

## ***Devekut*, or Communion with God**

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### **I**

Every discussion of Hasidic doctrine has to start with a basic question, namely: Is there a central point on which Hasidism is focused and from which its special attitude can be developed? I think there can be little doubt that there is, indeed, such a focal point, the discussion of which will take us right into the heart of the problem. This is the doctrine of *devekut*, the practical application of which has determined the spiritual physiognomy of Hasidism.

*Devekut*, the meaning of which I am going to analyze, is, of course, neither an exclusively Hasidic concept nor a novel invention of the Baal Shem. Exactly where the new departure in its Hasidic application is found will become clear if we proceed to consider both its "prehistory" and its position in Hasidism.

Throughout Kabbalistic literature, *devekut* is frequently mentioned as the highest ideal of the mystical life as the Kabbalists see it. This is not to be wondered at, considering the meaning of the term as used in many books. In general Hebrew usage, *devekut* only means attachment or devoutness, but, since the thirteenth century, it has been used by the mystics in the sense of close and most intimate communion with God. Whereas in Catholic mysticism, "Communion" was not the last step on the mystical way—although a book *De adhaerendo Deo* (*On Communion with God*), ascribed to Albert the Great but actually by the Bavarian monk Johannes of Kastl, was one of the outstanding mystical manuals of the later Middle Ages—in Kabbalism it is the last grade of ascent

to God. It is not union, because union with God is denied to man even in that mystical upsurge of the soul, according to Kabbalistic theology. But it comes as near to union as a mystical interpretation of Judaism would allow. I have already spoken briefly of this Kabbalistic concept of *devekut* in my former lectures on Jewish mysticism, but I may be permitted to add some remarks on the subject. *Devekut*, or as we may also call it, communion, is characterized in Kabbalistic literature by the following three traits:

1. It is a value without eschatological connotations, i.e., it can be realized in this life, in a direct and personal way, by every individual, and has no Messianic meaning. It is a state of personal bliss which can be attained without having recourse to the vast field of eschatology, utopianism, and Messianism. Being a strictly individual attainment, it is not an experience of the group, the social community of men, as is Messianic redemption, nor is it rooted in a hope or, for that matter, an anticipation of the Hereafter, of the World-to-come. In an eschatological sense, man cannot be redeemed alone, individually. Such individual redemption or salvation carries in Judaism no Messianic meaning. It is essentially a private experience; *devekut* can be reached alone. The only exception, when *devekut* became an experience of the whole community of Israel, was—at least according to some Jewish theologians—the revelation at Mount Sinai, but even then it was more in the nature of a multiplied experience of many single individuals than of the community as an integrated whole.

2. Furthermore, such *devekut*, although attained within the framework of this world, is, for the most part, realized only by the paradoxical means of abnegation and denial of the values of this world. Moses Nahmanides, for instance, speaks of “those who abandon the affairs of this world and pay no regard to this world at all, as though they were not corporeal beings, but all their intent and purpose is fixed on their creator alone, as in the cases of Elijah and Enoch, who live on forever in body and soul, after having attained Communion of their souls with the Great Name” (on Lev. 18:4). The realization of *devekut* means, therefore, a constant being-with-God which is not dependent on death and life after death.

3. For the understanding of the new turn of the idea of *devekut* in Hasidism, however, no passage is more important than Nahmanides' commentary on Deuteronomy 11:22, “To love the Lord your God, to

walk in all His ways and to cleave unto Him.” The old commentaries are divided on the question of whether this cleaving, which is *devekut*, is to be understood as a promise held out to the faithful, or as a commandment binding upon everyone. Abraham ibn Ezra is of the first opinion; Nahmanides of the second. He explains the verse as follows:

It warns man not to worship God and somebody beside Him; he is to worship God alone in his heart and his actions. And it is plausible that the meaning of “cleaving” is to remember God and His love constantly, not to divert your thought from Him in all your earthly doings. *Such a man may be talking to other people, but his heart is not with them since he is in the presence of God.* And it is further plausible that those who have attained this rank, do, even in their earthly life, partake of the eternal life, because they have made themselves a dwelling place of the Shekhinah.

