back to the surface.

He had lived too fast and had made too many promises that God did not keep.

At the age of sixty he became ill; his insides were tearing him apart. It was Passover. Deviating from habit, he celebrated the Holy Day far from other people, plunged into silent and uninterrupted meditation.

Seven weeks later, during Shavuot, feeling the end approaching, he gave his intimates detailed instructions for his burial. He requested them to sing at his bedside and invited a minyan

for the last service. "I have two hours to chat with God," he said. Seeing tears on the faces of his faithful, he added: "Why do you cry? I am leaving by one door only to enter by another."

Rebbe Pinhas of Koretz began to pray, pleading on his behalf. "Too late," the Master told him, "what is done is done; what is done will not be undone."

When he died, the two clocks in his house stopped.



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Many other Hasidic Masters

were similarly afflicted: Barukh of Medzebozh, Nahman of Bratzlav, Elimelekh of Lizensk, the Holy Seer of Lublin and, according to some sources, the Baal Shem himself. All, to varying degrees, struggled against melancholy. Perhaps because they looked so hard and so much at suffering, they could see nothing but sorrow in the end; because they listened so hard and so often to a thousand voices of sadness, they came to wish that they were deaf and dumb.

R. Levi-Yitzhak A. Berditchev.....

Levi-Yitzhak admired King Solomon, the wisest of our sovereigns. Why? Because, according to the Midrash, he mastered all languages? Because he knew how to speak to birds? No. Because he understood the language of madmen.

We shall never learn the truth. The entire period is taboo; one particular period of the Rebbe's life. Hasidic texts barely allude to it. It would seem that he succumbed to a severe nervous depression, deeper than any he had experienced before. We know, for example, that one night, having strayed into what was known as Tanners' Street, he was seized by infinite almost inhuman sadness—and fainted. We also know that he was obsessed by the suicide of a poor little beadle who had hanged himself from the synagogue's main chandelier, thinking thus to "honor" God. If he went to see other Masters with such regularity, it was probably to escape his own phantoms, which after being repressed for many years, overwhelmed him in the end.

He withdrew into himself, became a recluse. Suddenly he was incapable of carrying out his official duties, and instead spent his time "reading, very fast, from a small book that never left him." Prostrate, he let his absent gaze wander over beings and places. He whose passion had kindled sparks in every heart was now burned out; a frightened, hunted man.

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## The Seer of Lublin

(d) Rebbe Yaakov-Yitzhak was almost blind, but in Lublin he was called the Seer; between fits of depression, he preached joy.

Desperately, he fought the anxiety that undermined him. He even tried to "outlaw" it by proclaiming it the worst of sins. But it came back, day after day, choking him and squeezing him as in a vise. He startled his followers by forming a friendship with a non-believer, a well-known rake. "I like him," he said, "because he's cheerful."

Yet, despite his depressions, the Seer was constantly growing in stature in the eyes of his followers; his sphere of influence widened from one Shabbat to the next. People came to Lublin to study, to meditate, to do penance and rearrange their inner life. Some came to stay, others came and went.

He said: "How strange, all these people who come from far away, they are sad when they arrive, but by the time they leave, they are gay and confident, whereas I..."

A long pause: "I am somber, and so I remain; mine is a black fire, one that gives no light."

But that, his followers did not see or refused to see.

Perhaps they found it easier that way. They were content simply to watch his fire burn.

## R. Nachman Bratzlaver ...

(e) Living in a constant state of anxiety, Rebbe Nahman frightened those around him with his sudden, unpredictable changes of mood. Perfectly illustrating his own comparison of human thought and self-awareness with the perpetual movement of a pendulum, he alternated between highly communicative ecstasy and the blackest of depressions, toppling from gadlut hamokhin—exuberant frenzy—into stifling depths, katnut hamokhin. Gay, his gaiety knew no bounds;

say, he dragged the whole world into his despair



(R. W. R. as story-teller...)

Laughter occupies an astonishingly important place in his work. Here and there, one meets a man who laughs and does nothing else. Also a landscape that laughs. And a man who hears time, and everything he touches, roar with laughter—and hears nothing else.

Laughter that springs from lucid and desperate awareness, a mirthless laughter, laughter of protest against the absurdities of existence, a laughter of revolt against a universe where man, whatever he may do, is condemned in advance. A laughter of compassion for man who cannot escape the ambiguity of his condition and of his faith. ~~To blindly submit to God, without questioning the meaning of this submission, would be to diminish Him. To want to understand Him would be to reduce His~~



(I am excluding from this list perhaps the most notable, memorable, and remarkable of all such cases, the 20 year long depression of R. Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, because the subject is too broad, too mysterious, and too fascinating to take up in a lecture so limited in time.)

