

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THOUGHT IN ISRAEL

BOOK DESCRIPTION

BUBER'S CONCEPTION OF CHASSIDISM

by

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The following is a presentation of the main theses of Meir Orian's book.

Although Mordechai (Martin) Buber's influence on Western civilization, and especially on Protestant theology, is great, and although he opened to the West European world one of the many gates of Judaism, his own people has always looked with suspicion at his teachings and has considered them to be outside the main stream of Jewish thought.

Buber's work on Chassidism covers 40 years of restless and fruitful activity. He dealt with Chassidism in three different ways: by retelling the Chassidic tales, more or less in accordance with the sources; by interpreting the Chassidic message; and also in the form of a novel, "For the Sake of Heaven". In the last two ways he is no longer in line with original Chassidism: he presents his own philosophical ideas as those of Chassidism, whereas, in reality, a wide gap exists between the two.

Buber's basic philosophical conceptions are the 'I-Thou' relationship, and the totality and unity of faith and life. These ideas are indeed central to Chassidism, not as an intellectual conception, but as an intuitive feeling, realised in the encounter. Buber saw in Chassidism an endeavour to sanctify daily life, to re-establish the lost affinity to the Absolute. But the real roots of Buber's ideas are not to be found in original Chassidism, but in the philosophy of Kierkegaard and Christian mysticism (on which he wrote his doctor's thesis).

Buber, who had become estranged from Judaism after a superficial encounter with Polish Chassidism in his youth, found his philosophical and intellectual interests in Western culture. Modern Zionism brought him back to Judaism, and on his return he felt the strong need to find the same ideas, which had become so central in his thinking, also among his own rediscovered people. He did find them in Chassidism, and from then on

* Haifa, Pinat Hasefer, 1970, 69 pp.; original Hebrew title:

החסידות באספקלריה של בובר.

saw it as his mission to bring the message of Chassidism to the world at large.

Whereas for Buber his conceptions are expressions of a philosophical-romantic religiosity, the same ideas in Chassidism are rooted in a deep, religious awe, demanding the strict observance of all the religious precepts (mitzvot). Chassidism is both dynamic and conservative. It emphasises – as Buber does – that each individual has his own way, and that many gates are open to him, but whoever rejects the mitzvot, for him *all* gates are closed; and all the individual ways are but lanes on the highway of Hala-khah. Chassidism taught *how* to fulfil the mitzvot, but never, as Buber contends, that they may be replaced by spiritual acts. The Chassidic phrase: to declare the Kingdom of God, which means to observe all the mitzvot in devotion and enthusiasm, is “translated” by Buber into: to devote oneself to the Idea in which one believes.

Buber’s religious experience, which he imagined to be paralleled in Chassidism, knows only of the ‘I – Thou’ relationship. For the Chassid, God is not only “Thou” but also “He”, the Other, who demands and commands. For Buber, the spontaneous, direct relationship between man and God is of basic importance; for Chassidism, this relationship can only be experienced in the spontaneous fulfilment of concrete and fixed precepts. Buber, of course, is entitled to adhere to a religiosity-without-mitzvot, but to present this type of religiosity as original Chassidism is a falsification of history. The adhesion to God (devekut) never comes in Chassidism instead of the mitzvot.

Buber’s main mistake was that he distinguished between the “Torah” (i. e. halakhah) and the “soul” of Judaism. The latter he believed to have found in Chassidism. In reality, this Torah-less “soul” of Judaism has never and nowhere existed but in Buber’s own philosophy. Another distinction made by Buber is that between “religion” and “religiosity”. Religiosity is man’s spontaneous experience of God. Religion is the fixation of this experience in cultic forms, and is therefore a lethal danger to dynamic, living religiosity. The forms incline to take the place of God. This distinction brings Buber to unprecedented outbursts against traditional Judaism, in which he sees one of the extreme forms of this petrified religion, and a victory of priestly religion over prophetic religiosity. In Chassidism, as Buber sees it, prophetic, dynamic religiosity once again came to life.

Buber demolishes the partition between Judaism and the rest of humanity, a partition which has existed since Abraham and which is essential for the existence of the Jewish People. This paves the road for the identification of Jewish religiosity and early Christianity, which also rejected the mitzvot.

Professor Ernst Simon – a friend and disciple of Buber’s – has already shown the Christian motifs and roots of Buber’s thinking, and this

may explain why his influence on Christian world has been – and still is – so great, and why the Jews viewed his philosophy with suspicion. And when Buber compares the Chassidic Rabbi Ya'acov Yitzhak of Pzysha, the Jew par excellence, with Jesus of Nazareth, the symbol of everything anti-Jewish, then it is obvious that his conception of Chassidut is rooted more in the New Testament than in the teachings of the founders of Chassidism.

Described by Yochanan Eldad