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STUDY (OF HASIDUT) IS GREAT, FOR IT LEADS TO ACTION: TWO GENERATIONS OF HASIDUT AT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY

The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Texts and Commentary
(KTAV/YU Press, 1999)

The question of whether Torah study or ritual action is the preferred Jewish religious activity goes back millennia. Classic is the question, “Which is greater, study or practice?” presented as a debate between Rabbi Akiva, who prefers the former, and Rabbi Tarfon, who favors the latter.¹ Although their rabbinic colleagues are said to have called out, in an apparent attempt at resolution, that “study is great, for it leads to practice,” this statement does not do much to resolve the issue. If study is great (or “greater,” as it might be better translated), why is its significance predicated on its capacity to lead to practice? Does that mean that, in fact, performance is the greater of the two?

While this question has long been fodder for discussion among Talmudists and practitioners of Jewish thought,² it comes to a head with the divergence between Hasidim and Mitnagdim in the modern period. Mitnagdim are the great proponents of Torah study, which outshines its peers as the mitzva *par excellence* in their view. The most robust representation of this view, by Rav Hayyim of Volozhin, argues that

study itself is a form of practice, as are all other deeds, and it is greater still for it also leads to other practices. Thus there are in each act of study two elements. One element is the act [of study] itself... [and the second element is:] at the same time that he studies [for its own sake] he knows [or: learns how to perform] other acts, for study leads to this. Hence the act of study is primary, and the knowledge [gained by this study] is secondary.³

On the other hand, Hasidim, with their anti-elitist bent, support alternatives to ivory tower Talmud study, including religious activity in general

and ritual prayer in particular. Witness the view of Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, who writes that

it is also good to transform Torah into prayer; when you study [Torah] or hear a Torah discourse from a true zaddik, make it into a prayer. Beseech and plead with God that you will merit the fulfillment of everything that was said in the discourse, for [at present you perceive yourself as] very far from it.... The subject of this conversation [i.e., the prayer] rises to very great heights, for especially when you transform Torah into prayer you cause an exceedingly high degree of delight up above.⁴

Rabbi Norman Lamm brings this debate (and others) to life in his *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries*,⁵ a version of his dissertation, published in 1989, as well as in his *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary*, published ten years later.⁶

While both were published in the Sources and Studies in Kabbalah, Hasidism, and Jewish Thought series that R. Lamm founded and edited, the two serve quite different purposes. The published dissertation, a translation and expansion of the Hebrew version published by Mossad HaRav Kook in 1972 (the dissertation itself was authored in Hebrew and submitted in 1966), was a piece of innovative scholarship that staked a claim regarding R. Hayyim Volozhiner and his views on “Torah for its own sake,” and specifically compared him to the Hasidic Master, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe.

The Religious Thought of Hasidism, on the other hand, was an anthological volume that collected and elucidated core Hasidic teachings on a wide range of issues, organized conceptually into eighteen chapters. In this volume, R. Lamm did not argue for a particular position, but aimed to depict the richness and diversity of Hasidic thought. He did so in two ways: First, to show that Hasidic output exists beyond the stories popularized by Martin Buber and others, and that Hasidut, more than a mere “folk religion,” discusses weighty issues of theology and both builds upon and offers creative readings and applications of Jewish tradition. Second, to demonstrate the diversity of Hasidic thought on these issues, which is far from monolithic. Organizing the texts topically, rather than by thinker, facilitated that demonstration of the breadth and richness of Hasidic thought across multiple topics.

To this end, R. Lamm included classical theological topics such as God and Providence, the Soul, Faith, Torah Study, Worship, Repentance,

Evil, and Exile and Redemption, as well as more Kabbalah-focused themes, including *Devekut*, the *Tzaddik*, Worship through Corporeality, and Smallness and Greatness. Each of the eighteen chapters opens with an introduction, and each reading features explanatory footnotes, and not infrequent explanatory notes in the text as well. These notes elucidate the text, point out their author's broader goals and cases of creative interpretation or wordplay, and at times also situate the reading among scholarly views or disputes on the issue. As for scope, R. Lamm "confined [him]self largely to the first three generations of the movement" but "permitted [him]self an occasional foray into later generations" (xxxix).⁷

Upon publication, the volume was hailed as "a monumental work for the study of Hasidism,"⁸ "the most comprehensive anthology of Hasidic theological teachings in English to date,"⁹ and "one of the most comprehensive anthologies of Hasidic thought in any language. Its scope and coverage are simply breathtaking,"¹⁰ and was acclaimed for its clear translations and explications as well as its broad scope. The book won the National Jewish Book Award for Jewish Thought in 1999 and has been used by many a scholar of Hasidut since.