This statement, by the way, bears a strong resemblance to a similar one by Maimonides about the highest rank of prophecy, at the end of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III, 51). In Nahmanides' definition, there appears, for the first time, an element which has played no great part in the Kabbalistic doctrine of *devekut*, although it is mentioned often enough in quotations of this classical passage, but which was given great prominence by the Baal Shem, and even more by his followers. I am referring to the combination of earthly action and *devekut*. Of course, it was not Nahmanides' intention to say that *devekut* could be realized in social action and association too. But he clearly thought that it could be sustained even in social intercourse, although such intercourse in itself is considered rather as a hindrance which must be overcome by special effort. *Devekut* is a value of contemplative, not of active life. But Nahmanides' saying could be used to prove the possibility of the coincidence of the two spheres. A man might appear to be with other people, to talk to them and, perhaps, even to participate in their activities, but in reality he is contemplating God. This is the highest attainment in the Kabbalistic scale of values and represents a blend of action and contemplation. For Nahmanides, *devekut* has always the specific meaning of communion with the last of the ten *sefirot* or grades of divine manifestation, namely, with the Shekhinah, but this detail was not retained by other Kabbalists, who keep to the more general definitions of *devekut* given by other members of Nahmanides' circle of Gerona. His older colleague, Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon, already speaks of *devekut*, or communion with the Naught, which is certainly a much higher rank than commu-

nion with the Shekhinah, the Naught being the most hidden recess of divinity which contemplation may behold.

This idea of *devekut* as the ultimate fulfillment of the mystic's path permeates the theosophical and ethical literature of the Kabbalists. Isaiah Horowitz connects the state of *hasidut* with that of *devekut*: "Who is a Hasid? He who acts in piety towards God and gives pleasure to his Creator and all of whose intention is bent on cleaving to Him and thereby becoming a chariot for God." Characteristically, it still appears in Moses Hayim Luzzatto's *Path of the Upright* as the last stage of the Path. In the opinion of this contemporary of the Baal Shem, it is a special grace granted to the Hasid, a gift of grace for which man can only prepare himself by incessant striving for knowledge and cognition and by the sanctification of all his actions. It is at the very end of the Path that God Himself takes over his guidance and causes divine holiness to dwell on him. Only then—says Luzzatto—may man succeed in his quest for such *devekut* with God as may last forever, for he may be helped by God to what Nature withholds from him. "If a man attains such spiritual rank, even his earthly actions become actually holy matters, and this is alluded to in the biblical prescriptions on meals made of holy offerings."

Here we find two basic motifs in connection with the doctrine of *devekut* which reappear and are given prominence in the Hasidic teaching of the Baal Shem: (1) the sanctification of the profane sphere in the life of the perfect Hasid, its transformation into one single sphere of holy action which leaves no room for the concept of a separate state of "profane" action; (2) the paradigm of eating in holiness as the perfect example of this supreme state of man. What is generally considered as an earthly performance par excellence, is transformed into a holy, nay, a mystery rite. This paradigm, by the way, is by no means a late addition, nor is it a specific trait of Hasidism, as it is sometimes considered to be. It is common to the whole Kabbalistic renaissance of Safed. The transformation of the profane sphere of human activity is stressed by Luzzatto, who says that he who has attained communion lifts up the earthly things which serve his needs, and does so by the very act of using them. "He raises them up to himself, rather than descending from his rank and state of *devekut* by using them." But Luzzatto draws no social conclusion from this conception of *devekut*. With him, everything connected with it remains wholly within the sphere of contemplation. He only follows in the footsteps of the older masters of Kabbalism by insisting

on retreat and withdrawal from social intercourse as the principal means of attaining such "holiness" or "communion" (to him the two terms cover the same meaning). If *devekut* is the last stage on the path of ascetic self-abnegation, it would obviously be difficult to interpret it in terms of social ethics.

Luzzatto's book cannot be considered a literary source of the new Hasidic turn, but rather the opposite. But among the books with which the Baal Shem and the old Hasidic conventicles were undoubtedly conversant, there is the *Sefer Haredim* (*The Book of the God-Fearing*), one of the popular classics of Kabbalistic ethics, composed before 1600 at Safed by Eliezer Azikri. The three highest values which, according to him, the "Hasidim of Israel" cultivate, are "loneliness or retreat from society, asceticism, and *devekut*." He defines the latter as the fixing of thought on God (ed. 1601, fol. 66b). When the Baal Shem's Hasidism, in the eighteenth century, said that *devekut* was more important than study, this thesis aroused considerable hostility and was quoted in all polemical writings against the movement as proof of its subversive and anti-rabbinic tendencies. But it is noteworthy, and has been overlooked, that this fundamental tenet of Hasidism is quoted by Eliezer Azikri in the name of no less an authority of Kabbalism than his teacher, Isaac Luria himself. "These three principles of conduct are seven times more useful to the soul than study," Luria is reported to have said.

