

The Baal Shem Tov's Methods of Hasidic Spirituality as Tools for the Work of the Spiritual Care Provider

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In memory of our late teacher and founder of spiritual care in Israel, Rabbi Pessach Krauss z"l, may his memory be for a blessing.

Introduction

One of the two founders of the field of professional spiritual care in the United States, Dr. Richard Clarke Cabot (1868–1939), was a physician from Boston who lived in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ Toward the end of his life, he also taught theology and philosophy at Harvard University. In his book *The Art of Ministering to the Sick* (1957), he dedicates a chapter to reviewing the professional tools available to the spiritual care provider.² These tools are different from those available to other professionals in the fields of mental and physical health. This article will attempt to address the similarity between these professional tools and the practices for improving physical and mental health discussed in Hasidic literature. Special attention will be paid to the earlier works from the first–third generations of Hasidism—those laid out by its founder, the Baal Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, 1698–1760); by one of his two main disciples, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Katz from Polnea (1695–1781); and by the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, Rabbi Moshe Haim Ephraim of Sudilkov (1748–1800) and the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson, Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav (1772–1810). All four founders

¹I would like to take the opportunity to thank the primary donors who helped the Marpeh Academic Program for the Training of Spiritual Caregiving at the Schechter Institute, primarily the UJA Federation of New York, the Jewish Federation of the Greater Methrowest, New Jersey, Cecille and Rabbi Stanley Asekoff, and Dr. Joan Krauss, who has supported most of my scholarship and studies produced by the Marpeh program in memory of her late husband, Rabbi Pessach Krauss z"l, a former chaplain and teacher at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Rabbi Krauss was one of the very first Jewish chaplains in the United States, and the first founder and teacher of spiritual care in Israel following his aliyah by the end of the twentieth century.

²R. C. Cabot and R. L. Dicks, *The Art of Ministering to the Sick* (Macmillan, 1957), which was one of the first professional works written in this field.

of the Hasidic spiritual movement were residents of Podolia, a district in the southern part of the Ukraine. Many of their statements concerning their teacher's conceptual tools that support the soul—and, as a result, the state of the human body—are collected in the Book of the Baal Shem Tov on the Torah.³ While the Baal Shem Tov did not leave many writings, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Katz was the first to explain the new Hasidic spiritual innovations of his teacher, the Baal Shem Tov. These teachings were translated into a full and rich theology, consisting of teachings and spiritual tools in the works of many of his followers. However, as mentioned above, in this comparative essay I will focus on three interpretations of a number of spiritual tools that he mentions by his direct disciples, including his close student and his two of his family members.⁴

A fundamental assumption upon which to base such a comparative study is the conceptual infrastructure of both spiritual care theory from the twentieth century and early Hasidic theology and customs from the eighteenth century concerning the substantial but unpredictable connection between the human body and psyche. This must be taken into account even though we do not always understand it. In Cabot's view as both a doctor and educator, every person is meant to grow regardless of the state of their health.⁵ The Baal Shem Tov states: "If he were to believe that this came to him from God, he would not grow angry at all." Just as Cabot believed that any suffering a patient experiences is a stimulus to growth, the Baal Shem Tov felt that it is a person's task to strengthen themselves for work, especially after experiencing "some act of ugliness from a friend."⁶

³ Baal Shem Tov on the Torah, ed. Nathan Neta Hacoen and Shimon Menachem Mendel from Gwatshau, 3 vols. (Nofet Tsoffim, 1997), 1:108, 386 (Hebrew).

⁴ This comparative essay is not a historical or even a theological analysis of Hasidism but a professional article that wishes to highlight Hasidic tools relevant to spiritual care. It is a parallel article to the ones that I highlighted in an essay on tools that could be available to Jewish spiritual care providers and spiritual care recipients. For a discussion of various topics in the study of Hasidism, see Einat Ramon, "Gratitude, Israeli Spiritual Care and Contemporary Hassidic Teachers: The Theme of Thankfulness in the Works of Rabbis Brazofsky (the Netivot Shalom), Rav Arush and Yemima Avital," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 78–100. For further reading about the Baal Shem Tov and his immediate disciples, including the ones mentioned in this article, see Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov*, Litman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2nd rev. ed. (2013); Emanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic and Leader* (Brandeis University Press, 2012); Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, Jewish Lights Classic Reprint (1992); and Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (SUNY Press, 1995).

