

OUTLINE OF LECTURE TO JEWISH ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

"THE SEPHIROT AS METAPHYSICS AND
ETHICS IN EARLY HASIDISM"

1. The concept of the Sephirot is generally understood in the Kabbalistic tradition, as events which take place within the life of God. The Sephirot are also a way of man relating to God and of explaining certain existential and historical phenomena.
2. Whereas the system of Sephirot explains the emergence of the natural world, as the externalized language of God or as the emanation from the Ein-Sof and Its generative activity, this does not imply a clear and detailed metaphysic.
3. The ethical dimension of the Sephirot was not neglected. Thus, Cordovero and his Tomer Devorah and de Vides in his Reshit Hokhmah write elaborate works of Musar. Nevertheless, the Kabbalah is here used in didactic fashion rather than in a substantive way, and the Sephirot are invoked more illustratively than substantively and mystically.
4. R. Dov Ber of Mezeritsch, the "Great Maggid," as a genuine Kabbalist, and as a student of the Besht, both continues the Kabbalistic tradition and introduces certain variations. These variations are not always reflective of what is popularly considered Hasidism, but rather a profound turn of mind which lays the theoretical basis for later Hasidism, especially HaBaD.
5. The Sephirot as metaphysics: The term is here used quite literally, as a non-physical explanation of the physical universe. One example is: An analysis of the phenomenon of change. Pre-Socratic and later Greek philosophers -- differing views expressed by Thales and Parmenides. The Aristotelian system of metaphysics is based on the problem of change. Similarly, the Maggid discusses the question of change. It has already been described in an article HUCA by the late Joseph G. Weiss. Essentially, it involved a meditation in which an object is regressed to the sphere of אין, where annihilation of all differences and distinctness takes place, thus allowing it to egress in a changed form. I add two points to Weiss' paper -- one an addition, one a revision. I am not convinced that Weiss is correct in terming this idea of the Maggid as magical in the sense that it is a technique that must work. The Maggid is simply describing how the phenomenon of change operates, that it implies an act of destruction-and-recreation at every infinitesimal step, and that this may be explained sephirotically by regression to אין and re-emergence therefrom. There is nothing deterministic or generalized, and need not involve one in all the stages of contemplation.

fatalistic, it is merely descriptive and explanatory. The addition I make to Weiss' comments is: The purpose of the Maggid's interest is not purely metaphysical or philosophical, nor purely Kabbalistic, but also involves a means of explaining the mechanism of a Hasidic concept: *ה' יתברך נאמן*. The terminology is Kabbalistic, and is of course well-known in the Kabbalistic literature, but the term takes on a new meaning in early Hasidism; see my translation of ~~my~~ letter by the BESHT in the recent issue of TRADITION.

6. Another important instance of using the Sephirot as a metaphysic: Everything in this world derives from the Sephirot. This material is aptly summarized by one of the students of the Maggid, R. Shelomoh of Lutzk, in his "Second Introduction" to the Likkutei Amarim - Maggid Devarav leYaakov of the Maggid. Here, the Maggid combines Beshtian immanentism with Kabbalistic intuition. The idea of divine immanence is crucial to early Hasidism. In the hands of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, this would soon lead to acosmism or illusionism. The roots of this concept already are to be found in the works of the Maggid, and reflected by R. Shelomoh of Lutzk. Thus, for instance, every quality or state of mind that we are subjected to in this mundane sphere, when abstracted from its physical matrix, is the only true reality. This reality, in turn, is derived from any one of the Sephirot, bearing in mind that in the process of this declension from the upper worlds to this phenomenal world, it may undergo severe transformation. Hence: *ה' יתברך* may appear as illicit love; *ה' יתברך* as idolatrous fear; *ה' יתברך* as egocentric arrogance. Of course, there may also appear in their beneficent modes. Hence, we have a way of explaining all human activity and psychology and, in addition, we are imperceptibly lead to the early Hasidic concept of evil as a challenge to man to transform it into its original core of good.

7. We are here on the border of the next theme: the Sephirot as ethics. The very fact that the core of effluence from the Sephirot to this world remains the same, and that evil is merely another "face" taken by this primal divine force, gives us a technique for liberating the good from within the evil, and transforming the latter to the former. By a process of meditation and contemplation, man who is seized by evil impulse must now contemplate the divine origin of the power of this impulse, and thus will come to understand that it must be applied beneficently.

8. The theme is, of course, reminiscent of the Lurianic doctrine of "elevation of the sparks," and references are obliquely made to it time and again, sometimes even quite explicitly. But while the schema is very similar, the technique of application is far simpler in early Hasidism than it is in Kabbalah. The contemplation is generalized, and need not involve one in all the arcane technology of contemplation.