The bond between the old Kabbalists of the thirteenth-century school of Gerona and latter-day Hasidism, in their evaluation and elaboration of *devekut* as a mystical state of mind, is proved conclusively by a statement of Eliezer Azikri to which no attention has been paid. This author tells us that the "Hasidim of old times" took off no less than nine hours daily from their study of the Torah

for the spiritual activities of retreat and *devekut* and used to imagine the light of the Shekhinah above their heads, as though it were flowing all around them and they were sitting in the midst of the light, and this is the way I have found it [the meaning of *devekut*] explained in an old manuscript of the ancient ascetics. And while in that [state of meditation], they are all trembling as a natural effect, but [spiritually] rejoicing in trembling.

Azikri's source, the "old manuscript," is known to us. It was my good fortune to discover it some years ago in a lengthy and extremely interesting description of the meaning of Kabbalistic meditation (*kavvanah*) whose author was none other than the great mystic Azriel of Gerona.

Through the intermediacy of the sixteenth-century moralist of Safed, this description had come down to the Baal Shem and his followers, and the description of the state of *devekut*, which I quoted in my former set of lectures from a book of one of the Great Maggid's disciples, is taken, albeit without naming the source, from Azikri's work. This little example may serve to demonstrate the hidden after life of the old Kabbalistic manuscripts, the impact of which is too easily overlooked.

## II

But let us return to the crucial point which our discussion of *devekut* has now reached. The questions can now be asked: What is the difference between the old Kabbalistic idea of *devekut* and the Hasidic one? Why could Luria and Azikri, in the sixteenth century, make the statements I have quoted without being attacked, whereas the rabbinical antagonists of Hasidism lost their tempers when they found an essentially identical statement in the writings of Ber of Miedzyrzecz and Mendel of Przemyslan? Was it only a question of the different time and environment that made a perfectly orthodox statement sound wicked and heretical two hundred years later? This, of course, would by no means be impossible. The history of religion abounds in examples of such different evaluations of the same tenet under different historical conditions. But the true answer to our problem is to be found in another consideration which, in my opinion, will take us into an even deeper understanding of the essential nature of Hasidism.

It is not so much the meaning of *devekut* that has changed in Hasidism as its place, and this is a most significant change indeed. The novel element is the radical character given to *devekut* by this change. Hasidic *devekut* is no longer an extreme ideal, to be realized by some rare and sublime spirits at the end of the Path. It is no longer the last rung in the ladder of ascent, as in Kabbalism, but the first. Everything begins with man's decision to cleave to God. *Devekut* is a starting point and not the end. Everyone is able to realize it instantaneously. All he has to do is to take his montheistic faith seriously. It is, therefore, small wonder that the Baal Shem identifies *emunah* (faith) and *devekut*. "Faith," he says (*Toledot* 195b), "is the intimate communion of the soul with God." And the first, and most pointed, consequence of this identification is the frequently repeated formula that to fall away from the state of *devekut*

is essentially equivalent to separation of the creature from its Creator, nay, to idolatry (*avodah zarah*). God pervades everything, or, as the old adage goes, "no place can be void of the Shekhinah." Therefore, to be aware of this real omnipresence and immanence of God is already the realization of a state of *devekut*. In the opinion of the Baal Shem, to be out of *devekut* is not simply a state of estrangement from God, it rather implies the negation of His oneness and all-pervading presence. This idea is not an accidental obiter dictum of no consequence. It is commonly repeated from the Baal Shem's teaching in all the early writings of Hasidim before 1790. The Baal Shem formulated it in the words of the Torah (Deut. 11:16), *ve-sartem-va-avadtem elohim aherim*, "lest you turn aside and serve other gods," meaning, "once a man turns aside from *devekut* and the fixation of his thought on God, he is considered as one who serves other gods and there is no mediating path."

This change of position in the scale of values explains, to my view, much of the attraction Hasidism has held for the "common Jew." On the one hand, there could be—and, indeed, has been—the continued stress on the mystical implications of the state of *devekut* as an extreme attainment, and Nahmanides' passages on it are frequently quoted by those who consider it ultimate. On the other hand, it could be considered the focal point in the religious life of every Jew. Even if the leaders and saints took *devekut* in its most exalted meaning, this novel turn explains why it could very quickly become externalized when put as a demand to the average man. To be sure, it was a comfort to the masses that to cleave to God was no longer a remote ideal for the few, but there is also the second aspect which cannot be overlooked: if *devekut* was demanded from everybody and, in a way, forced upon the masses, it was bound to assume rather crude and vulgar forms. Once the radical slogan, "Judaism without *devekut* is idolatry," was accepted, its very radicalism already contained the germ of decay, a dialectic typical of radical and spiritualist movements. Since not everyone was able to attain that state of mind by mere introspection and contemplation, external stimulants, even liquor, had to be employed. *Devekut* in its popular and even objectionable forms was not a phenomenon of later degeneration, but was well known from the very beginnings of the newfangled Hasidic conventicles. As Moses of Santanow tells us, *devekut* was practiced about 1740 by rather simple people, who found in it an outlet for their emotional piety.