⁵ Cabot and Dicks, Art, 16.

⁶ See, respectively, Cabot and Dicks, Art, 17 and Baal Shem Tov, 1:108–9.

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According to Rabbi Moshe Haim Ephraim, speaking in his grandfather's name, the foundational idea of Hasidism is that "the Lord does not inflict a person with suffering, unless he first visits them with melancholy."⁷ The idea that depression precedes illness (and other types of suffering) ties the health of the body and the psyche closely together, emphasizing the movement's worldview. Nonetheless, Hasidism does not see faith as a kind of magic formula that is guaranteed to prevent the factors that lead to suffering or to cure illness. External occurrences, including those that cause human pain, are also according to the result of divine commands or luck. This also applies to the phenomena of bodily illness and suffering.⁸

The role of both the Hasid and the Tsaddik (the leader in Hasidism) who helps him is to strengthen individuals in their efforts to deal with the sufferings they are experiencing. The fundamental idea is that, unlike the spiritual care provider, the Hasidic Tsaddik has the supernatural ability to sweeten the divine decree. This is seen as an expansion and extension of the talmudic dictum that "the Holy One, Blessed be He, decrees, and the righteous man annuls the decree" (b. Mo'ed Qatan 16b).⁹

The intention of Hasidism is thus to prevent melancholy and to endow happiness and humility—that is, the acceptance of one's fate—as a way of life, in order to sweeten the divine decrees with which people wrestle to the best of their ability.¹⁰ In a professional context, the fundamental assumption of the relation between the body and the psyche neither supposes nor promises that spiritual care operates according to natural laws.¹¹ Both Hasidism as a theological school of thought and theoreticians of spiritual care emphasize that the spiritual care provider, or the Hasid or Tsaddik assisting him, can help a sick person to deal more successfully with their situation and focus their energies on using the crisis to grow spiritually.¹² In both spiritual care and Hasidism, then, there are methods for strengthening both the psyche and the body.

⁷ In other words, "he takes from them their level of security" in their faith (Baal Shem Tov, 1:326).

⁸ This is a paraphrase of of Degel Maḥanei Ephraim by Rabbi Moshe Haim Ephraim from Sudilkov, relating his grandfather's perception of suffering (Baal Shem Tov, 1:326).

⁹ Furthermore, "when his (a person's) body (is sick), his soul is weakened as well; and he cannot pray as he should even though he is free of sin. Hence a person must be very careful to preserve his health" (Baal Shem Tov, 2:237).

¹⁰ Baal Shem Tov, 1:13.

¹¹ Although natural laws are not fully known to us (and may therefore surprise us), we should point out that this is a further point of commonality between the two disciplines.

¹² Cabot and Dicks, Art, 16–17.

Following the presentation of these ideas, this article will follow the form of a comparative study between the two fields examining the writings of early Hasidic school of thought through the lens of spiritual care as a profession that has taken its first steps in the State of Israel over the course of the last two decades.

Practices of Spiritual Care

Cabot began his professional training in philosophy at Harvard as a student of the American philosopher William James (1842–1910). He then turned to medicine and published research in cardiology, hematology, and pulmonology.¹³ Later in his life, he returned to teaching philosophy and theology. As an exceptional polymath, Cabot was a pioneer in teaching medicine by discussing patient cases as a means of medical instruction. His method worked to integrate social workers within the hospital staff. Later on he advocated for clergy to be trained and hired as spiritual care providers in hospitals. Together with the Protestant minister Anton Boisen (1876–1965), Cabot launched the first clinical-pastoral education training course in the Boston hospital, and when their paths later diverged, Cabot continued to bring in clergy to work with the patients in various wards.¹⁴ When he returned to teach philosophy and religion at Harvard and at a nearby Christian theological seminary, he undertook a study of social ethics. His book on spiritual care for the sick was written and published in 1936, three years before his death.

Cabot's book, one of the first to be written in the field, reflects the population of American patients that preceded the waves of immigration from South America and Asia in the middle of the twentieth century. As mentioned, it recounts a wide variety of tools in the arsenal of the spiritual care provider. It reflects not only the uniform character of the hospital and the community at that time but also the close ties between them and the innocence that American society lost over the course of the twentieth century.

