

## BOOK REVIEW

**THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF HASIDISM: TEXT AND COMMENTARY**, translated and edited by *Norman Lamm*, with contributions by *Allen Brill* and *Shalom Carmy*. (KTAV/Yeshiva University Press, 1999. 711 pages.)

Reviewed by  
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Recently the journal *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* devoted three entire issues to the theme, "The Jewish Anthological Imagination."<sup>1</sup> It is surprising that not a single article focused on the hasidic movement, especially since, almost from the very beginning, hasidic literature has often taken the form of anthology. Responding to the demand from an eager hasidic reading public, early editors and publishers collected teachings, tales, aphorisms and moral maxims from the *Besht*, the *Maggid* of Mezeritch, and other masters.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the titles of many hasidic works share a common first word—*Likkutei* or *Likkutim*—announcing that the work is a collection or anthology of some sort.

*The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* thus stands in an old and honorable hasidic tradition. But at the same time, the publication of this work is a unique and significant event. Norman Lamm, along with his collaborators Yaakov Elman, Alan Brill and Shalom Carmy can justly claim to have put together one of the most comprehensive anthologies of hasidic thought in any language. Its scope and coverage are simply breathtaking. There are eighteen chapters, each devoted to a major category. But this only begins to tell the story, for the chapters are further divided into smaller units of analysis. The result is a feast for the mind and spirit. Whether one is interested in hasidic views on the soul, faith, Torah study, prayer, repentance, joy, humility, redemption or many other areas, one now has a reliable guide. Each chapter is provided with an introduction, and the selections are amply annotated. Most important for our contemporary context, the selections are all translated into clear and comprehensible English, no small feat for texts which are often technical and presuppose much prior knowledge.

Wisdom and insight are evident everywhere. This volume is obviously the result of a lifetime of study, teaching, and reflection. Certain chap-

ters that draw upon Lamm's earlier work on R. Hayyim of Volozhin are particularly impressive, but each and every chapter makes an important contribution to the whole.<sup>3</sup> Where else could one go to find eleven selections on the difficult concept of "worship through corporeality," or eighteen on "life and death?"

For the beginner, this volume provides an invaluable entry into hasidic theology as a serious discipline. For the lifelong student of the movement, the anthology is a vehicle to deepen and broaden one's knowledge. Those seeking religious guidance will find many passages to inspire and edify. And teachers at all levels from high school to university now have an inexhaustible resource for classroom instruction. (The volume boasts a number of important study and research tools, including biographical sketches, a glossary, bibliography and indices.)

The work's bounty is so great that it stimulates the appetite for even more. One area not significantly addressed in this volume is that of hasidic teachings on the Sabbath and Festivals, and the topic of Sacred Time as a whole. For some masters, this area was a central concern. One thinks in particular of R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger and his work, *Sefat Emet* (represented here by one selection). With its lapidary style, homiletic excellence, absolute mastery of sources, and penetrating theological vision, *Sefat Emet* is increasingly being recognized as a modern Jewish religious classic.<sup>4</sup>

While the anthology includes a great breadth of hasidic views, one notices that the volume's center of gravity falls squarely with the more moderate tendencies, and that some of the movement's most radical voices tend to be underrepresented. This is true both between the major streams of hasidic thought, and within individual lineages or streams. Of the students of the *Maggid* of Mezeritch, for example, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, founder of *Habad* Hasidism, is quoted with great frequency, while more radical figures, such as R. Hayyim Haykel of Amdur are nearly absent.<sup>5</sup> Even within *Habad* Hasidism, while certain later masters are represented by selections, R. Shneur Zalman's theologically provocative disciple R. Aharon ha-Levi of Starosielce is nowhere mentioned. And while R. Tsadok ha-Kohen of Lublin is well represented, no selections are provided for R. Tsadok's master, R. Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, as daring a thinker as Hasidism ever produced. Of course, every anthology embodies the taste and sensibility of its editor, and Dr. Lamm has every right to apply his own criteria for choosing the selections and to have the final product reflect his spiritual and intellectual signature.