It is important to note that the same connection between *devekut* and the state of retreat and isolation constantly emphasized in the older literature of Kabbalistic ethics continues to prevail in the writings of eighteenth-century Hasidim. In this respect, there is no difference between the old-fashioned ascetic, such as that of Moses of Satanow, and the new school of the Baal Shem. "*Devekut*" says the former, "can be mainly attained during the time one spends in solitary retreat, for it is then that the soul actually cleaves to its Creator, for the whole earth is full of His glory." The reason given here that *devekut* is possible because God is everywhere, is exactly the same advanced by the Baal Shem and the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz.

### III

A closer analysis of the Baal Shem's sayings on *devekut* will enable us better to understand its two fold aspect in Hasidic teaching. We have already mentioned the connection between "faith" and *devekut*, but the authentic dicta of the Baal Shem provide us with several other elucidations which are relevant to our discussion.

As a classical illustration of the meaning of *devekut* and, incidentally, also of the way famous Hasidic dicta have traveled through Hasidic tradition, we have the daring reinterpretation of Psalm 81:10, "There shall be no strange God in thee." These words, said the Baal Shem, can be taken according to the Hebrew sequence of words to mean "God shall not be a stranger to thee." And when is God no longer a stranger to man? When man constantly fulfills the admonition of the psalmist, "I set the Lord always before me." It is the communion with God through *devekut* that makes God an intimate friend of man, instead of a forbidding and remote stranger. This saying, quoted by Gedalya of Liniec, was not, even in Hasidic circles, generally known to belong to the Baal Shem. It is frequently quoted as one of the epigrams of Rabbi Mendel of Kock, in the fourth generation after the Baal Shem, who used to translate the biblical passage in a literal manner, *Nit zol zeyn in dir Gott fremd*. The Rabbi of Kock obviously liked the saying, and it is considered by many as one of his great words. Since there was no critical examination of the old and authentic sayings, many of them have, in the course of time, come to be ascribed to later authorities who were wont to quote them.

The performance of the commands is in itself an act of *devekut*, as is

shown by an etymological pun. According to the Baal Shem, *misvah* means a bond. The Talmudic adage, "each good deed brings about another one," is taken to mean that every communion with God leads to ever closer communion. *Devekut* is thus not a state but is in itself a Path comprising an infinity of ever more intimate communions.

If the essence of religious action is communion or *devekut*, it follows that leaving this state of communion is the essence of sin. Even he who "falls away from the fixation of his thought on God for a moment only" is called a sinner. But this statement, mentioned by the Baal Shem's grandson, sets such a high standard for *devekut* that it had to be qualified and mitigated, as will be shown presently.

The Maggid Rabbi Mendel of Bar used to quote the following literal translation of Psalm 32:2 in the name of his teacher, the Baal Shem, "Blessed is the man to whom not to think of God is iniquity." Here the primitive radicalism of the demand of *devekut* is somewhat mitigated. Blessed is the man who has no other sin to repent of than his falling or stepping out of *devekut*. It is a sin, but the sin of a blessed man, of the perfect Hasid who has attained a higher level than the rabbinical zaddik. It is *devekut* as the final stage on the Kabbalist's path that is reflected in this and similar statements. Incidentally, this is the only word of the Baal Shem quoted (though anonymously) in a book of an old-fashioned Hasid like Simhah of Zolozec, a contemporary of the master.

Of what does that *devekut* consist which is realized in study and prayer? The answer is given in many authentic dicta of the Baal Shem stressing that *devekut* is a spiritual or contemplative act by which a man binds himself to the spiritual element inherent in the letters of Torah and prayer. The words and their element, the letters, are the vessels which contain a priceless jewel, the light of The Boundless *En-sof*. *Devekut*, in the opinion of the Baal Shem, is communion with this inner light that animates the letters of the Torah or, for that matter, everything. For he accepts the Kabbalistic conception of creation as externalized speech: Everything that exists consists of letters of the divine language. Each of them is only the vessel which contains unfathomable depths of divine light, a light which is not created, but is the light of the Shekhinah herself. What is required, therefore, is to concentrate in study and prayer not on the external figures of speech, nor on the "letter," but on the "spirit" that animates it. That is what *devekut* can perform. Meir Margalioth, the Rabbi of Ostrog, says that it is this special conception of