Even at a backward glance, however, the list of tools mentioned is a fascinating one. Near the beginning of the book, Cabot addresses the various aspects of spiritual growth, demonstrating that the spiritual care provider's

¹³ C. S. Roberts, "The Case of Richard Cabot," in *Clinical Methods: The History, Physical, and Laboratory Examinations*, ed. H. K. Walker, W. D. Hall, and J. W. Hurst, 3rd ed. (Butterworths, 1990), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK702/>.

¹⁴ Boisen suffered from mental illnesses that hampered his ability to work for long periods, and he focused primarily on serving as a spiritual care provider in psychiatric wards.

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attentiveness amounts to an expression of love that helps the sick person to grow. Cabot emphasizes the value of theoretical instruction, aesthetic appreciation, and integrating the patient with their environment so as to communicate to them that they are crucial to their surroundings.¹⁵ In describing the different aspects of spiritual growth, Cabot reflects the tools of spiritual care that were, in his time, primarily the province of people of faith. In fact, this is still an accepted stance today in the United States and Europe.

In contrast, there is currently a desire in Israel “to separate religion from the spiritual care provider,” even though the numbers of religious or quasi religious spiritual care providers has been on a constant rise. Such a separation is necessary, in my opinion, if we are to encourage the growth of the professional field in Israeli society, where religious issues are the most charged of all. Nonetheless, a variety of tools is available to the community of spiritual care providers that derives from the traditional Jewish cultures.

At the end of his book, Cabot expands upon what he only alluded to at first. He recommends that spiritual care providers equip themselves with books so that they may lend them to patients. Furthermore, he guides them in making the necessary matches between the suggested reading material and the patients who require it by demonstrating the greatest possible sensitivity toward the patients' beliefs and opinions.¹⁶ He mentions a puppy that delighted the patients on the ward, a small boy who visited and became a source of cheerfulness and joy, and a variety of spiritual foods of growth that the spiritual care provider is able to bestow.¹⁷

Counting teaching as an expression of spiritual growth, Cabot then clarifies how to help patients derive benefit from books and reading in order to improve both their spirits and their ability to cope. There are patients to whom an intellectual challenge grants spiritual strength; others need to keep occupied when faced with an extended hospitalization, and some wish to read spiritual literature or prayers. The spiritual care provider who is familiar with the spiritual care recipient's world of beliefs and opinions will know which book to recommend and how to conduct a discussion about it that draws upon the provider's familiarity with that particular text. Encouraging patients to write is also one of the tools that Cabot and his cowriter Russell Dicks recommended, anything from arranging lists that document the patient's activities to keeping a diary.¹⁸ In the end, Cabot

¹⁵ Cabot and Dicks, Art, 16–17.

¹⁶ Cabot and Dicks, Art, 162–164.

¹⁷ Cabot and Dicks, Art, 16–17.

¹⁸ Cabot and Dicks, Art, 16–17, 168–69.

recommends keeping busy with occupational activities and art, fields that now have come mostly under the professional supervision of occupational and art therapists.¹⁹

A glance at the professional literature on spiritual care reveals that Cabot's readiness to directly address the care provider's set of tools demonstrates a certain innocence. The spiritual care books of our era lack practical, professional lists of the sort that Cabot and Dicks provided. This lack is due in part to the growth of therapeutic professions like occupational therapy and, later, arts, transpersonal therapy, other modalities that have taken responsibility for some of the fields that the two men named as the professional domain of the spiritual care provider. It was also influenced by the development of spiritual care in the United States, which has been inspired by the minimalist psychological methods of the school of Carl Rogers (1902–87). These factors began to limit the role of the spiritual care provider to asking questions and listening rather than directing the spiritual care recipient toward a world of content defined by their own worldview and interest that is meant to improve and expand their spiritual resources.²⁰

E. Brooks Holifield, an American historian of this field, thus characterized a central dimension in the thinking of spiritual care in the United States after World War II as one that focuses on the value of individuals' "self-realization. ...The good for which they aimed was 'growth.' ...This had triggered the enthusiasm for Carl Rogers."²¹ In the context of this professional viewpoint, the spiritual care provider's toolset came to be marginalized. It is therefore no wonder that the professional literature dealing with spiritual care praxis in postmodern contexts lacks any reference to the wide variety of professional tools we find in the earliest professional literature. The American spiritual care provider of our times is trained to listen carefully to whatever the people whom they are attending are saying.²² The provider's reflexive focus upon the patient's story and their subsequent processing and evaluation deserve more attention in this literature. If that were already the case, providers would ask more questions about ways of coping and about various support systems, including the family, the community, and especially the patient's world of beliefs and opinions.

