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## SOME THOUGHTS ON HASIDISM

It is a sobering thought, especially for one turned thirty, that we are already post-counterculture. This juncture provides an opportunity, though, to gain a new perspective on a facet of that period, still very much with us. Both the counterculture and its parallel in the social sciences, the Human Potential Movement, shared a common ethos of personal and communal liberation. Often, this found expression in a mistrust, if not outright disdain, for the rational intellect. Reacting to the reductionist, dehumanizing tendencies of the culture created by science and technology, they sought rediscovery of the self through varieties of political, social, psychedelic, and religious experience. Out of this came what one publication parodied as a *Whole Soul Catalog* of methods for stimulating spiritual, psychological, and somatic sensitivities.

One major phenomenon of this era of self awareness was the rise of black pride, whose shock waves resulted in a generally heightened ethnic awareness. Eventually this mood spread to Jews as well, though more slowly than to other groups, such as American Indians or Puerto Ricans. This was largely due to disproportionate Jewish identification with the struggles of other minorities, and the equally disproportionate representation of Jewish youth in the more psychic and spiritual involvements of the counterculture.

As many young Jews ruefully discovered they could not be black, others soon found that they were as alienated at the Ganges as they had been on Wall Street. The current renaissance of Jewish awareness is partly traceable to this pattern.

A question posed by many of those now seeking a "new Jewish consciousness" is: Does Judaism—and, in particular, Hasidism—recognize an intuitive, non-linear mode of mental activity, as a means

of developing areas of the mind and soul considered inaccessible to the probing intellect? The answer is not immediately apparent. Jewish belief and practice is a towering structure of intricate detail, built upon a foundation of rigorous talmudic logic. All of the great sages of Israel, including the masters of Hasidism, have always lived in that structure and stood firmly based on that foundation.

A Galician hasid, Menahem Ekstein, has affirmatively answered this question in a book published 60 years ago. Menahem Ekstein was killed in the Holocaust, but left as a legacy the first introduction to Hasidism for the uninitiated. Authoritatively grounded in hasidic sources, his *T'naei Nefesh LeHasagat HaHasidut* (Preconditions of the Mind for Attaining Hasid-ness) presents a program of mental exercises for stimulating and developing spiritual consciousness.

The first rule which Hasidism addresses to all who knock at her gates, asking to enter her inner chambers is "Know thyself:

Learn to look at yourself—to rise above all your natural inclinations and recognize them well. Divide yourself in two: One, a natural, human earth-walker, living a day-to-day existence, affected by the vicissitudes of time which constantly change and pass by him. And the other, a higher being, not drawn after transitory happenings and not affected by them: Who, rather, sits above in a lofty tower, glancing down at this other, lower man—towards all the various things that happen to him and the effects they have upon his mind. Who views them; knows and recognizes them; probes and scrutinizes them; and has within his power to direct them and use them as he wills. . . ."

Great striving in all the academic fields and the possession of much erudite information will not bring you to this state. Not so long as you do not devote some time each day to a period of solitude—to free your thoughts and contemplate. Only contemplation—the primal, natural way of study—will bring you to this level.

It should be noted here that the idea of contemplation is not exclusive or original to Hasidism. The thrust of the hasidic movement has constantly been to reemphasize and revitalize elements which have always existed in Judaism, but which were felt to be overlooked. In the first section of Maimonides' *Code*, he gives instructions for contemplating creation as the way to come to love of God.

When a man shall contemplate His deeds and creations—wondrous and great—and see in them His inestimable, endless wisdom; immediately he will begin to love, praise and exalt Him.

What stands in the way of achieving the exalted state described as the prerequisite to Hasidism? At the outset of his program, Ek-

stein precisely defines the objective, the obstacles along the way, and the strategy to overcome them.

The two major obstacles to self-knowledge are vanity and illusion. A man caught up with a specific emotion—joy, pleasure, pain, depression—becomes so involved with his feelings at that moment that he forgets he ever felt different before that point and will feel different again. Moreover, preoccupied with his own emotions, he is shut off from the lives of those around him. Both of these obstacles grow out of an egocentrism which grossly inflates a man's own self image and totally sucks him into each fleeting experience.

Hasidism, says Ekstein, present a straightforward method for dealing with these specious imaginings: a new kind of imagination, grounded in reality. Instead of an escape into a world of dream-stuff, one uses a visionary scope through which to see a very real world, beyond the senses.