*devekut* that he learned from his master, the Baal Shem, and that he had actually observed how it was practiced by him. This definition, which occurs also in the Baal Shem's authentic letter to his brother-in-law, puts the emphasis on a definite technique of contemplation which the Baal Shem practiced and taught, and there can be no doubt that it goes far beyond the earlier definitions of *devekut* which I have discussed. I am inclined to think that the dialectic of *devekut* to which I have made reference is fully reflected in this conception: It sounds very simple and anyone might start practicing it, but it is extremely difficult to attain as a sustained state of communion. Why should not anyone be able to concentrate on the inwardness of the spiritual element in everything? As a matter of fact, it is a counsel given not to the accomplished Kabbalist at the end of his path, but repeatedly addressed to everybody. Yet, it has the unmistakable ring of a mystical practice which has its esoteric side and is by no means as easy to carry out as it appears to be.

Sometimes the letters and the holy names composed of them are identified with the light that dwells therein, the letters themselves being transformed into the spiritual element, with which communion must be established. In this connection, great interest attaches to the mystical turn the Baal Shem gave to an old Jewish saying which extols the merit of the study of the Torah for its own sake (*torah lishmah*). Several dicta explain the new meaning infused into the old phrase. This high ideal—the Baal Shem is reported to have said—must be understood according to the precise meaning of the phrase, which is “for the sake of its name.” It is the name of God, the spiritual element, which is evoked by true study and which should be aimed at in study and worship. Study of the Torah (*lishmah*) is not a principle like “art for art's sake,” but reflects the longing to discover the hidden element inherent in the letters and words. There are many variations of this motif among the Baal Shem's sayings, and it is obvious that he used the idea very often. Lurianic Kabbalism knew of a parallel explanation of *lishmah*, but whereas the Lurianic idea aimed at some theosophic detail in the mechanism of the Upper Worlds, the Hasidic exegesis of the saying is of a much more general nature. It is interesting that Jacob Joseph of Polonne quotes both explanations, the Kabbalistic and the Hasidic; he senses that there is a difference between them, but he strives to efface it.

As I have said, this definition of *devekut* as man's binding himself to the core (*penimiut*) of the letters, the Torah and the commandments,

instead of to their external aspects only, seems to be a new point made by the Baal Shem. He was in dead earnest about the religious implications of this thesis. How much so is shown by one of his sayings, where he infers from this definition that he who does *not* bind his thought to the “root” or core of the action which he performs, is positively sinning by introducing separation into the world of spiritual unity and by “cutting down the trees of Paradise.” This is the familiar Hebrew phrase for falling into heresy. Therefore—and this idea is hammered into the readers of Jacob Joseph of Polonne's books—he who keeps the Torah in its externals only, without *devekut*, is an arch-heretic in the sense of Kabbalism: instead of binding and uniting things to God, he separates and isolates them from Him. This, of course, is a radical and essentially spiritual thesis. It is interesting to observe how early Hasidic authors strove to discover a Kabbalistic authority for it. The Rabbi of Polonne tries to read it into a statement found in Abraham Azulai's *Hesed le-Avraham* (written about 1640). But Azulai's statement is of an altogether different nature and lacks the radicalism of the Hasidic thesis. The fact that it was necessary to twist quite innocuous Kabbalistic sentences in order to extract from them his new meaning of *devekut*, tends to show that we are dealing here with a novel departure. This central thesis that the core of every true worship is *devekut* could not be held by Kabbalists as long as they placed *devekut* at the end of the Path, and, as a matter of fact, Azulai never said it. He says only that the prayer of man is heard if he succeeds in drawing out the spirituality of the supernal spheres into the letters. This is quite different from discovering them there as an ever-present reality. And, of course, no mention is made by Azulai of the absence of *devekut* constituting a sin or transgression.

