



January 18, 2000

Five Towns Lecture/February 19, 2000,

"Is Hasidism a Viable Option for Modern Orthodox Jews?"

1) Zaddikism. On the one hand it is very necessary because people want a spiritual authority who can inspire them. The Modern Orthodox rabbi does not usually fill that role. The problem with this is that it is overdone -- including the contemporary Mitnagdic world -- and instead of spiritual authority we have spiritual authoritarianism... The real meaning of *emunat chakhamim* is either the *Chakhmei ha-Mesorah* who formulated the Talmud and the Oral Law generally, or -- perhaps -- the faith of a scholar, namely, not blind acceptance but critical and analytic faith...

2) Prayer. We have much to learn from Hasidic prayer, and indeed the current popularity of Shlomo Carlbach is testimony of that (we should not worry over much about the negative aspects of this fad -- because much of it is a fad, but at the same time it is a genuine appreciation of his musical genius and his ability to inspire faith).

3) The Hasidic teaching that we can implement our fear of God in daily activities, not merely when we study Torah or perform official mitzvot. Thus, the Berditchever explanation of *Torah im Derekh Eretz* as opposed to that of R. Chaim Volozhiner.

4) Classical Rabbinism, in its Mitnagdic mode stresses so highly the value of Torah study that it consequently negates the value of ordinary labor. Hasidism, by contrast, not only maintains that Torah is implemented by observing it in the marketplace, as an example, but also, as the Besht taught, you must give full concentration to whatever you are doing, live it fully and do it for the sake of Heaven. Further, according to this perspective, Torah of course remains the most important item on the Jewish agenda, but not to the extent that it suffocates all else. Thus, the spiritual element of elevation of character, of "worship through corporeality," sanctify daily life and "ordinary" labor...

5) Hasidism strongly believes in spontaneity, and abjured any form of artifice. (Thus, when Rabbi Elimelch of Lizensk was complimented by a visitor upon speaking beautifully, he responded, "May I be struck dead before I be accused of that!") Hasidism, of course, overdid it, especially if you look at it in the context of contemporary life: it was lax in manners, in cleanliness, in neatness, etc. But its spontaneity left it closer to authenticity. The modern temper does not abide such spontaneity -- of course, excluding the values espoused by the counter culture of the 1960s... But this does stand as a challenge and a chastisement of Modern Orthodoxy -- we are too prim, too smug, too artificial, perhaps too superficial... Our davening is without adventure, without surprise, without the eruption of genuine feeling. It is dry, routine, even boring...

Hence, the result will be that the answer to the question posed at the outset is: partially yes, partially no...

OK - this + 1 more
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