¹⁹ Cabot and Dicks, *Art*, 169–70.

²⁰ E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self Realization*. (Wipf and Stock, 1983), 295–306.

²¹ Holifield, *History*, 288–89.

²² Carrie Dohering, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*. (Westminster John Knox, 2006), 133.

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From a picture of the multicultural North American population of the twenty-first century, which includes diverse status levels and kinds of people, it emerges that the professional tool of the spiritual care provider is now defined, more than anything else, as an awareness of all aspects of the patient's social identity. The professional work program seeks to provide the patients with a feeling of security in their relationship with the spiritual care provider and of personal security in general, including the option to grieve over their loss, and establish a new connection to life.²³ According to the professional literature written mainly by American Protestants, the main tools spiritual care providers can use to help their patients are empathetic listening and conversation.

However, a cursory glance at the work of spiritual care providers in Israel, which has yet to be examined statistically, testifies to a search for additional tools in pastoral care that go beyond what is now accepted in the United States. We hear and are witnesses to the work that Israeli providers are doing with various texts, including (but not limited to) reading Psalms or Hebrew poetry and other texts, singing songs with the patients, painting with them, using guided imagery or meditation, creating texts, writing life stories, doing activities in nature, watching theater or writing and performing plays. Some of these are being used during the care providers' training. In the case of the Marpeh academic spiritual care training program at the Schechter Institute, the spiritual caregivers-in-training themselves often develop these tools during their training.²⁴ This is the source of my interest in asking what uniquely Jewish spiritual tools may help strengthen Israelis in a postsecularized Zionist Jewish context. The term "postsecularized" means that Israelis may, in times of distress, freely turn to diverse Jewish and Israeli practices and texts as resources for spiritual support.

Spiritual Care Practices in the Teaching of the Baal Shem Tov

In light of my observations about the professional development of spiritual care in the United States in the twentieth century, I will attempt to examine the tools that early eighteenth-century Hasidism placed before us for devel-

²³ Dohering, *Practice*, 100–110, 133–42.

²⁴ For a selection of lectures in Hebrew on different methods that Marpeh students and graduates have developed, see: <https://marpeh.org.il/העשרה-בידיאו/>. See also Einat Ramon, *Truth and Lovingkindness: Sources on Spiritual Care in Midrash and in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. David Golinkin (Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2018) and Netta Bentur and Michael Schultz, eds., *Meeting in the Midst: Spiritual Care in Israel* (JDC-Eshel, 2017).

oping the spiritual strength that this movement believes is helpful to both the body and the mind. Most of the following statements that have been taken from the *Book of the Baal Shem Tov* address spiritual techniques for defeating “melancholy.” This term is used in Hasidic literature to designate depression, which, as mentioned above, also affects the body’s strength.²⁵ It is therefore worth mentioning that the secondhand transmission of Hasidic sayings through students or the students of students is, in fact, colored by the authors’ worldviews. Nonetheless, we can discern here a systematic Hasidic viewpoint and the spiritual tools for dealing with the sufferings and spiritual/psychological crises that are characteristic of Hasidism from its beginnings until the present day that offer a universal spiritual perspective for dealing with this challenge.

The Cultivation of Humility: A Worldview that Accepts Reality

The most effective tool for relieving a sick or troubled person’s suffering, even if it is the hardest to achieve, may well be developing a state of mind that completely accepts reality. This is what Hasidic literature calls a position of complete humility:

People do not deserve to arrive at the point of truth unless they first acquire in their psyche a measure of humility and degradation achieved in full, to the very end, to the point that they seem in their own eyes to be nothing at all...the truth is humility and degradation, while pride is the lie.²⁶

According to the Baal Shem Tov, those who accept this position are in contact with the unity that exists within the principle of the creation of the world: “And when people accept their sufferings in love and happiness, the unity is created; and they bring close, and connect with, and speak to...the soul that is joy and spiritual vitality, and the verdict is annulled and mercy is shown.”²⁷ This viewpoint is subsumed within a broader Hasidic view of the world, which this article does not have the space to explain.