*Devekut*, or “communion,” is not “union” in the sense of the mystical union between God and man of which many mystics speak. But it leads to a state, or, rather, implies an action which in Hebrew is called *yihud*, which means unification, the realization of union. The term has not always a mystical connotation, and it is not always easy to determine what is meant by it. Sometimes it only means concentration of mind by uniting all its powers on one focal point, sometimes it means even less, namely, the acknowledgement of God's unity. This latter meaning, however, is more or less restricted to non-mystical literature, where it is frequently found, whereas Hasidic literature uses the term in the same special sense given to it by the Kabbalists. If a man binds his thought to

the root of the Torah, this is called a *yihud*, both because he concentrates on it and because he breaks down the barriers and brings about unification by making into an organic whole what seemed separated and isolated. He does not become God, but he becomes "united" with Him by the process in which the core of his own being is bound up with the core of all being. There is one saying of the Baal Shem—apparently the only one—stating that the process of *yihud*, which is accomplished through *devekut*, transforms the Ego, or *ani*, into the Naught, or *ain*. This idea, which plays no central part in the Baal Shem's conceptions, was taken up with great vigor by the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz who, as a radical mystic, made it one of the cornerstones of his thought. The hidden Naught, an old Kabbalistic symbol of the depths of the Godhead, held no special attractions for the Baal Shem, but it takes on a new vitality in the teachings of Rabbi Ber and his pupils. Many of the classical writings of Hasidism overflow with lucubrations on the communion with "Nothingness" and the path by which man retraces his steps from "aught" to "naught." The strange enthusiasm which characterizes these sermons on a truly paradoxical symbolism wanes after the generation of Rabbi Ber's pupils. But for the first generation after the Baal Shem it held a fascination unequaled in Jewish literature and not easily explained. It seems to express a degree of abandonment to emotionalism that has no precedent, except for the short upsurge of Sabbatianism in 1666, and could find no adequate expression but in the most daring paradoxes of mysticism. The Baal Shem never said that *devekut* represented a state where man was able to stand within the Naught, an idea cherished by the Maggid. Of course, the new departure introduced by Rabbi Ber did not prevent him from using definitions and theses about *devekut* which he had inherited from the Baal Shem.

There is a point in connection with the Baal Shem's conception of *devekut* that deserves further attention. I am referring to the relation between Talmudic study of the Torah and the new central virtue. As far as I am aware, it has been overlooked that this the shifting of the place of *devekut* in the scale of values, and the new definition given to it, has something to do with the evaluation of Talmudic learning in early Hasidism. The old Safed school clearly already knew that the "Hasidim of old" took nine hours off their time of study in order to practice solitude and *devekut*. Now, when *devekut* was no longer considered a final stage for the few, but a demand on anybody who harkened to the

voice, this was bound to hasten the clash between a purely Talmudic orientation and the new school. If you concentrate on the spiritual core of the Torah, on the mystic light shining through the letters, and if this is *devekut*, it follows that you cannot concentrate with equal fervor on the specific and concrete meaning of the words, and certainly not on the intricacies of Talmudic lore and discussion. To penetrate an intricate discussion is one thing, and to contemplate the divine light that pervades the words is another.

The Baal Shem, and still more his main disciples, were fully aware of the gulf between the understanding of the specific detail and the contemplation of the all-enveloping light which transcends human grasp and understanding. They did not think it possible to unite both of them in one and the same act. (The Baal Shem said to the Rabbi of Polonne that on Sabbath there was almost no time to study, because all of it ought to be devoted to *yihudim*, i.e., contemplation.) Hence the insistence on taking time off from study and devoting it to contemplation and meditation. The two did not go together. Mendel of Przemyślany, who counseled not to devote too much time to Talmudic study, only drew the logical conclusion from the basic demands of *devekut*. The famous warning so vehemently assailed in the struggle between the two camps is to be found in a context where special emphasis is laid on the practice of *devekut*. The radicalism of the mystics and protagonists of popular revivalism, which necessarily brought about the clash, had not yet been watered down. Later on, it would be argued, as some Kabbalists, including Moses of Satanow, had done before, that *devekut* and penetrating study were not mutually exclusive and might be practiced together. Honesty requires us to state that Hasidism, in its beginning, was far removed from such an irenic attitude. Talking about *devekut* and contemplation, it meant what it said, and meant it in an uncompromising sense. The emphasis on *devekut* had, of course, two aspects: one for the average man, to whom it opened up a new vista and, especially through the practice of fervent and ecstatic prayer, a Path to God; the other, for the learned, from whom it required a new balance between the intellectual and emotional sides of his nature. In both cases, the problem could not have arisen without the afore-mentioned shifting of the place of *devekut* into the center of man's spiritual activity.

