

Yale University, Lux et Veritas and the Rebbe

TALK DELIVERED AT THE YALE UNIVERSITY SHABTAI SOCIETY ON 19TH KISLEV 5775

DECEMBER 8TH 2014 BY FAIVISH VOGEL

It is a great honour to be invited to the Yale University Shabtai Society by its founder, Rabbi Shmully Hecht to deliver this talk on one of the highlights of the Chabad-Chassidic calendar, Yud **Tes Kislev**. This date marks the release of Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad movement, from imprisonment on treason charges and symbolises the vindication for his teachings and development of Chabad Chassidism.

The seal of this distinguished University depicts the “**UrimVetumim**”. This was the breast plate worn by the High Priest in the Temple of old, first in the desert and then in Jerusalem. When the Jewish Kings needed to access G-d direct, they would stand before it and ask the question. The twelve precious stones upon which were engraved the names of the twelve tribes, sons of Jacob, would then flicker the letters on the stones, producing the Divine response.

It's motto is “Lux et Veritas” Light and Truth. I can only presume that the faculty had access to light and Truth via something similar to the High Priest's Breast Plate!

This location is hugely fitting for the original founding date of this prime Chabad Chassidic festival can be traced to the birthday of the founder of the general Chassidic movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shemtov, who was born in 1698. This was three years before this institution!

To the extent that this University was founded in order to further religious and academic training, it was probably planned by the Al-mighty to allow luminaries of the Jewish faith to make their presence on earth – as a signal of pre-emption!

Now we all know but sometimes we actually feel that it is “G-d, who prepares the footsteps of man” This is elaborated in Chassidic teachings and which we call “Divine Individual providence”.

Providence through a number of circumstances led me from London to N.Y. in 1965 and I attended a meeting or “Farbrengen” as they were called on Yud Tes Kislev 5766 – 1965.

These events comprised of the Rebbe speaking for long periods of time, interspersed with singing and of course saying L’chayim.

During one of these talks, I sensed that this was going on for a longer time than usual. In fact this talk lasted around two hours.

I followed up to half time but then became lost. But I said to myself, this will become a real classic. It truly did.

This talk, after being published in various forms, was finally edited by the Rebbe himself and printed for Yud Tes Kislev – December 1971

This essay was titled “On the Essence of Chassidus”

We are all aware that there are books **on Judaism** and those **about Judaism!** This was **about Chassidism** but was truly **on Chassidism**, In fact it must be the “mother of all essays” It is titled “**the Essence of Chassidus**”

We have all just heard very illuminating presentations from Dr Glynn Dynner of the Sarah Lawrence College Faculty and Professor Reuven Kimmelman Head of Jewish Studies Department at Brandeis University. Dr Dynner gave a

comprehensive historical and sociological overview of the overall Chassidic movement. This included a map of the numerous towns and villages which hosted the Chassidic masters of the time. Very informative. He also made reference to the primacy of Jewish liquor purveyors and even published a book on this subject which presumably goes some way to explain the Chassidic weakness for a L'chayim!

Professor Kimelman gave a masterful presentation of Rabbinic Judaism of what we call normative and mainstream Judaism. This is based on the written and oral law but which later became written through the Mishna and Talmud. This then became codified through a succession of Scholars from that time until today.

It is into this normative and mainstream Judaism that I will attempt to present a further dimension which draws from the G-dliness of the beyond but equally penetrates and illuminates both its History and Sociology but most importantly Rabbinic Judaism.

This small book which has been translated into English and many other languages, takes the reader on a "guided tour". It begins with a question which we have all asked and which continues to be asked.

"What is Chassidism and what is Chassidus?"

Where does it slot into the grand edifice of Torah? Was it a movement which followed the massive and terrible pogroms in the mid 17th Century and which provided solace for its remnants? Were its teachings an explanation of the whole Kabalistic system? Was it an ethical training course? Or did it advocate behaviour which went beyond the letter of the Law? Or maybe a "populist" movement which raised the station of the simple people?

We must say that all the above are truly **manifestations** of Chassidus but not of its Essence and does not answer the question, “What **is** Chassidus”? In searching for an answer to this question we revert to the most frequently used descriptive Hebrew word which is “Ma-hut” This is in fact a question, “what is it?” which has been transformed into a noun, reading the “**what** of”, its true substance.

