

# Mysticism, Hasidism And Escapism:

## Continued Discussion of "*Jewish Mysticism: Medieval Roots Contemporary Dangers and Prospective Challenges*"

The following interchange extends the discussion of Lippman Bodoff's detailed study of contemporary mysticism published in the *Tevet 5763* edition of *The Edah Journal*. Yehuda Gellman is Professor of Philosophy at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheva and a Senior Research Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He is the author of several books on hasidic masters and hasidic thought. Lippman Bodoff is past Associate Editor of JUDAISM and author of numerous scholarly articles in Jewish thought.

### **LOZ LEIBIN: A REPLY TO LIPPMAN BODOFF ON JEWISH MYSTICISM**

Yehuda Gellman

In the *Tevet 5763* issue of *The Edah Journal* Lippman Bodoff presents a strong attack against mysticism and hasidism in contemporary Jewish life. Bodoff calls for the readership of *Edah* to switch from "admiration" to "revulsion" of these phenomena. While the article is deeply learned and challenging, I cannot agree with the author's main conclusions. In what follows, I will present in a succinct manner the main difficulties I have with Bodhoff's article.

1. Bodoff expresses the view that mysticism as an attempt to escape from the real world became important because of the phenomenon of German Jewry engaging in mass martyrdom in the face of Christian persecution. Mass suicide was an escape from the real world, thus creating legitimization for another escape from the world - mysticism (pp. 5-6). Since those historical circumstances are long gone, what we are left with is a misplaced escapism from the world that should arouse our revulsion.

#### **Reply:**

(a) Bodoff provides insufficient historical basis for linking mysticism and Jewish martyrdom. We are given the "escape" analogy as a major basis, which is not convincing. (More on this below.) If it is historical explana-

tion he is after, Bodoff might consider the rise of mysticism in Christianity, and the age-old adage, "*Vi Iz kriztelzich azoi yidilztich*" ("The way it Christianizes, it Judaizes.")

(b) Even if Bodoff were correct about the historical roots of mysticism as a major force in Jewish life, to judge mysticism throughout the ages and in contemporary times based on its origin commits the "genetic" fallacy. That fallacy exists whenever someone insists that the genesis of an idea determines its truth or falsity or its goodness or badness. There is no substitute for examining closely how mysticism has functioned down the ages after its inception in order to form an evaluation of it. And there is no substitute for examining closely how mysticism, and its offspring, hasidism, functions in Jewish life today. I would call on Bodoff to give more thought to the claimed positive aspects of mysticism throughout Jewish history, to weigh for the reader both the pros and cons, and only then come to his conclusion. His case would be more convincing.

(c) Bodoff's description of "mysticism" as an "escape from the real world" repeats a caricature that does not get at the full truth. The mystic may seek experiences that "take him out of the world," but it hardly follows that all persons who are mystics are driven by a desire to escape the world. Here is an analogy: My friend spends an hour a day in his study with the door closed riding his exercise bike. This effectively cuts him off from other people, his responsibilities, *tikun olam*, and so on. It hardly follows that my friend, as a person, is driven by

a desire to escape all of these things. Indeed, his exercising might be motivated by a desire to be in better physical condition so as to serve the world better. Similarly, while mystical experiences may involve one degree or another of "leaving the world," it hardly follows that in doing so the mystic is driven by an escapist desire. Jewish mystics have always appreciated the "*ritzu*" and "*shav*," the ascent and descent, as the rhythm of the mystical life. Mystical teachings have always taught against the dangers and temptations of escaping from the world. (Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchiv attributes the bells on the High Priest's clothes when entering the Holy of Holies on *Yom Kippur* to the necessity of the *kohen* to be grounded in the world by the tinkling sounds of the bells, so that he won't "die," that is, simply escape from the world.) In theosophical Jewish mysticism, the mystical ascent serves to draw the supernal *shefa* into the world for its *tikun*. I am afraid that the escapism issue is more nuanced than Bodoff would have us believe.