So far, we have found in *devekut* a value which, to the Baal Shem no less than to his precursors, is connected primarily with solitary medita-

tion and prayer. In prayer, even in communal prayer, man is alone with God, much as he may strive to bind himself spiritually to "Catholic Israel." What I said at the beginning of the characteristics of *devekut* in Nahmanides holds emphatically true for the Baal Shem's conception too, in spite of the change I have just been analyzing. The possibility of a social meaning of communion with God begins to show here and there and seems to be based on the practice of the Baal Shem. His disciple, Moses of Dolina, reports in his name that *devekut* can be sustained even in seemingly idle talk and in attending to one's business. But to accomplish this, he says, special zeal and fervor are required. The very close relation between *devekut* and *yihud* is also shown by the fact that the same saying that Moses of Dolina quotes about *devekut* is mentioned by the Baal Shem's grandson in connection with the possibility of performing *yihudim* not only by prayer and contemplation, but by every earthly performance. Even in social intercourse, in attending to business, etc., it is possible to continue the contemplative attitude by binding oneself to the spiritual core of the matter. In other words, *devekut* and *yihudim* are not concerned so much with the concrete as such, but rather with emptying it of its concrete content and discovering in it an ideal aspect that opens a vista into the hidden life which flows everywhere. *Devekut* was not preached as an active realization of the concrete, but as a contemplative realization of the immanence of God in the concrete.

In the teaching of Ber of Miedzyrzecz, the re-evaluation of *devekut* has proceeded a step further, in harmony with the general trend of his thought, which could be characterized as a transformation of Kabbalistic theosophy and its terminological apparatus into mystical anthropology. It is remarkable that the central concept of Lurianic Kabbalism, the idea of *tikkun* (restoration), plays no great part in the first Hasidic writings. Its place is taken by *devekut*, a substitution which I have found nowhere in pre-Hasidic literature, and which, indeed, could never be found there. Why? Because the idea of *tikkun* in Lurianic doctrine had a strong Messianic connotation and implication on which I have dwelt elsewhere. But *devekut* is essentially a non-Messianic and non-eschatological value. When it took the place of *tikkun* in the mending of the "broken vessels," in the restoration of harmony in the broken state of our being, it could do so only because something had fundamentally changed in the outlook of the Hasidim. About this change, namely, the neutralization of Messianism as a driving power, I shall speak at greater length later. Before

this liquidation of Messianism had taken place, nobody could have thought of substituting the private and contemplative experience of *devekut* as a healing force for the broad and comprehensive action that was the essential meaning of *tikkun*. This substitution tells much about the real difference between Lurianism and Hasidism.

Rabbi Ber enumerates three factors which may induce the state of *devekut*: retreat from association with other people; the writing down of Kabbalistic mysteries on the Torah; and the practice of *yihudim*, in the sense of special meditations. No special emphasis is laid as yet on the attainment of *devekut* within the group. He does not change the basic meaning of *devekut* as a value of introspection which consists of solitary intercourse with God. It is not a social value. In his opinion, it is a high degree of perfection if a man is "sometimes" able to be alone with himself and God "even when in one room with many other people." It was left to Rabbi Ber's disciples, especially to Elimelekh of Lezajsk, to take the final step and demand the realization of *devekut* as a social value. But this could be done only at a high price, namely, by binding *devekut* to the institution of Zaddikism, a connection wholly foreign to primitive Hasidism.

Looking back on our analysis, there is one point which deserves to be amplified. It is remarkable that *devekut*, an essentially emotional value, is linked in a surprisingly large number of sayings of the Baal Shem and his various pupils or associates with a seemingly intellectual effort. *Devekut* is reached by a fixation of one's thought (*mahshavah*) or mind (*sekhel*) on God. True, there are some sayings which mention the soul as a whole, and not only its intellectual power, as the instrument of *devekut*. But the insistence on the use of mind and thought cannot be accidental, even if we concede that "thought" is sometimes used in a rather loose sense. For it does not always mean the purely intellectual and intentional act of the mind, but rather indicates in some places any intentional act of the soul, including its voluntaristic and emotional spheres. I assume, however, that the strong emotional coloring of the "thought" of man in the dicta about *devekut* has something to do with the nature of this act. In fixing all one's attention on God, thought, sunk in contemplation of the ineffable light, loses its definite content as an intellectual act. By the practice of *devekut*, thought is transformed into emotion; it is, if I may be permitted to use the expression, de-intellectualized. In other words, the insight which is won by *devekut* has no



rational and intellectual content and, being of a most intimate and emotional character, cannot be translated into rational terms.