Moving from the theoretical to the concrete, Ekstein then sets out his detailed program of mental and emotional development, which he calls "*manual* imagination," as opposed to the "*innate* imagination" which impedes growth. The program begins with learning to picture a small ball. Slowly, the ball is expanded into a globe. Then, picturing the globe from a distance, seas and land are added, countries and their peoples, the animal and plant kingdoms. All in minute detail.

Naturally, the mind must be trained over a period of months or years to visualize such a phantasmagoria of images. And, even with success, the images will not have an immediate effect. But, with perseverance, they will eventually become so vivid as to leave their impression.

Then comes the point of all these months of mental training. Secure in his ability to depict the universe about him, the initiate now attempts to place himself in position amongst all these myriad peoples and creatures. In this way, he goes beyond an intellectual awareness, to actually experience his true individual significance relative to the whole of creation.

But the mind does not let go so easily. It will not readily accede to such depersonalization. The stream of consciousness of a lifetime must be rerouted. But diligence and persistence in the program will build up a cumulative effect, like water dripping on a rock. With time, the innate imagination will begin to weaken and fade before the increasingly graphic manifestation of the manual imagination.

Most likely, not every person will experience a total elimination of the innate imagination; nor is such eradication necessary. It is only imperative that control rest in your awareness and volition to be able

to awaken and kindle within yourself the manual imagination and use it at will. The manual imagination will dissipate, much as a candle lit in a murky room instantly transforms the darkness, then, as with the snuffing out of the candle, the blackness returns, so returns the innate imagination.

There is a difference, however. Here, even when the innate imagination does return, it can no longer cause any damage. Nor will it have the same influence. Now you know it well; you know its vanity; you know its deceit. And you know full well that it is in your power to dispell it at any given moment.

But dissolution of the ego is not the end. Such abnegation, alone, without reorientation, could lead to depression and despondency. Thus, the second part of the program goes beyond self-renunciation to self-transcendence.

The most insidious aspect of egocentrism is a trait generally taken as synonymous with it: selfishness. Beguiled into an inflated self-importance, a man cannot see over his own psychological belly. Seeing oneself by true perspective pops the bubble, leaving one humbled. But there must be a new, positive focus to recenter on.

The next step, then, is to expand the capacities for feeling. If the delusion to be overcome is obsession with petty, transient self-concerns, the means for rising above those concerns is identification with the lives of others. This, of course, could be accomplished with what in the 60's was called "getting involved." But social and political action are limited by circumstance in their capacity to develop the personality. Instead, Ekstein presents a contemplation technique, complementary to the first one.

The manual imagination, now a seasoned worker, moves from the panorama of the vastness of creation to focus on the lives of individual people. Visualizing other people's life situations, from grief to joy, feeling every aspect and detail, one comes — no, merges — into total identification and empathy. One learns to feel the suffering as well as the joy of others; to, as the sages put it, "take on the burden of your friend."

Then with the skill of a great novelist, Ekstein takes the reader into the mind of a father watching his only son in the final throes of the death overtaking him. Powerless to help, the father watches the child take his last breaths. The scene at the cemetery . . . then the return home to see his son's empty bed.

In this way, continue to picture every minute detail, until it affects you; until you can really feel the pain of the father and the depth of his loss. Sorrow and mourning will fill every cell of your heart, to the point where you cannot even think of anything else.

Then, again in detail, the reader is told to picture how the pain slowly becomes blunted and fades, until, bit by bit, the father is able to return to his former routine. Next, with the father, the reader allows the pain to ebb from his own heart.

The essence of the idea is that a man is able to become his own poet, and expand his powers of feeling. He need not depend on seeing such situations, nor on reading dramatic literature. Rather, he can experience them in his own imagination.

To share in another's life is not just to feel his suffering, but his joy as well. Just so must one learn to feel the rejoicing of a wedding: from the decorations of the hall, the crisp-white tablecloths, and the flowers; to the music, the dancing, and the ebullient faces of the bride and groom. Then, once again in all its minutiae, how the family and guests go home and return to their daily lives.

This, in outline, is the program for achieving the "Divide yourself in two" Hasidism demands as a preliminary. At first, this can only be accomplished at specific times of the day set aside for contemplation—early morning or late night—when one is relatively free from the turmoil of daily activity. Only with time can one accomplish an integration of this outlook into the totality of his daily life. Then, transposing the "rising above" into regular pursuits, he learns to control his transitions, rather than be controlled by them.

One immediate result of mastering these exercises and the ones that accompany them—spanning the gamut of human experience—is that one can and does learn to control his emotions at will. And that, to a great extent, is the goal of this training. Thus, the express objective of the program: for mind to rule over matter.

