

KINLOSS: Finchley Synagogue Beit Midrash Programme
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Chassidism and Modernity

Is Chassidism Relevant for the Modern Age?

Dr Tali Loewenthal - Adjunct Lecturer, Dept of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, UCL
Director: Chabad Research Unit
www.chabadresearch.net - cru@lubavitchuk.com

1. Professor Joseph Dan's question in 'Chasidism: the third century' (in Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised*). How is it that Chasidism has survived? But we are asking a further question: is Chassidism relevant?
2. 'Modernity': Rationality. The Enlightenment. Emancipation and Education for all. Personal freedom. But: Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: 'Brothers become others'. A further dimension: One's own self becomes 'other' - *Déracinée* - 'uprooted from one's origin and self'.
3. The battle to preserve Orthodoxy: Rabbi Moshe Sofer (Schreiber), the Chatam Sofer (1762-1939). Preserving the Halachah. The 'Will' of the Chatam Sofer which became the basis for Hareidi Orthodoxy: preserving the 'small print' of the Halachah.
4. Two aspects of Jewish life: The *Letter* and the *Spirit*. At the Giving of the Torah: the Commands of the Torah, the Laws; complemented by the drama of Mount Sinai. In the Talmud: Halachah and Aggadah, Laws and edifying stories and ideas, Inspiration.
5. Paths of Inspiration: Kabbalah - for the few. The Talmud in Chagigah tells of the dangers of Kabbalah, in the story of 'Four who entered Pardes', only one of whom, Rabbi Akiva, 'entered in peace and came out in peace'. The Zohar speaks of the outer aspect of Torah and the Inner aspect, Revealed and Hidden.
6. Revealing a Path of Peace in revealing the Inner dimension of Judaism: Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760).
7. Spirituality which leads *away* from the world, versus spirituality which leads *into* the world. Midrash Tanchuma (Nasso 7:1): the goal of existence is that

G-d desired to create a 'dwelling' in the Lower World. That the world should express the Divine.

8. The Baal Shem Tov and his disciples taught how one can discover extra dimensions of spirituality in Prayer, Torah Study and Mitzvot.

9. The significance of Love of one's Fellow. The idea from Rabbi Yitzhak Luria that before prayer one should say 'behold I accept on myself the Mitzva of Ahavat Yisrael'. Thus, Ahavat Yisrael is the gateway through which one comes closer to service of G-d.

10. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812): author of Tanya. The theme: 'it is very easy to serve G-d, in your mouth and heart and action' (Nitzavim 30:14). כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיו ובלבבך לעשותו He also wrote the Shulhan Aruch HaRav, thus combining the Letter and the Spirit.

11. The late Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994), broadened the reach of the inspiration of Chassidism. His initial statement as Rebbe: Love of G-d, Love of Torah, Love of one's fellow. They all interconnect.

12. His final edited discourse, on the words ואתה תצוה - 'You (Moses) should command'. But surely it is G-d who commands? Rather understand this as 'You Moses should *connect*' - צוותא וחיבור . This final discourse explains that the role of a Jewish leader through the ages is to connect the Jew to G-d, and to connect the Jewish people to each other.

13. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's impetus that each Jew should help others become more observant, giving the guidance of the Ten Mitzva Campaigns, helps each person discover more of the inner meaning of the Mitzvot.

14. The Ten Mivtzaim (Campaigns): Love of one's Fellow, Chinuch (Educating oneself and others), Torah Study, Tefilin, Mezuzah, Tzedaka, Having Jewish Books, Kashrut, Lighting Shabbat Candles for women and girls, Mikveh.

15. Now we can consider Professor Dan's question. Why has Chassidism survived? Because it is relevant. Because it makes others into brothers, reversing the negative aspect of modernity, while retaining the positive aspect.

16. Modernity **plus** Chassidism is a healthy way to make a Divine dwelling in the world, combining the letter and the spirit, for the Jews and all humanity.