(d) Along with Bodoff's charge of escapism, we should recall that many Jewish mystics were deeply involved in the worldly life of the Jewish people. They were married men with families, rabbis of communities, and leaders of movements. When we look at the lives of Jewish mystics we find many figures engaged in the world in most impressive ways. The greatest Jewish mystic of the 20th century, Rav Kook, was a community rabbi, Chief Rabbi of Palestine, and the author of hundreds of halachic decisions concerning life as lived. A mystic of Safed, Rav Yosef Karo, wrote the most popular halachic work in history, the *Shulhan Arukh*, dealing with everything from soup to knots. The Baal Shem Tov, founder of the hasidic movement, treated sick people, traveled from place to place, and displayed an earthy love for all persons. Perhaps the most mystical of the Hassidic Masters, the Admor Hazaken of *Chabad*, wrote his own *Shulhan Arukh* dealing with all facets of life. In impressive activism, hasidic masters spread their movement across Eastern Europe in an astonishingly short time. These hasidic masters can hardly be said to be "escapists" when involving themselves in the lives of hundreds or even thousands of their *hasidim* on a regular basis, when they were active in Europe in forming political movements, and when they are involved in

Israeli political life today through ultra-Orthodox parties. Apparently, Bodoff refers to degenerate mystics in his escapism charge. Again, a more balanced approach would have been appreciated.

2. Bodoff identifies contemporary "zealous Orthodox groups" as having a "predominantly hasidic component," and the *hasidim* as the contemporary incarnation of the escapist ills of mysticism.

**Reply:**

(a) I assume Bodoff refers to the *haredim* when he talks about "zealots." However, *hasidim* make up only one component of that group, and they are not a majority. The other components are the "Lithuanian" *haredim* whose outlook remains that of the yeshiva world of Eastern Europe, and the sephardic *haredim*, who follow Rav Ovadiah Yosef. Secondly, present day hasidim are in some respects less separationist than are their Lithuanian counterparts. For example, hasidic men do not tend to learn in *kollelim* for extended periods, as do the "Lithuanians."

(b) The connection between contemporary hasidism and mysticism is tenuous. While Chabad and Breslov stand out as strongly oriented around mystical texts most other hasidic courts are not. The hasidic court of Gur, the largest group in Israel, has a weak connection, as a reading of the Sfat Emet will show. The same applies to the hasidic courts of Slonim, Belz, and many others. When it comes to mystical practices, of inducing mystical illuminations and the like, the connection between mysticism and hasidism today hardly exists. This might be a new reason to reject hasidism (They aren't even doing anymore what they were founded to do!), but that argument has to be made.

3. When Bodoff refers to scholarship, he depends almost exclusively upon secular researchers for his evaluation of *qabbalah* and hasidism.

**Reply:**

(a) As an academic myself, I am not about to urge an obscuratinist rejection of secular scholars. Their scholar-

ship is indispensable for understanding Jewish mysticism. But for religious people, to whom *Edah* speaks, they are not sufficient. When evaluating a phenomenon we are invoking values and background beliefs. Those of the Orthodox will be different from those of secularist scholars. Here is one example where the difference will surface: As religious people, we should not be eager to reduce the explanation of religious phenomena to historical explanation. We should be ready to recognize a "religious impulse" at work, both on the national and individual level, non-reducible to socio-political realities. There is no doubt in my mind that Jewish mysticism and hasidism satisfy for many people dimensions of religious yearning not satisfied otherwise. This fact is independent of any story about how it all began. A secular scholar is not likely to recognize a *sui generis* religious impulse or allow it much historical value. Religious people must factor such an impulse into their theological reckoning.

(b) The history of Jewish mysticism is controversial, and the experts are divided on basic issues. For example, while Gershom Scholem found the roots of *qabbalah* almost entirely in Gnostic thought, Moshe Idel traces its ancestry to the Rabbis. While Bodoff is entitled to be convinced by one scholar or another, I would have liked him to explain why he depends on one view rather than another.