R. Lamm's attraction to Hasidut was not only intellectual, as his connection to the religious movement was present in his family and foundational in his own religious experience. R. Lamm's two grandfathers lived Hasidic lives, the one as a follower of the Belzer Rebbe and the other as a "*hasidischer rav*" tied to the Sanzer dynasty. R. Lamm himself grew up davening in Hasidic *shtiebls*, the rabbis of which he memorializes in the dedication of *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*. Of course, this volume testifies that R. Lamm's interest in Hasidut far transcends the *shtiebl* experience or feelings of nostalgia for earlier generations, as he engages the intellectual ideas and debates of Hasidut head-on.

While this work is the most direct contribution R. Lamm made to the study of Hasidut (and the volume is his heftiest, by far), it is by no means the only one. Multiple other publications of his touched on aspects of Hasidut and Kabbalah, from *Torah for Torah's Sake*, to an edited volume on Rav Kook, to multiple articles on Hasidic themes,¹¹ to the unique and creative treatment of Hasidut in his seminal publication, *Torah Umadda*.

There, R. Lamm presents Hasidut as one of several models that would argue for the religious value of the pursuit of secular studies. On the Hasidic model, where one sanctifies the profane in one's spiritual life, engagement in non-Torah intellectual activity can be classified as holy—not as holy as Torah study, to be sure, but holy nonetheless.¹² He draws upon the Hasidic idea of *avoda be-gashmiyut*, worship through the physical, which presumes

that divine immanence throughout the world allows for the possibility of serving God through mundane activity. R. Lamm draws upon a teaching of R. Tzvi Hirsch of Zhidachov appearing in his *Sur me-Ra va-Asei Tov*, section *Ketav Yosher Divrei Emet* (116a), where he writes that

one can perform unification of action in all mundane activities, such as business dealings, eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse, in a more exalted manner than the one described in *Duties of the Hearts*, in the chapters called “Unification of Deeds” and “Service of God”.... If the eating is done in accordance with the meditation of R. Isaac Luria—to extract and elevate the holy sparks in the food... and especially if one has been privileged by the Almighty to perceive and visualize with his mind the roots of His blessed Names, as explained in the Lurianic writings regarding the proper meditation by scholars for eating—then he can create *yibudim* (“unifications”) as much with his eating as he can with his prayer. Happy is he and happy is his lot! Similarly, each of his business matters can become a service in its own right, provided that he deals honestly. This is equally true of all mundane matters, whether plowing or sowing or reaping—any work of the field.¹³

Such an embrace of the material world, in all of its mundane glory, opens the door, argues R. Lamm, for an approach that values not only Torah study but secular studies as well. Leaving behind the Lurianic theurgy, R. Lamm retains the world-redemptive and material-positive view that this and many other Hasidic teachings put forth, and applies it to university study:

If Hasidism can find the promise of holiness in eating, why not in studying the chemistry of carbohydrates and the physiology of ingestion? If in working with a hammer and a chisel or a cobbler’s awl, why not with a theory and a hypothesis?¹⁴

This suggestion that a Hasidic theology might ground the *Torah Umadda* ethos is no mere throwaway line. R. Lamm stakes quite a lot on this view, arguing that it “yields probably the most potent confirmation of the legitimacy of Torah and Wisdom.”¹⁵

Not only did R. Lamm see Hasidut as a preferred theological grounding for the concept of Yeshiva University, he worked in multiple ways to include Hasidut as a part of the YU curriculum. Aside from teaching a course on Hasidut at YU, his tenure saw multiple scholars with expertise in Hasidic thought join the faculty. By the time he left the presidency in 2003, all three of the collaborators on the volume—Dr. Alan Brill, Rabbi

Shalom Carmy, and Dr. Yaakov Elman—were each teaching courses on topics related to Hasidut.

R. Lamm's investment in Hasidut, in his writing, his conceptualization of YU, and his staffing of its faculty, was by no means obvious or expected. Given the overwhelmingly "Litvish" nature of the Yeshiva—Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and the other *Roshei Yeshiva* overwhelmingly took the side of R. Hayyim Volozhiner over his Hasidic disputants—one would not have been surprised if Yeshiva University lacked any Hasidut at all.¹⁶ R. Lamm's commitment both to Hasidic thought and to the educational principle of offering theological breadth and diversity (within limits, of course!¹⁷) ensured that Hasidut played a role in these various ways.