One assessment that does bear reconsideration relates to the stylistic

qualities of hasidic *derashot*. To take one example at the very beginning of the volume (pp. xxxv-xxxvi): in the context of discussing the vagaries of textual transmission of the printed homilies, Lamm notes correctly that R. Levi Yitshak of Berditchev was entrusted with the task of editing the homilies of his master, the *Maggid* of Mezerich. He then states that "R. Levi Yitshak was less lucky in his own case; the editors of *his* talks preserved much of the tenor and style of the original talks, and thus emerge both prolix and verbose." This gives the impression that *Kedushat Levi* was edited by someone other than R. Levi Yitshak himself. The facts are as follows: current standard editions of *Kedushat Levi* are comprised of several parts, initially published separately. The first volume to appear contained homilies for *Hanukkah* and *Purim*, published by the author himself in Slavuta in 1798. The homilies on the Torah (which are now placed first in standard editions) were published in Berditchev (year 1811) by his sons, shortly after the master's death. The sons, who were scholars in their own right, had their father's manuscript before them, and would have had little time or inclination to undertake major editorial changes. Thus it may be stated with confidence that *Kedushat Levi* is largely the product—in style as well as substance—of R. Levi Yitshak himself. If indeed the text preserves "the tenor and style of the original talks," this can only be seen as an extraordinary blessing and gift.

It is wonderful to observe R. Levi Yitshak at his work in constructing the typical *Kedushat Levi* homily. As soon as he identifies his topic and goals, he sets about laying the exegetical and theological groundwork, sinking pylons deep in the textual soil, raising development sections, deftly spanning interpretive space. The end result is a cantilevered structure which elegantly sweeps across broad stretches of biblical territory. Best of all, the fresh textual readings dovetail precisely with the hasidic insights—the new ways of envisioning God, Torah, the world, oneself. The exegesis, the theology and the impetus to inner renewal mutually enhance each other. Ultimately they are seen to be one and the same. As for the repetitions, they generally serve the purposes of development, emphasis, and nuancing, or they set the stage for a new direction of movement. Seldom if ever do they appear tedious or devoid of significance. Nor is *Kedushat Levi* the only hasidic text distinguished by stylistic power and grace. In general, it is helpful to keep in mind that the hasidic *derasha* is a religious art form with its own rhythmic aesthetic, where exposition and technique are forever wedded to content and meaning.

With the publication of *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, Norman Lamm has changed the face of English language study of Hasidism,

now disclosed to be a deeply challenging domain of boundless fascination and reward. We are all in his debt for the enormous energy and learning that went into producing the work. Warm-heartedness and generosity of spirit are in evidence throughout, in the sheer volume of selections, in the copious explanations, and the unstinting effort to make difficult topics clear to all readers. As we turn the pages, we feel ourselves in the hands of a master teacher, gently guiding us at every crucial point, moving us forward and assisting us in avoiding pitfalls. *Bo el ha-teiva*: this work beckons the thoughtful explorer into the ark of Hasidism, into the word, into the text. It will inspire many to turn to the Hebrew original to ponder still more deeply. Of a great new work, one can ask no more.

## NOTES

1. The first issue devoted to the subject of anthology was 17:1 (January 1997); the second, 17:2 (May 1997); the third, 19:1 (January 1999).
2. See Zeev Gries, *The Book in Early Hasidism: Genres, Authors, Scribes, Managing Editors* (Tel Aviv: Kakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992) [Hebrew].
3. *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake, in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (Ktav, 1989); idem, "The Phase of Dialogue and Reconciliation," in *Tolerance and Movements of Religious Dissent in Eastern Europe*, edited by Bela K. Kiraly (Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 115-129. In these writings, Lamm masterfully compares and contrasts the views of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady and R. Hayyim on divine immanence and transcendence in the context of an active religious life. His deft disentangling of complex theological issues is a model of clarity and lucid exposition.
4. English language readers may wish to consult *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*, edited and translated by Arthur Green (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998).
5. The characterization of R. Hayyim Haykel and R. Abraham of Kalisk as "radicals" in the context of the hasidic movement is that of Dr. Lamm himself; see "The Phase of Dialogue and Reconciliation" (note 3, above), page 117.

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## REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE:

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