After considering the benefits (as well as potential dangers) inherent in the system, Ekstein then proceeds to an analysis of its psycho-spiritual underpinnings. First he takes up the problem of the inability of the finite mind to grasp the near-infinite of creation. Only after years of training can one even appreciate its vastness.

Then, in far more elaborate detail, he examines the growth of the emotional attributes. Without ever referring to them as such, he traces the development of human consciousness in terms of the ten "soul powers" which correspond to the ten supernal *Sefirot* (spheres, manifestations, or emanations of the divine in the universe).

Hasidism distinguishes ten faculties or powers in every act. Eight of them are internal, comprising intellectual and emotional faculties which lead one to action. The ninth binds the internal powers to the physical act; the tenth is the act itself.

The first eight are divided into three mind (intellect) and five emotion powers (attributes). The three intellect powers are:

- (1) the source of the original idea or thought to carry out any form of action,
- (2) the power of thought itself, and
- (3) the faculty which absorbs and integrates this thought, develops it, expands it, and brings it to fruition. . . .

The five emotion powers are:

- (1) joy,
- (2) fear,
- (3) pride,
- (4) conquest, and
- (5) the gratification which follows conquest.

These five powers work on a constant basis . . . one is always primary and apparent, with the others operating to a lesser degree.

The source of the emotions is the third intellect power: the "depot" in which thoughts are absorbed and amplified. Through reflection on the ideas stored therein, the emotions are conceived and developed.

Following the five emotion powers are two more faculties which serve to integrate the other eight: One (the ninth) is a bridge between the feelings and action. It is a subtle form of "energy" which flows from the seat of emotion, activating the limbs. The tenth faculty is the action itself—observable behavior. It is the actualization of thought and feeling.

Three principles are then pointed out regarding the functioning of the ten faculties:

- (1) They have a process of growth, analogous to the growth of the body. But although the growth of the body stops, the growth of the soul-powers can continue until death.
- (2) Again like the body, these faculties must be fed in proportion to their ability to utilize the "nutrition."
- (3) Material stimuli have a limited ability to nourish the mental faculties. Eventually, a person needs more than tangibles alone can provide.

By way of explanation and expansion of these principles, the growth of consciousness is then traced through its various manifesta-

tions and stages, in a series of illustrative examples. Two major points stressed are that growth only occurs with the expansion of the intellect and emotion powers, and that only at the very moment of expanding consciousness does one fully experience joy and a sense of life.

The remainder of the book relates the purport of this heightened awareness, developed through the program, to various aspects of Jewish and specifically hasidic thought and practice. But, for our purposes, it is sufficient to be familiar with the technique and its conceptual framework.

The question arises, "In what way does this differ from meditation?" Certainly, there are a good deal of superficial—and more than superficial—correspondences between this hasidic contemplation and many common forms of meditation: The setting and time of day for practice which would provide the least distractions, concentrated attention, restricted (or controlled) awareness, and, in particular, the use of imagination and visualization, rather than discursive reasoning, as a path to higher knowledge.

A closer look at the practice and philosophical foundations of meditation, however, will reveal essential contrasts between these two modes of mental activity.

The essence of meditation is experiential, or psychological, rather than educational; i.e., its goal is not study, but development of a state of mind. Common to all forms of meditation—and what, therefore, could be considered its central aspect—is the act of *dwelling upon*. Whatever the object of attention: a candle flame, a sound, a repeated movement . . . or even consciousness of one's surroundings and all its various sounds, smells, and sights, or acknowledging the very sense of consciousness—following the mind as it darts from thought to thought—the particular object is incidental to the act of attending itself. Thus, meditation might be defined as a *centering of awareness*, irrespective of the content of that awareness.

This becomes increasingly clear with a review of the philosophy of yoga, the meditative discipline most familiar in the West (though it is equally true of *za-zen* and Sufism, as well as other systems). Along with the *Bhagavad Gita* which is Hindu scripture, the major source of yogic thought is the *Yoga Sutras* (Amphorisms) of Patanjali.

In his second *sutra*, Patanjali defines yoga as "an inhibition of the modifications of the mind (*Yogas chitta vrtti nirodha*)." The Sanskrit word for mind in this *sutra* is *chitta*, which is not pure consciousness, but a result of the interaction of pure consciousness (*purusa*) with the material world (*prakrti*). *Vrtti*, here translated as modifications, literally means "whirlpool." When one realizes that

*prakrti* is synonymous with the concept of *maya* (The Great Illusion), the meaning of this fundamental *sutra* becomes apparent: The goal of yoga is to be released from the Great Illusion of physical existence, to withdraw from the whirlpool of manifested "reality" into a state of pure consciousness, to sever all attachments to the world of the senses.