Despite R. Lamm's investment in Hasidut in general and particularly at YU, it would appear that the embrace of Hasidut by many at the university actually occurred *following* his term as president rather than during it. For the past near-decade and a half (beginning soon after Richard Joel's assumption of that position), Yeshiva University has moved in a Hasidic direction in various ways. From the Stollel, a grassroots embrace of Hasidic practices by undergraduates beginning in 2008,¹⁸ to the more institutionalized turn to Hasidut embodied by the appointments of R. Moshe Weinberger, R. Moshe Tzvi Weinberg, and others, YU has incorporated an increasingly Hasidic nature. *Farbrengens* exist where they hadn't previously; "happy minyanim" sprout up on Friday nights, Rosh Hodesh, and other occasions; students with *peyes* and *gartels* now frequent YU's halls.¹⁹ All of these developments postdate R. Lamm's term as YU president, radiating outwards to impact many Centrist Orthodox communities.

Common to all of these phenomena is that they have primarily taken place on the level of practice rather than study. Student choice of dress and preference of prayer style dominate the Hasidic scene at YU. While students do read Hasidic writings, they are most likely to read *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, *Netivot Shalom*,²⁰ or other, more contemporary tracts, and to avoid the earlier, more classical, and more philosophical works of Hasidut.²¹ And while some might take the odd course in Hasidut, most are not interested in studying Hasidic thought within an academic setting, reserving their Hasidic interests for the "Yeshiva" rather than the "University" sector.²²

This can be fully contrasted with R. Lamm's interest in Hasidut. *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* overwhelmingly prefers the earlier and more intellectually-inclined writers of Hasidut and treats them with strict, academic objectivity.²³ His writings, both in that volume and elsewhere,

eschewed the more practically oriented, self-help style works of Hasidut. Furthermore, R. Lamm, despite his Hasidic roots, never advocated the importation of Hasidic practices into YU.

Those who have traced the phenomenon of Hasidut at YU and in the Centrist Orthodox community at-large see it as stemming primarily from influences at American *Shana ba-Aretz* programs in Israel. Of course, Israel itself has undergone a spiritual and particularly hasidically tinged revival in recent decades, not least in the Religious Zionist camp. However, the influence on Americans appears to have come especially from Haredi Israeli Hasidut that trickles down to American programs in Israel, and is then imported to the United States and YU by these students. Given their distinct origins, it is certainly interesting that these students ended up at YU, mere years after its President and leading thinker published a volume on Hasidut.

“Study is great, for it leads to practice.” Usually this progression is direct, as the religious subject is so enamored of their studies that they are motivated to practice in a more accurate, precise, and inspired fashion. In this case, however—call it *hashgaha* or the divine sense of humor—no direct connection between R. Lamm’s study of Hasidut and today’s YU students’ practice thereof is apparent. Indeed, it is doubtful if the average neo-Hasid at YU is even aware of R. Lamm’s volume on Hasidism. But let the record show that R. Lamm’s masterful work focusing on the study of Hasidut preceded in short order a renaissance in its performance at Yeshiva University and the larger community in YU’s orbit. Even if one cannot draw a direct line between the two, we should recognize R. Lamm as a precursor, if not a founding father, of the contemporary Hasidic moment in Centrist Orthodoxy.

¹ This dispute appears at Sifrei Deuteronomy 41, *Megilla* 27a, and *Kiddushin* 40b. See also *Bava Kamma* 17a.

² For example, see the discussion among Rashi and the Tosafists at: Rashi *Kiddushin* 40b, s.v. *sheha-talmud*; Rashi *Bava Kamma* 17a, s.v. *mevi*; Tosafot to *Bava Kamma* 17a, s.v. *veha-amar mar*; Tosafot to *Kiddushin* 40b, s.v. *Talmud gadol*; and Penei Yehoshua to *Bava Kamma* 17a, which relates to these discussions.

³ *Ruah Hayyim* to *Avot* 3:9 (translation drawn from Lamm, *Torah Lishmah*, 154).

⁴ *Likkutei Moharan* II:25, s.v. *gam*, translated in *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, 186. Relevant notes (no. 39, 41) to this passage include: “R. Nahman here raises the issue of the merits of prayer vis-à-vis Torah study.... The early Hasidic masters stressed the supremacy of prayer over every other mitzvah, including Torah study. While they sensed this to be an innovation, they viewed it as a necessary and justified departure....

R. Nahman's view is more radical.... He recommends that Torah itself should be transformed into prayer. Accordingly, not only is prayer superior to Torah study, but the value of Torah study is measured in terms of the prayer developing from it."

⁵ Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake: In the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (Ktav and YU Press, 1989).