6. Why this proclivity for depression amongst Hasidic masters? Let me essay three answers: *(which apply specifically to Zaddikim, & are in addition to extremely harsh conditions: poverty, persecution, spiritual depletion)*

a) Hasidism derives from Kabbalah (Buber: "Hasidim is Kabbalah turned ethos") and the mystic experience is by nature one of mood alteration or oscillation (ratzo va-shov)... (This does not mean that every mystic is a manic depressive, though many might be.)

b) The very nature of the spiritual endeavor -- the attempt to achieve communion (devekut) with God who, in His transcendence, defies such accessibility to intimate human contact, ~~thus, but also stories about missions & accomplishments~~ is fraught with frustration. The religious desideratum of devekut is asymptotic; hence -- built-in grief. Note reversal of cause-and-effect which we usually assume: here the spiritual experience may determine the psychic state, rather than the other way around.

c) An additional source of frustration, even despair, -- Zaddik sets high communal goal: creating a sacred community. Feels personal responsibility to elevate all his people - physically and spiritually -- and takes the failure personally. Related to this is what I referred to earlier: Wiesel's

*Butzlover stories often center on theme of missions & accomplishments - royal messengers who fail to deliver message enter into for them*

suggestion that in taking upon himself burdens of sorrows of his Hasidim, Rebbe just was crushed under it. (Do psychiatrists and other mental health workers ever have similar experiences? And if not, why not?...)

7. I believe it is precisely because of this penchant for melancholy or depression, that the Hasidic masters gave new emphasis to element already found in ancient Jewish tradition, namely, Simchah... Similarly, they repeatedly warned their followers against vulnerability to Yeiush, despair... They themselves embraced melancholy while fortifying their followers against it. They did this in three ways:

a) Historically, Hasidism was in part a reaction against the growing distance that had developed in traditional Jewish life between the scholar and the layman... By emphasizing the layman's closeness to God (kirvat Elohim), his ability to attain spiritual eminence through prayer and devotion rather than exclusively by the arduous route of arcane halakhic scholarship, the Zaddikim countered the ordinary Jew's feeling of worthlessness.

b) By interposing their own spiritual roles, either as intercessionaries or facilitators, the Zaddikim helped the Hasidim overcome feelings of helplessness in confronting their spiritual assignments.

c) By creating a communal support-system that emphasized Simchah and banned Yeiush -- i.e., the singing, dancing,



occasional nip of schnapps, the camraderie that prevailed in the Hasidic courts -- the Masters effectively overcame for their followers their feelings of hopelessness.

8. (If time:) as an illustration: R. Nachman Bratzlaver had a keen appreciation of the ubiquitousness of suffering and travail in life, not only existentially as part of the human condition, but because of very real practical problems faced by his people: persecution, poverty, ill health, family distress. He therefore recommended (Likkutei Moharan, II-23) that melancholy itself be sublimated into joy. His analogy: just as when people dance in a circle and they grab a distracted and depressed bystander into their circle and infect him with their joy and make him happy, so when an individual attempts to experience simchah, there are suffering and worry and melancholia (marah schechorah, "black bile") at the periphery of his awareness, and instead of ignoring them, he ought pull them into the circle of his joy and convert all his pain and worries and sadness into joy.

9. Lest I be guilty of overpsychologizing this element of simchah in Hasidim, let me add, without adequate elaboration, that the emphasis on joy happened to articulate perfectly with Hasidism's basic theological stance, that of immanentism...

### III - Madness as a Response to Suffering.

In turning to our next theme, we move from history to literature, and from a <sup>18th</sup> 19th century religious movement to a late 20th century



novelist. Yet, the distance is not really that great, considering that Wiesel's background is Hasidic and that he has written about it sensitively. Indeed, there is a kind of continuum between the two, even though we must grant that Wiesel, as a creative artist, has been eclectic in selecting those themes in Hasidism which most accord with his own insights and concerns -- concerns mostly drawn from his experience as a survivor of the Holocaust -- "The Kingdom of night and mist," as he often calls it.