At the heart of yogic thinking is the doctrine of the *klesas*, (the sources of) suffering and misery. Any involvement with material stimuli—painful or pleasurable—is ultimately rooted in the *klesas*. The only freedom is in total detachment. But how is this detachment to be accomplished? Only through the practice of yoga. "The suppression of the modifications of the mind is brought about by persistent practice and non-attachment."

Perhaps the most explicit statement of the goal comes after Patanjali's cataloging his "eight-limb" yoga system. The last limb is *Mantra Yoga*—intense meditation on a specific sound. (Most common is "TM," said to have a direct mystical connection with the "Divine Consciousness." TM is a popularized form of *Mantra Yoga*.) Following the outline of the system, Patanjali writes, "From it results the disappearance of obstacles and *turning inward of consciousness*" (emphasis mine).

This definition of meditation—as the centering of awareness for the goal of developing detachment and inwardness—makes the descriptions of meditation and its benefits in popular literature not only credible, but readily understandable. Everything from relaxation and greater ability to concentrate, to improved general health and a better golf game: All this is the natural, expected result of such centering, which, in essence, is a withdrawal from the outside world into the self.

I may be guilty of psychic McCarthyism here, but I might add that it is no accident that most of the literature of the counterculture lumps meditation together with biofeedback machines, psychoactive plants and chemicals, sensory deprivation, strobe lights, acid rock, and a miscellany of other techniques for achieving altered *states of consciousness*. This understanding also makes more plausible R.D. Laing's insistence that what we call insanity is really just another way of looking at things.

The differences between meditation and the hasidic contemplation program we have been looking at fall into three general categories: (1) technical, (2) theological (or, perhaps, theosophical), and (3) moral. In purely technical terms, Ekstein's system could be called a *learning* process, while meditation would be an *unlearning* process. In meditation, old habitual modes of response are discarded for new



ways of looking at things—with the emphasis on *ways of looking*. The hasidic contemplation, while more experiential than academic, is still educational in its being *content*-oriented. The point of the technique is to achieve a more thorough integration than could be gotten by merely reading information. But it is a contemplating *about*, not a meditating *on*.

Now, anyone with even a cursory familiarity with Jewish religious philosophy—in particular, the works of Musar and Hasidism—has come across such dichotomies as *ruhniyut* (spirituality) and *gassmiyut* (corporeality); *homer* (matter) and *zura* (form); *guf* (body) and *neshama* (soul) . . . with the emphasis always on moving away from the earthy, towards the ethereal. Where, then, is the dividing line between the Eastern striving to become “pure consciousness” and the Jewish striving to become “holy”? I think an answer lies in the understanding of the goal of meditation set out earlier.

Both the Hindu and the Jew see a physical world of transient pains and pleasures which, in its very cosmic insignificance, preposterously poses as a self-contained reality. The difference is in the response. The Hindu dismisses it all as a play, retiring to the theater lounge to relax until it's over. The Jew applauds, crying “Author! Author!” and tries to get His autograph.

Of course, meditation can be and often is a specifically religious discipline. Certainly much of yoga is devotional or spiritual in nature. But this is not a contradiction. I never asserted that the inner-directedness of meditation was egocentric. The centering of meditation can move from the inner self to union with the “Universal Over-self” as manifest within.

But this is precisely the point—the very fork in the road where Judaism and Eastern religion must part company. The “merging with the divine” through meditation is a striving towards God, *away from creation*. Hasidism, particularly as expounded by Ekstein, is a striving towards God *through creation*.

Obviously, to cite the “towering structure” of observances mentioned earlier as “proof” of the outer or other-directedness of Judaism would not only contradict the basic premise of this analysis, but would be actually misleading. Hasidic writings abound with such expressions as *deveykut* (cleaving to God), *hitpashtut hagashmiyut* (spiritual disembodiment), and *hitbatlut hayesh* (abolishment of substance). The difference is that all these seeming negations of the material world are *means*, not *ends*.

The mystical relationship between man and God as conceived by Hasidism is a constant dynamism of *ratzo* (advance) and *shov* (retreat) (see Ezekiel 1:14). As the Baal Shem Tov explains:

After the soul is “chipped” from its sacred source, it burns with constant passion to return to “the Rock from which it was hewn.”