⁶ Norman Lamm, with contributions by Alan Brill and Shalom Carmy, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (Ktav and YU Press, 1999). Yaakov Elman, Associate Editor of the Sources and Studies in Kabbalah, Hasidut, and Jewish Thought series under which the volume was published (R. Lamm served as the Series Editor) is mentioned in the preface as "a man of most impressive versatility in many areas of Jewish scholarship, [who] edited this volume with great care... as a labor of love for the subject." Rabbi Shalom Carmy, who co-taught a course with R. Lamm on Hasidut, wrote "a number of the introductions to individual chapters of this volume as well as the general introduction" and Dr. Alan Brill "contributed the chapter on the role of women in Hasidism" (xxxii).

⁷ In limiting himself to the earlier generations, R. Lamm was following the standard academic trend at the time, which assumed that the creative period of Hasidism ran until 1815, at which point it entered a state of decline. See the depiction of that view by David Biale at, e.g., *Gershom Scholem: Master of the Kabbalah* (Yale University Press, 2018), 142.

⁸ Yehuda Gelman, "Reviews: The Religious Thought of Hasidism," *Jewish Action* (Fall 2000).

⁹ Morris M. Faienstein, "Book Review: Norman Lamm, ed. *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary*," *AJS Review* 26:1 (2002), 196–197 (at p. 197).

¹⁰ Nehemia Polen, "Book Review: Norman Lamm, ed. *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary*," *TRADITION* 35:3 (2001), 80–83 (at p. 80).

¹¹ To mention just two pieces that appeared in this journal from R. Lamm's earliest years: "The Ideology of the Neturei Karta – According to the Satmarer Version," *TRADITION* 12:2 (1971), 38–53, and "The Letter of the Besht to Rav Gershon of Kutov," *TRADITION* 14:4 (1974), 110–125. The latter mentions the forthcoming anthology on Hasidic thought, although it would be another 25 years before it ultimately appeared.

¹² R. Lamm admits that this application of Hasidic thought is unusual, and even cites R. Nahman of Breslov's opposition to Jewish philosophy and to the notion that intellectual speculation is relevant to faith (see p. 143).

¹³ Translated by R. Lamm in *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, 333–334.

¹⁴ *Torah Umadda* (Maggid Books), 147.

¹⁵ *Torah Umadda*, 144.

¹⁶ In fact, it appears that, from the 1960s and extending into the 1970s, Yeshiva University did not have offerings in Hasidut. See Shaul Seidler-Feller and David Myers, "Introduction: A Portrait of Chaim Seidler-Feller," in *Swimming Against the Current: Reimagining Jewish Tradition in the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Chaim Seidler-Feller*, eds. S. Seidler-Feller and D. Myers (Academic Studies Press, 2020), xviii.

¹⁷ As R. Lamm puts it, in his Introduction to *Seventy Faces*, xv: "That there are 'seventy faces' or facets to Torah, as the Sages taught, implies that there is a variety of ways to express one's Jewishness—but not an infinite number of ways."

¹⁸ For an anthropological study on the Stollel and several other recent phenomena, and groups involving Yeshiva University students, see David Landes, "*Didan Notzach*: Toward a Hasidic Modern Orthodoxy," in *Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut*, ed. S. Zuckier (Ktav and YU Press, 2021), 377–424.

¹⁹ In this context it is worth citing two articles discussing the trend of increased Hasidut at YU: “Rabbi Moshe Weinberger to Join RIETS Faculty as Mashgiach Ruchani,” *YU Commentator* (February 2013); and Barbara Bensoussan, “Rekindling the Fire: Neo-Chassidus Brings the Inner Light of Torah to Modern Orthodoxy,” *Jewish Action* (Winter 2014), 20–29. Most recently and extensively, the Orthodox Forum volume, Shlomo Zuckier, ed., *Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut*, features several articles that discuss the Hasidic turn at Yeshiva University. See particularly the articles by Zuckier, Turetsky, Landes, Reichman, and Boshnack.

²⁰ See, for example, Tzvi Sinensky, “Rebbe Without Walls: The Slonimer Sensation,” *TheLehrhaus.com* (December 1, 2016), who notes that *Netivot Shalom* is currently very popular across the board, including in the Centrist Orthodox world, and describes it as fitting within the self-help genre.

²¹ See Landes, “*Didan Notzach*,” and Yehuda Turetsky, “The Year in Israel Has Changed: Neo-Hasidut and American Modern Orthodoxy,” in Zuckier, *Contemporary Uses and Forms*, 353–376.

²² In fact, as David Landes points out (Landes, “*Didan Notzach*,” 411), “Hasidut also constitutes a critique of Modern Orthodoxy’s long preoccupation with a particular set of issues, [including] scientific or academic approaches to the study of sacred texts.”

²³ While most of the citations are of early sources, an exception is made for Rav Tzadok of Lublin, because he offers a particularly intellectual and talmudically informed writing style, which only further proves this point.

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