At first glance, the instruction to obliterate oneself may lead a person to

²⁵ For a discussion of various topics in the study of contemporary Hasidic or quasi-Hasidic thought in Israel, see Ramon, “Gratitude.”

²⁶ Baal Shem Tov, 1:49.

²⁷ Baal Shem Tov, 1:53.

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asceticism and depression, precisely the opposite of what the spiritual work of the Hasid is supposed to achieve. In this context, therefore, we may come to understand the Hasidic work of joy that was meant to prevent the Hasid from sinking into melancholy—a deep, existential, psychological crisis of sadness and depression. In this context, the Baal Shem Tov clarifies the next spiritual tool. It therefore emerges that the cultivation of a worldview focusing on unity with God—on accepting reality as His will—is the best way to relieve both physical and psychological human suffering. Nevertheless, this spiritual goal is difficult to achieve because of the enormous act of self-negation it requires. Furthermore, as a fervent desire, it is a higher spiritual goal than a basic level of humility, and one that a person continues to seek throughout their life but may never fully achieve.

Coping with Sadness and Melancholy: Eating, Drinking, Happiness and Balance

Hasidic literature acknowledges the struggle to achieve humility, which minimizes a person's suffering by seeing reality through the lens of unity with God. For this reason the Baal Shem Tov's thought developed a strategy for coping with melancholy and with the difficulty of achieving an awareness of transcendence above and beyond one's sufferings. He instructs his Hasidim:

There is the way that the wicked behave—eating, drinking, joyfulness, laughter and so forth; and there is the way that the righteous behave—fasting, weeping and crying, eulogies and so forth. *But when the sickness of melancholy takes hold through sadness, asceticism and so forth, he needs to adopt the values of the wicked—eating, drinking, and joyfulness—in order to take away the above-mentioned sickness.* And when, at times, he sees that the evil inclination is taking hold of him, let him dress in black and adopt a sad demeanor; and all this he must do to balance the scales of his psyche. And this is what he said, though I do not know which of them is desirable.²⁸

This instruction is a form of the expression “the lessened that strengthens

²⁸ Baal Shem Tov, 1:66, emphasis mine.

the increased,” coined by his great-grandson Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav. It directs the individual toward activities that suit their disposition and asks of them an inner attentiveness to the directions toward which their spirit is being drawn. If they are drawn toward their lusts, this will lead to a decline in their spiritual/psychological condition; Hasidism does not distinguish between spirit and psyche in the way that modern thought does. In cases of potential addiction, people should try to restrict their inclinations and impose on themselves an “inclinatory limitation.” If there is a tendency toward sadness and depression, however, the Baal Shem Tov directs his students to behave in the way that “the wicked behave” in order to balance themselves—that is, eating, drinking, play, and joyfulness. How is it possible to prevent an individual from lapsing into hedonism as a consequence of this advice? The Baal Shem Tov explains that, as long as “the work of prayer” is at the core of their various activities, it will guarantee that “the wise person is able to eat good things and all the other delights...and to deny himself in this way.”²⁹

This worldview, which sees in the Torah of Israel—the Torah of life—a means of preventing suffering and its causes, has consequences for how we view the reasons behind the commandments. While this is not the place to examine this theory in depth, it is worth remembering that the Baal Shem Tov’s ideas are rooted in a religious Jew’s way of life as a given and bound up with defined kabbalistic understandings of the world that may not be dissociated from the techniques that strengthen the spirit. From the kabbalistic viewpoint, a life of fulfilling the commandments is one that leads to healing and spiritual strength. This is the deeper meaning of the verse: “I am the Lord who heals you” (Exodus 15:26).

While kabbalistic and Hasidic circles assume that the Torah heals, in this article it is my purpose to examine the way in which the Hasid or the Tsaddik is instructed to treat melancholy, because sorrow or self-flagellation, even if it results from a failure to observe the commandments, “is a great hindrance to the worship of the Holy One, Blessed be He.” The solution is that “he will be made sad by his transgressions and will return to rejoicing in the Creator, blessed be his name,” the point closest to our own interest here in spiritual care.³⁰ The Baal Shem Tov spells out in these instructions a way to aid the uplifting of the spirit by the material sustenance of the body without lapsing into hedonism: “While he is eating, let his intention be to

²⁹ Baal Shem Tov, 1:68.