In order to prevent its ceasing to exist as a separate entity, the soul was enwrapped in matter and occupied with material concerns such as eating and drinking, commerce, etc. All this, in order that the soul would not be uninterruptedly involved in Divine service, and could thus effect a *tikun* (cosmic “restoration”) of the physical, through their existing together.

This concept of *ratzo va-shov*, refers to an intense yearning for an attachment to God, “advancing” (*ratzo*—lit. running) towards Him in mystical union. Then the union is culminated in the “retreat” (*shov*—lit. return), bringing the splendor of the Divine *shefa* (flow of abundance) into the fulfillment of the commandments: personal and communal. To remain in the *ratzo* would be a betrayal of the gift of *shefa*.

And God appeared to him (Abraham) amidst the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. And he lifted his eyes and beheld three men standing before him. And when he saw them he ran to greet them. . . . And he said, “My Lord, if I have found favor in Your eyes, pass not, I pray, from Your servant” (Genesis 18:1-3).

Thus Abraham took leave of God, so as to welcome three wayfarers into his home. (See Midrash and Talmud quoted in Rashi’s commentary on above passage.) The Talmud derives from this that hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. Such commentary is devoted to the issue of how Abraham himself knew this, and how he had the “audacity” to leave the presence of God and tend to his guests.

What emerges is that Abraham, in the midst of direct mystical union, perceived that this was not his ultimate purpose. A still higher good than this “cleaving to God” was to fulfill the *will* of God *within His creation*, and thereby *emulate* Him.

When the position of Rebbe fell to R. Shlomo of Radomsk, he refused, declaring himself unfit. That *Shavuot*, he left Radomsk to spend the festival with R. Yehezkel of Kuzmir. Upon greeting him, the Kuzmirer said:

It is written “And Moses descended from the mountain (Sinai) to the people, and he did sanctify the people . . .” (Exodus 19:14). Rashi says, “This teaches us that Moses did not turn to his own business—rather, he went directly from the mountain to the people.”

Now tell us, Reb Shlomo, what kind of businesses did our teacher Moses have? Did he have any goods to sell? No, of course not. The point is that when Moses saw the need for working with the people of Israel—to bring them

closer to God—he took himself to the task at hand, suspending his personal worship for the needs of the community.

The portrayal of “The Eastern Way” as a withdrawal—a retreat from the field of battle—might seem to contradict the entire thrust of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the “gospel” of Hinduism. The *Gita*, which is the major section of a lengthy epic called the *Mahabharata*, opens with the warrior-hero Arjuna riding into battle alongside his friend and charioteer, Krishna.

Surveying the field of battle, Arjuna recognizes his own kinsmen and friends amongst the enemy. Appalled, he throws down his arms and refuses to fight. The whole of the book then unfolds as a religious dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna—now revealed as an incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu—in which Krishna convinces Arjuna not to shirk his duty, but to fight.

But Krishna’s “do your duty” is by no means a Prussian military code or Protestant work-ethic. It is fundamental statement of the Eastern view of reality.

Even a wise man acts according to his nature; beings follow nature: what can restraint do?

Attachment and aversion of the senses are based on sense-objects; let no one come under the sway of these two. They are his enemies.

Better one’s own duty, though devoid of merit, than the duty of another, well performed. Better is death, in following one’s own duty; the duty of another is full of danger (III).

The reason Arjuna is told to return to the battle is not because of any essential nature of the fight itself; this is not a war of independence, nor is there the biblical admonition here of “And you shall destroy the evil in your midst.” The war must be fought because it *will* be fought; and Arjuna, as a *kshatriya* (member of the warrior caste) must fight because such is his *karma* (fate, action, works . . . the laws of cause and effect).

If, actuated by egoism, you think “I will not fight,” in vain is this, your resolve. Your own nature will impel you.

O son of Kunti (Arjuna), being bound by your own *karma*, born of your own nature, you shall be helplessly led to do that which, from delusion, you desire not to do.

O Arjuna, the Lord dwells in the heart of all beings, causing all beings to revolve, as if mounted on a wheel.

O Bharata (Arjuna), take refuge in Him with all your heart: through His grace you shall attain Supreme Peace and Eternal Abode (XVIII).

"The truly wise mourn neither for the dead nor for the living," says Krishna. There is no death, therefore, there is no killing. Once Arjuna rids himself of his "delusions," he can become like the truly wise who act with "non-attachment" to the results or effects of their deeds. Rather, they perform the duty fated them with selfless devotion.