9.. The ethical consequences are immediately obvious: man transforms his evil impulse and redeems it by letting the good within it emerge by appreciating and realizing that it is, at core, a divine and therefore holy and good impulse. Indeed, we here have the theological background and rationale for the concept of

נחש נחש נחש.

10. This shades into the more specific question of "alien thoughts." These may be of any kind, but usually are taken to be erotic in nature. The Maggid's doctrine thus leads to a preference for sublimation of such "alien thoughts," rather than mere nullification. This is later to be challenged by other Hasidic thinkers, and excoriated immediately by Mitnaggedic polemicists, who found the doctrine too difficult and too dangerous.

April 21, 1975

ADDITIONS TO OUTLINE FOR LECTURE TO JAAS ON " THE SEPHIROT AS META-PHYSICS AND ETHICS IN EARLY HASIDISM"

(the lecture was never delivered because it was too technical and complicated for the audience. The material can be organized, however, for a major academic lecture. The following notes are at random, and have to be organized together with the major material.)

1. Scholem (in his book on Kabbalah taken for the 6J) rejects both Franck and Joel and maintains that the Kabbalah's emanation of the Sephirot is unlike Neo-Platonism in that it takes place within God Himself.
2. Thus, the corporeal world is independent of the Sephirot, although it has its archetypes in the ten Sephirot which impregnate the outer or lower worlds.
3. The Maggid - Lutzker theory of the impregnation by the Sephirot of the mundane spheres is a Kabbalistic version of the Platonic Ideas -- it is not new in the history of Kabbalah, but is significant for various doctrines which were originated and enhanced in the school of the Maggid such as the "elevation of Middot," "the elevation of alien thoughts," Devekut, and Simhah.
4. NL: Since from the very beginning the Kabbalah expressed its vision of the Sephirot in terms of speech, perhaps we could identify Lutzker's concept as a homonym -- namely, as that which can be taken one way or another, it being up to man to resolve the ambiguity and fix the meaning. So with the effluence of the Sephirot into this world: They are morally ambiguous, the ethical equivalence of homonyms, and it is up to man to re-convert them to their pure state after they have been corrupted. Lutzker thus grafts this Zoharian language theory onto the Platonic archetypes.
5. This scheme thus offers a pattern of regressive meditation: physical object to abstraction or metaphysical analogue of Platonic Idea to Source-world to (pre-Zimzum) "Root of Roots" or the Ein-Sof. This is the Maggid's (contemplative) Devekut.
6. Zimzum is demythologized from its Lurianic original meaning; it is given a metaphysical rather than a purely mystical interpretation: The Ein-Sof enters the world as an undifferentiated Essence, is then individuated into metaphysical worlds separate from each other, which are in turn transformed into perceptible physical and sensory properties.
7. For the Maggid, the "elevation of qualities" is thus a regression or reversion of emanation -- a reductio ad infinitum on the same path that creation takes place but in the opposite direction. By a contemplation we reverse and accomplish the "elevation of qualities" and

that is Devekut.

8. This schema is related by the Maggid to the Breaking of the Vessels. Although the concept is demythologized, in keeping with Hasidic harmonism, he retains the idea of the pathos of the "sparks" pleading for redemption. Thus the thoughts (the metaphysical sparks from the Sephirot) appears soiled, begging man for cleansing, liberation.

9. This is based on moral ambivalence of reality which can be good or evil (i.e. what I have called a homonym) and upon the concept of immanence.

10. See 10'3'07 278 page 274 who quotes Maggid implying Lutzker Idea for the elevations.

11. In the above passage from 10'3'07 278, he also invokes the concept of the Breaking of the Vessels. From Lutzker's presentation, it would seem that the Maggid does not work with the entire concept of the Breaking. According to Luria, the Break occurred in the Sephirot of 307 through 910 and partly 1282, with the "spark" overflowing. Lutzker applies the sparks idea to all the Sephirot, though without mentioning the Breaking as such. This would seem to conform to the early Hasidic unhappiness with the catastropholic theory of Luria and any ideas of dissonance.

Thus, Lutzker gives us a transition from mysticism to metaphysics and also to ethics and psychology.

12. Consider the following: In the conventional Kabbalistic understanding of the Sephirot, especially in their very earliest level, they describe what Scholem calls "the inner life of God," and the means by which He influences and reveals Himself to the world. Fundamentally, therefore, it is a transcendentalist conception whereby God, in the form of the Sephirot, encounters the world as an other. When Lutzker combines this with the Lurianic notion of sparks who offer his metaphysic of the world, maintaining that all facts of this world whether physical or psychological are derived from and are expressions of the Sephirot, the actualization of the "worlds," he is in effect making a statement of Hasidic immanentism.