³⁰ Baal Shem Tov, 1:127–28.

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draw out the vitality that is within it in order to lift it up in service to the Creator, Blessed be He; and so in all his other activities, all his thoughts should be directed toward actions that will bind him upward.”³¹ In other words, it is not enough for a person who has been seized by melancholy to eat, drink, and rejoice. All these activities must be accompanied by awareness, and by remembering that these actions connect him with his spirit, with God. This is the root of happiness, since these activities are incapable, in and of themselves, of making people happy.

Self-Care, Prayer and Suffering

The fundamental principle of Hasidism follows the insights of the sages of Israel, who said long ago that “the decree of judgment is changed by prayer from bad to good,” especially when “the person prays for himself.”³² Yet it remains for us to ask: What evidence is there for a link between prayer and an improvement in the state of the human spirit? What is the quality of the spiritual process that takes place here? Furthermore, “a person will know whether their prayer has been answered, if after they pray their heart is joyous, and the opposite if it is saddened.”³³ In other words, the essential criterion of the success or failure of personal prayer is the measure of happiness that it elicits.

In the part of his essay called “The Column of Prayer,” which is attached to his commentary on the *parashah* of Noah and deals with questions of prayer in Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov sharpens this point. He writes that the emotion that governs prayer affects both the individual’s state of mind and the actions they take afterward, “because after the prayer that a person offers, they need to take care in their actions since they are likely to fall, God forbid, into anger or other inappropriate behaviors.”³⁴ Thus the Baal Shem Tov’s book repeatedly mentions the value of joy in serving God. Time and again he tells us that “prayer that is offered out of joy is certainly better received before Him, may his name be blessed, than prayer offered in sadness and tears.”³⁵ And from an awareness of the spiritual danger that lies in melancholy, the Baal Shem Tov warns that “there are those who pray in sadness because of the melancholy that has overwhelmed them, and

³¹ Baal Shem Tov, 1:281.

³² Baal Shem Tov, 1:251.

³³ Baal Shem Tov, 1:259.

³⁴ Baal Shem Tov, 1:258.

³⁵ Baal Shem Tov, 1:179.

they imagine that they are praying in great trepidation.” In fact, however, “prayer of this sort is not the worship of God but a learned commandment of human beings.”³⁶ Another way of coping with great distress or melancholy is to comprehend that the distress is greater than the person themselves. In Hasidic terminology this is called “the distress of God’s Presence,” and it is inseparable from the imperfection of the world.

The “distress of God’s Presence” has a psychological aspect that relieves a person of the weight of their distress. As a student of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Katz states: “Because if, God forbid, a person is in some great distress, and their prayer is on themselves..., and it would have made better sense to pray on it...so long as they are unable to restrain themselves when it comes to the distress itself.” In such cases, they should direct their prayers “towards the utility of God’s Presence.”³⁷ So if a person’s suffering is a consequence of the fact that they are feeling hatred, the Baal Shem Tov recommends that his Hasidim pray about it and thereby disconnect from the evil within them, “to correct them, to lift them up through the words of the prayer.”³⁸

In his commentary on the name of Judah, the Baal Shem Tov explains the moment when we generally relate to prayer as a request for ourselves or for others. It is an alleviation of the distress embedded in this name “whose character is one of thankfulness and praise to Him, may his name be blessed...because every form of distress is contained within this name, and when he brings to it thankfulness and praise as I mentioned above, the distress is alleviated.”³⁹ For, according to the Baal Shem Tov, at the moment when we praise God, we receive everything—even our sufferings—in love. In this way, the distress is alleviated.⁴⁰

One’s Relation to Sickness and the Illnesses of Others

According to Hasidism, “The Divine Presence relieves the sick person, as it is said (Psalm 41) ‘God will relieve him on his sickbed, and in his mercy will relieve me as well.’”⁴¹ This worldview defines the role of a single individual’s prayers for a sick person as follows:

³⁶ Baal Shem Tov, 1:179.

³⁷ Baal Shem Tov, 1:244.

³⁸ Baal Shem Tov, 1:247.

³⁹ Baal Shem Tov, 1:361.

⁴⁰ Baal Shem Tov, 1:361.

⁴¹ Baal Shem Tov, 1:138.