The Rebbe goes on to explain that even while the development of Chassidus had a beneficial effect on the Jewish people and Judaism in all the aspects mentioned, it would be a misrepresentation to say definitively, that it **was** any of them. Its impact was felt historically, sociologically, emotionally and intellectually but that would only be its effect.

In contra- distinction to any of the above the Rebbe proposed something unique. Chassidus is the “quintessential essence of G-dliness” or as expressed in the Zohar, as “the Divine flow of the Infinite without end”.

Whilst Rabbinic Judaism is liberally laced with allusions to redemption it was Chassidism which brought it to the fore.

The Rebbe offers entry into this discussion with the concept of the Moshiach. He cites Rabbi Israel Baal Shemtov the founder of the Chassidic movement who recorded his own personal experience of elevation into the celestial worlds. He met the Moshiach and asked him “When will he come?” He replied, “When your well-springs spread to the outside!”

The promised achievements of Moshiach affecting our world are many but the core paradigm shift will be experienced with “the Supernatural elements of G-dliness becoming apparent within the natural world order.

The Rebbe then proceeds to reason that “from the promised reward of a mitzvah, we can ascertain its very nature and substance. It’s **mahut** (see above)

Given this reward we may now employ human perception of this entity by examining the five levels within the Jewish soul. The first four levels of **Nefesh, Ruach, Neshoma** and **Chaya** are understood in rational terms of human function proceeding from the lowest. Thought, speech and deed are grouped in **Nefesh** as one. Their source is in **Ruach** the emotional energies which in turn feed off **Neshoma** the intellectual powers. All of the three above are sourced in the fourth level, usually understood as delight which is the prime motivator. All of these maybe classified as rational.

However the fifth level (the quint (five) essence) defies definition and is expressed as **Yechida**, singular and virtually “one with G-d”. Such energy is rarely manifested except as the propelling energy expressed in acts of total self-sacrifice. This would be in a class of its own, the supra-rational.

Incidentally this notion appears in the “Guide for the Perplexed” (Maimonides) who cites Aristotle’s writings when describing the four basic “elements” The fifth he alludes to is “ether”, an over arching and unifying factor, hinting to a parallel line of thinking.

The paradigm of Torah interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism is understood on or through four levels רמז דרוש סוד פשוט

First a note on Torah. Its narrative is perceived as “the metaphor of the Prime Being” It’s true metaphysical **substance** explained by Maimonides and amplified by Rabbi Schneur Zalman is the “wisdom of the Holy one blessed be He”

Where He and His wisdom are ONE.

This is the essential Substance of Torah.

This Essence, in turn finds expression on all four levels

Plain or Literal Meaning	פשוט	Peshat
Homiletical	דרוש	Drush
Allusory	רמז	Remez
Mystical	סוד	Sod

Chassidus reveals and represents the fifth level, expressed in the Zohar as “a Divine flow of Infinite without end” whose generating infinite light impregnates all the four levels and provides them with a deeper and luminary insight.

It is this Yechida level of Torah interpretation which galvanised the deepest levels of Jewish spirituality to evoke a fiery and sustained commitment to Jewish practise.

The Zohar first printed in the 13th century records the teaching of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai of the Tannaic period, who predicted that in the second half of the sixth millennium, 5500 after creation “the heavens would open and both divine wisdom together with (scientific) wisdom of the world would be revealed”. I needn’t remind you that with the exponential or geometric advances of our time which began in mid-eighteenth century heralding the Industrial Revolution it is only a matter of time for these two worlds to converge.

This parallel progression of the physical and spiritual areas of our existence are mutually complementary and the development of both is becoming more and more apparent. But because free will is not denied from anyone, this ultimate can only be as inevitable and as soon as we may choose.

He has chosen to create the world and He places His trust in humanity to choose “Life and Goodness” for the sake of perfecting the world and to provide a suitable dwelling place for Him.

On this extraordinary day of the 19thth of Kislev we invoke his blessings.

It is also up to each and every one of us. L’chayim!

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