4. Bodoff blames Jewish mysticism for Jewish xenophobia and the resultant resistance to modernizing Orthodoxy.

**Reply:**

(a) There is some truth in this claim. (Though I would not use the term "xenophobia" here. The Jews suffered enormously at the hands of the *goyim*, and their negative attitude had much to ground itself on.) On the other hand, we don't need mysticism to find xenophobia in Jewish tradition. There is plenty elsewhere. Nevertheless, clearly the Jewish philosophical tradition affords a more congenial starting point for Modern Orthodoxy. The mystical tradition did not only follow rabbinic exclusion of non-Jews, it froze the category of "non-Jew" into an eternal metaphysical category. This in

turn resists change pursuant to political and social changes on the ground. However, the other groups in the *haredi* world, historically and today, do not differ from the hasidic world in their resistance and even venom against general culture. So while Bodoff has a good point here, it does not serve to single out mysticism for special condemnation.

The attitude toward non-Jewish culture can change while staying within mysticism. Witness the writings of Rav Kook, whose world-view was a clear break from the past. There is no reason why this cannot be developed further yet, while retaining the spiritual power that so many find attractive today in Jewish mysticism.

3. Bodoff believes that those who disagree with him must be thinking that mysticism offers "unmitigated" "benefit and enrichment" to Judaism (p. 23).

**Reply:**

(a) That is not my view, as can be already discerned by my partial agreement with Bodoff's thoughts on mystical "xenophobia." Bodoff might also have included mysticism's raising the male-female dichotomy to a metaphysical principle, a move impeding the modernizing of Judaism with regard to women. In addition, Bodoff is certainly right to see the mass defection from Judaism in the 19th century as due in part to hasidic resistance to change. We must ask, however, what could have been demanded of hasidic leaders ill equipped to deal with the flood of modernity that no one, who was not omniscient, could have foreseen. And we are entitled to ask Bodoff to compare the hasidic reaction to the *mitnagid* one.

(b) My problem is not with someone leveling criticism at the Jewish mystical tradition, but with the Bodoff's seeming overly eager to condemn mysticism in the blanket way he does. A careful weighing of good and bad would have been in order, rather than a one sided extreme condemnation.

I would like to close by expressing my wish that Lippman Bodoff further development his line of reasoning, taking into account my comments, so that the

important issues he raises can be further engaged in by those, like him, so concerned for the future of *kelal yisrael*.

#### LIPPMAN BODOFF REPLIES:

At the end of my paper I wrote:

The view of Gershom Scholem, probably the greatest objective scholarly defender of Jewish mysticism, is that it is caused by terror, and fear of evil in the world which is viewed as coming from demonic forces, which Scholem considers "one of the most dangerous factors in the development of *qabbalah*." He concludes: "Anyone who concerns himself seriously with the thinking of the great qabbalists will be torn between feelings of admiration and revulsion." It is time, I believe to begin to move from the former to the latter.

At the very beginning of his response, Yehudah Gellman writes:

"Bodoff calls for the readership of *Edah* to switch from "admiration" to "revulsion" against "mysticism and hasidism."

There is a continuum clearly implied by my suggestion, on which we *begin to move* from one end toward the other. Readers of my paper will have difficulty, as I did, recognizing what I wrote in Gellman's purported paraphrase. Moreover, I *concluded* my paper with my observa-

tion, after spelling out and documenting my case, so Scholem's words had a very long, concrete, heavily annotated context for my readers. Gellman begins his paper with his "paraphrase," which sheds more heat than light on the issues between us.

The rest of Gellman's objections are fully answered in my paper, and I see no point in repeating them for my readers. Gellman's chief complaint seems to be that I did not adequately present the "pros" of Jewish mysticism and hasidism. I am not aware of any, except for Dan's claim that attaching Luria's mythical and magical imperatives to observance of the commandments, to mend a broken God (*sid*) who is also in exile, is a benefit; See Dan's *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*. It was once, evidently, a great balm to Jews who could not understand their tragic *galut* plight of continued vulnerability and oppression, and far too many periodic outbreaks of persecution. I doubt this was a benefit or virtue, because there were too many opportunities when a more rational accommodation to the *galut* trauma seemed possible and were discarded or rejected, as I point out in my paper. It provides a reason for what happened, not a benefit. In any case, I believe that magic and myth, insularity and anti-rationality are dangers, not virtues, in today's world.

Moreover, If Gellman is aware of any important benefits of Jewish mysticism, past or present, I would have expected him to mention them, at least, in his long response. I can't find any such claims. I think that tells the whole story.