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During prayers for the sick and for any distress that may befall a person, he should mention the sick person there and make the *Yichud* in his Name, in order to sweeten the judgment that is bound up with his Name...and one should not go on at length about this to those who understand science, because it is a great secret and should not be touched upon in writing.⁴²

Hasidism and Spiritual Care: Professional Thoughts

A glance at the quotations taken from the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples about coping with sadness and melancholy testifies to the fact that the spiritual training of Hasidism at the start of its development actually bears a great similarity to the second wave of professional insights in spiritual care. Like the influence of Carl Rogers, these teachings emphasize the direct training of human consciousness. The Baal Shem Tov saw in melancholy and sadness a danger to an individual's spirit and body and to their influence on their environment—that is, a danger to the world. He therefore instructed his students to address this tendency, which takes hold of everyone at some time, by finding the necessary balance. A person's spiritual balance is also upset when they are absorbed in their inclinations. If their frame of mind leads them in this direction, then, for the sake of balance, they must limit the degree to which these inclinations are expressed.

These ideas are reminiscent of Maimonides's guidance of people toward the golden mean. Yet early Hasidic teachings take a spiritual and psychological step beyond this, suggesting that those who are deep in melancholy should behave as wicked people do—eating, drinking, and being joyful—so long as they remember that God is the source of the food, the drink, and the joyfulness. Maintaining this perspective, along with being aware of God and negating oneself in His presence, forms the cognitive basis for improving an individual's spiritual condition. In addition to these inner practices, yearning for a state of humility (if nothing else) lightens the burden of their troubles and sufferings.

The Baal Shem Tov recommends that people pray for themselves, for the improvement of their enemies' virtues (if the latter is the source of their sufferings) and for the sick person at whose head lies God's Presence.

⁴² Baal Shem Tov, 1:116.

However, he does not go into detail regarding the exact process that makes such prayer psychologically possible.⁴³ It goes without saying that if we were to trace the philosophical lines of thought behind these spiritual practices in the writings of his successors—particularly Naḥman of Bratslav, who expressed (perhaps more than anyone else) his ideas about the problem of sadness and melancholy—we would have access to a broader development of the tools available to individuals as they struggle with this spiritual and psychological problem.

A separate issue is our own professional question about today's spiritual care providers in Israel, who turn to Hasidism as both a spiritual source and a magnet for professional spiritual practices. Given that all of Hasidism is rooted in the world of Torah—the world of kabbalistic cosmology and the keeping of the commandments—can these practices be helpful to members of the secular or traditional community who are not part of this world of kabbalistic beliefs, ideas, and customs? It seems that the secularization of Hasidic practices is already taking place in the work of spiritual care providers in Israel, whether consciously or not. If there is within this article the potential to enrich them, then that is a positive outcome.

The possibility of expanding the viewpoint of an individual who is suffering from physical, emotional, or spiritual pain may be couched in other ways that do not necessarily involve phrases like “the distress of God's Presence” or “the unity of God.” We may ask a person who is seeking spiritual care what sort of broad worldview may ease their mind. Prayer may also undergo a process of secularization, if that is necessary in the context of spiritual care, by means of guided imagery. Furthermore, we may assume that this is why this particular tool of spiritual care is used so widely by Israeli spiritual care providers. On the basis of the Baal Shem Tov's instructions for prayer, a person may imagine themselves in an improved situation, may picture something that makes them happy, and so may emerge in good spirits from the guided imagery which replaces traditional prayer for them.

Of course, at the highest level of spiritual care we may see how it is possible to be thankful for each aspect of life, including the difficult ones. Testimonies and stories about spiritual care do in fact describe these kinds of situations; however, they are difficult to grasp and require a great deal of motivation and psychological strength, and this is true in both the Hasidic

⁴³ This may also be due to the fact that all the statements appearing in his name are from his many students, some of whom were only indirectly connected to him. They are therefore offered as individual fragments.

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and the rationalistic contexts, whether religious or secular.

Be that as it may, examining the ways in which the Baal Shem Tov's sayings address the problem of melancholy gives us a road map, one that leads us to ask at every turn: Have we opened up a worldview broad enough to allow people to rise above their personal suffering? Have we led ourselves to imagine, to hope, to pray for something good? Have we been thankful for what exists? If we have expressed our thoughts about all of these situations, then we have made use of the basic tools available to the spiritual care provider, and Hasidism may serve in this context as a resource to that end.

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