Against this background, the essence of *Karma yoga*—the yoga of action—becomes clear, as does the divergence between it and the *shov* of Hasidism. The *shov* is the "retreat" from "cleaving to God," in order to function within the world, to fulfill His will as revealed in the Torah. *Karma yoga* is *kinetic meditation*—allowing the universe to unfold through one's limbs. Like the bow-shot of a Zen archer, the dance of a "whirling" Sufi dervish, the *Kata* movement in karate, there is no intrinsic meaning in the action itself, only in the consciousness and awareness it develops.

Abraham's turning to his guests, Moses's coming "from the mountain to the people," the admonition of the Kuzmirer to the Radomsker to do the same, all bear out the maxim that (Jewish) "life is with people." Similarly, contemplating the details of other people's lives is a graphic way of teaching oneself to live for others. The inner life is the means, living for others is the end. By contrast, the goal of yoga might be said to be amoral. *Amoral*, because within the yogic system, death is an illusion; thus Arjuna's killing cannot be considered *immoral*. The living or dying of kinsmen and friends is incidental to achieving spiritual liberation. Morality is simply irrelevant to pure consciousness.

To consider a moral code in regard to most meditative practice is naturally impertinent. No one would or should expect ethics to result from concentrating on a candle flame, a sound, or one's breathing. But when the "wisdom of the East" is adopted as a way of life, it is not merely pertinent but imperative to analyze the sources of that wisdom.

The first two of Patanjali's "eight-limbed" yoga system are *yama* (vows of abstention) and *niyama* (observances). Together, they comprise a severe moral code of self restraint and purity. Yogis in India who do not practice *yama* and *niyama* are considered to be followers of the "Left-hand Path," or "Brothers of the Shadow," those who do yoga for selfish reasons, seeking occult powers rather than enlightenment. (It is a very common and dangerous error amongst children of the counterculture to view any mystical, romantic reaction to the culture of science and technology as beneficent: If science begat faithlessness, then faith—in anything—is a self-evident good. Instructive in this regard is the fact that *Reichsfuehrer SS* Heinrich Himmler—

and, according to some reports, Adolph Hitler himself—were deeply involved in mysticism.)

A deeper look, however, at the ethical principles of *yama* and *niyama*, in the context of the full yoga discipline, reveals its basic incompatibility with Jewish values. In fact, they are two highways which diverge in near-opposite directions. The real essence of *yama* and *niyama* is not ethics at all, it is a preparatory training for non-attachment to worldly things. “Conventional” morality is still tied to the world of *prakrti*—to the illusions of the senses. The yogi practices “non-violence” in order to transcend the impulse to harm others, “non-stealing” to become detached from sense objects, “truthfulness” so as not to clutter the mind with unnecessary complications, and in order to reveal hidden, inner untruths. And so on with the rest of the “vows” and “observances.” Thus even people ultimately become objects in the yogi’s training—rungs in his spiritual ladder to liberation.

In a richly allusive letter written by R. Shimon Shalom of Amshinov to yeshiva students in Israel, he defined Hasidism in terms of its root word—*hesed* (grace, kindness, benevolence, mercy, etc.). Citing R. Akiva’s statement in the Sifra, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself—this is the great rule of the Torah,” he writes that the Hebrew word for “rule” (*klal*) implies something general and inclusive. The entire Torah constitutes an expression of *hesed*. Thus, when the gentile came to Hillel and asked to be taught the whole Torah on one foot, he was referring to the three pillars or “feet” on which the world stands: the Torah, worship, (*avoda*), and active loving-kindness (*gemilat hasadim*) (Avot 1:2). His question was, which of the three pillars, in and of itself, includes the other two?

And the answer was, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend,” which is the same as the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And these are the very words of R. Akiva: that this is the great rule of the Torah . . . because the power of *hesed* embraces the entire Torah. Parallel to this is the *gematriya* (science of the numerical values of Hebrew letters) of *gemilat hasadim* being equal to that of *Torah*.

As R. Samlai said (Sotah 14a), “The Torah begins with *gemilat hasadim*—‘And the Lord did make for Adam and his wife cloaks of skin, and He clothed them.’ (Genesis 3:21); and it ends with *gemilat hasadim*—‘And He buried him (Moses) in the glen . . .’ (Deuteronomy 34:6).”

Thus, the beginning and the end demonstrate that the whole of Torah has its source in the power of *hesed*.