I have always regarded Town Beyond the Wall as Wiesel's most profound, if sometimes perplexing, work. Its themes are universal and yet <sup>concrete</sup> particularist -- suffering, evil, silence, rationality, indifference, meaninglessness. Most important for this lecture, he treats the theme of madness here in ~~great~~ depth. I will briefly summarize and comment upon it. I find three approaches or meditations on madness in this novel:

a) First, Wiesel justifies madness as a legitimate response to

suffering. Answering Menachem, who maintains that God is not madness, Michael retorts, "And if, after all, He were [mad]? That would explain so much" (p. 148). This is ~~not a way of countering madness with madness in order to arrive at the ultimate rationality of life. On the contrary,~~ it declares that suffering reveals the essential irrationality at the core of experience -- "the broken vessels," as the Lurianic image has it, at the center of existence -- and therefore a rational or sane approach is doomed to frustration. The only sane response to the madness of existence consists of pitting one's own madness against it.



b) Another motive for madness is one to

which Elie Wiesel returns time and again. It is hinted at in the quotation from Dostoevski at the beginning of the book: "I have a plan — to go mad." I detect in this book — and in other passages here and there — the theme of madness as spite. God expects me to find meaning in my suffering. Well, I shall defy Him: "I have a plan," a strategy I have devised "to go mad" — to subvert the search for meaning and sanity and to deny to God the satisfaction of having me search for meaning in the depths of suffering. "The choice of madness," Michael says (p. 101), "is an act of courage ... an act of the free will that destroys freedom." When Pedro answers, "You're trying to drive God mad," Michael thinks: "And God too is trying to drive me mad." The "spite" theme comes through quite clearly.

c) There is yet a third, perhaps most important theme which makes Wiesel's madmen and madwomen the most irresistible of all his characters. His psychotics

conform with the current revisionist psychiatric theory that madness may simply be another and more intense form of lucidity. The madman is "farseeing. He sees the world that remains inaccessible to us. His madness is only a wall, erected to protect us — us:"

Madmen, Wiesel avers, "know that everything is false (p.19). The nature of human society is such that there is created a kind of moral imperative for decent men to go mad. "By what right," asks Moishe the madman, "are they not crazy? These days honest men can do only one thing: go mad! Spit on logic, intelligence, sacrosanct reason! That's what you have to do, that's the way to stay human, to keep your wholeness!" (p. 20). In a world gone mad, going mad — by the standards of that society — is indeed a salvaging of sanity. If the world is topsy-turvy, then one restores it by turning it upside-down, i.e., going mad. Hence, madness becomes a way of piercing through the moral lunacy of society in order to grasp the inherent sanity that life could be.



This last approach of Wiesel's represents an inversion of the sanity-insanity dualism. It is the madmen who are lucid and the supposedly normal people who are crazy. <sup>The inmates have taken over the asylum.</sup> It is the wrong <sup>same</sup> people who are inside the locked wards, and the <sup>strange</sup> wrong people who are treating and prescribing for them. A sobering thought indeed.

Let me share with you an even more remarkable challenge to the sanity of supposedly "normal" people. This comes from the great Rabbi Nachman of Brazlav, the strange Hasidic Rebbe who was the great story-teller of Hasidism, and whose tales have been compared, favorably, with those of Franz Kafka. (This tale too is recorded by Wiesel in his Souls on Fire):

In a distant land, a prince lost his mind and imagined himself a rooster. He sought refuge under the table and lived there, naked, refusing to partake of the royal delicacies served in golden dishes—all he wanted and accepted was the grain reserved for the roosters. The king was desperate. He sent for the best physicians, the most famous specialists; all admitted their incompetence. So did the magicians. And the monks, the ascetics, the miracle-makers; all their interventions proved fruitless.

One day an unknown sage presented himself at court. "I think that I could heal the prince," he said shyly. "Will you allow me to try?"

The king consented, and to the surprise of all present, the sage removed his clothes, and joining the prince under the table, began to crow like a rooster.

Suspicious, the prince interrogated him: "Who are you and what are you doing here?" — "And you," replied the sage, "who are you and what are you doing here?" — "Can't you see? I am a rooster!" — "Hmm," said the Sage, "how very strange to meet you here!" — "Why strange?" — "You mean, you don't see? Really not? You don't see that I'm a rooster just like you?"

The two men became friends and swore never to leave each other.

And then the sage undertook to cure the prince by using himself as example. He started by putting on a shirt. The prince couldn't believe his eyes. — "Are you crazy? Are you forgetting who you are? You really want to be a man?" — "You know," said the Sage in a gentle voice, "you mustn't ever believe that a rooster who dresses like a man ceases to be a rooster." The prince had to agree. The next day both dressed in a normal way. The sage sent for some dishes from the palace kitchen. "Wretch! What are you doing?" protested the prince, frightened in the extreme. "Are you going to eat like them now?" His friend allayed his fears: "Don't ever think that by eating like man, with man, at his table, a rooster ceases to be what he is; you mustn't ever believe that it is enough for a rooster to behave like a man to become human; you can do anything with man, in his world and even for him, and yet remain the rooster you are."

And the prince was convinced; he resumed his life as a prince.

(If from: Brab (love on person and what harvest))



IV. Finally, lest you mistake this foray into <sup>18th and</sup> 19th century Hasidim<sup>s</sup> and 20th century belle lettres as an expression of <sup>unanimous</sup> approval by normative Judaism of this rather radical stance in celebration of madness, let me apprise you of an incident that occurred sometime in the late 1700's which comes to entirely different conclusions. It is an eye-witness report of a conversation with the leader of the Mitnagdim (the opponents of Hasidism) and one of the most authentic geniuses in Jewish history. Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, was a phenomenal Talmudist who achieved world-wide scholarly fame before he became Bar Mitzvah. If anyone in the last 800 years can be pointed to as the most authoritative spokesman for classical Judaism, it is he. The Gaon was, by disposition, the ultimate "Litvak" -- sober, ascetic, intellectual, pious, fanatically devoted to his study and research -- above all, a man of the mind. But he was also one of the most prolific Kabbalists of all the ages. He experienced mystic visitations almost every night of his life, beginning from the time he was nine years old. These pneumatic experiences never interfered with his intellectual activity. Indeed, he insisted that they may not impinge upon one's sober intellectual analysis, and that mysticism may never become a short-cut to what reason must acquire through patient and systematic toil. (if time - נאמן לרוב - פשוט בלתי סביר לומר שיש קשר בין הדברים)

Now, permit me to read to you from the introduction to one of the Gaon's works by his chief disciple, a world famous scholar and



educational innovator whose emotional sobriety and analytic skepticism equalled that of his master, the Gaon. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes:

"Truly, from all his . . . wonderful deeds, as well as from what I have seen with my eyes in his writings, it appears that . . . holy mysteries were revealed to him by the Patriarch Jacob and by [the Prophet] Elijah. In other places where he wrote in a general way that "it had been revealed unto him" I am not quite sure whether these were waking revelations or ascents of the soul to the celestial academy during his

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#### APPENDIX F

sleep. There can be no doubt that he certainly experienced ascents of the soul every night . . . ~~as said before~~; but concerning the revelations in his waking state I have nothing certain from him, for he kept these things secret . . . and the little that I know about it is what he would tell us incidentally, on rare occasions, in the course of our conversations. However, from one amazing story which I heard from his ~~holy~~ mouth I inferred that he also had great revelations when awake. My father in heaven is a witness that once I heard from his ~~holy mouth~~ that there was a man in Vilna who dreamed dreams, awesome dreams that frightened all who heard them, for he told everyone his innermost thoughts and deeds so that people greatly feared him. [Once] he was brought before [the Gaon] and said to him: "Rabbi, permit me to say one thing to your honour. A fortnight ago Thursday you sat in this place and expounded these and these verses from the portion *Ha'azinu* [Deut. xxxii] and Rabbi Simon bar Yoḥai was sitting at your right hand and the 'ARI at your left hand." Our master was amazed whence this mortal knew all this, and said, "But I remember that [on that day] I even sent my servant away from the house [so that nobody should know]." Then our master said to him, "It is true that I expounded awesome mysteries on that occasion", and as he said this his face waxed very pale—which shows that these must have truly been wonderful things and exalted mysteries, worthy of being expounded in the presence of Rabbi Simon b. Yoḥai. Then our master looked at the dreamer and recognized that he was suffering from melancholia, and melancholics do at times have correct and true dreams. Then he ordered his servant to chase the man away.



Well, what have we here?

Another voice, more comprehensive, less radical, less tolerant,  
but more attuned to human, social, and communal realities and  
exigencies. And undoubtedly a more authentic voice of normative  
Judaism.

The Gaon does not deny that madmen occasionally possess  
incredibly lucid insights into the truth, into reality. They can  
even discern mystical truths with a startling clairvoyance. But  
if their perceptions, correct though they may be, issue from  
abberant personalities -- if, in a word, they are psychotic --  
then their truths are not usable, their perceptions not  
servicable, their insights may never become normative. No matter  
how much ~~literateurs~~<sup>novelists</sup> may celebrate them and romantic movements  
like Hasidism may cherish them, madmen remain madmen. The  
distinction between health and sickness may not be blurred, no  
matter what the temptation.

And so, my dear psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric social  
workers and nurses and other assorted mental health  
professionals, I conclude with the assurance that at least some  
of the expositors of the Jewish tradition agree that you belong  
outside, not inside, the closed gates of the wards; at your  
desks, not on your couches.