This point is very succinctly put forward by Meshullam Feibush Heller, a pupil of the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz and the Maggid of Zloczow. His classic epistle on the fundamentals of Hasidism contains pointed criticism of the contemporary study of Kabbalah. True mystery, he says, is not what can be read and studied by anybody in the printed volumes of Kabbalistic teaching, which is a purely intellectual affair, like so many other studies; there is no point in calling this an "esoteric" knowledge when it is, in truth, as exoteric as any other knowledge that can be imparted by books. The real mystery and esoteric wisdom is that of loving communion with God, *devekut ha-ahavah ba-shem yitbarakh*. It cannot be told or transmitted, and "everyone knows of it only what he has found out for himself, and no more."

It is, however, not without interest that the link between *devekut* and intellectual effort may have come down from Kabbalistic tradition. Joseph Gikatilla (about 1300) defines *devekut* as the process by which man binds his soul to God by way of intellectual thought, and he labors this intellectual view of *devekut* at some length in his book on the Kabbalistic reasons of the commandments.

#### IV

If Hasidic piety was focused to such a degree on *devekut*, there could be no doubt that the great demand could not be fulfilled continuously. There are two ways in which the Baal Shem dealt with this question in his sayings. Sometimes he admits the necessity of an interruption of *devekut*. The soul, too, must take a rest from the exertions and the emotional strain. By simple and unstrained activities it must gather new strength for the renewed exercises of *devekut* (*Ben porat*, fol. 34a). Seen in this light, attending to the business of daily life is a necessary interruption and preparation for the adventure of spiritual life, and therefore no reproach attaches to it. In *devekut*, man is cleaving to the spiritual life of all worlds which is the Shekhinah or the immanence of God. This vital force, which is aroused by communion, cannot operate without interruption. A "descent," a *yeridah*, from the state of *devekut* is therefore part of human nature. The Baal Shem used to apply to this the verse in Ezekiel 11:14, which he interpreted to mean, "the force of life" (*hiyut*),

instead of *hayot* of the text, "runs and returns," i.e., operates not steadily but with interruptions. The meaning of all this, of course, is that the force of life, although it is there, cannot be continuously realized and made conscious. Jacob Joseph of Polonne mentions twice such a "fallen state" or *yeridah* of the Baal Shem himself when he had gone to another country; it is to be regretted that he gives no further details, but contents himself with the remark that after that he had double power of "ascent," *aliyah*.

But it must be admitted that in the light of his own pronouncements, this is not a satisfactory solution. If it is sin, or even heresy, to fall out of *devekut*, how could an explanation such as this one hold good? Out of this dilemma came a fundamental thesis of the Baal Shem, meant as a qualification of the doctrine of *devekut* and which, indeed, played a very important part in early Hasidism. This is the doctrine of *katnut* and *gadlut*, the minor and major states of man.

As a matter of fact, *katnut* and *gadlut* are not only states of man's mind or being, but, according to the Baal Shem, two basic states of every being. "Just as there exists a state of *katnut* and *gadlut* in the supernal *sefirot*, there is a similar state in every thing, even in the clothes that a man wears," his grandson quotes him as saying. We have here another striking example of the metamorphosis of Kabbalistic terms. In Lurianic Kabbalah these terms have a specific theosophic meaning, as states of the divine mind in some of its manifestations. The chapters on these states in Vital's *Es hayyim* are famous for their difficulty and their daring use of anthropomorphic symbolism. The Baal Shem takes the terms back into the human sphere and gives the theosophic idea a new turn or twist.

With him, *katnut* and *gadlut* are phases of life, everywhere and at all times, from purely natural and even artificial things up to the configuration of the divine *sefirot* where the same rhythm and the same law prevail. *Katnut*, the minor state, is the state of imperfection, even of degradation, whereas *gadlut* means the full development of a thing to its highest state. Everywhere in time, space, and the soul there is the same organic law of the two states, an idea which the Rabbi of Polonne was tireless in preaching and applying.

There is a higher and lower state in human existence and human affairs, and particularly in worship. But everything depends on the rank a man has reached in his spiritual struggle for perfection. With one, *katnut* may mean an outward and mechanical way of worship "without

soul" or, as the Baal Shem was fond of putting it, "without joy." But with another class, it may mean only a lower standard than their customary one. *Katnut*, then, is the time of man's struggle with his lower instincts in order to lift himself up to *gadlut*, a state that knows of no struggle, but only of the enjoyment that comes with victory over the darker side of his nature.

The same verse in Ezekiel I, used by the Baal Shem in support of the interruption of *devekut*, is also adduced by him in connection with this rather different theory. There is a steady flow of life, up and down, and no state is void of its manifestation. There can be a modest form of *devekut* even in the minor state. It is limited and without that exuberance and exhilaration that comes to man only when joy sweeps him off *katnut*. But still, it enables him to keep some sort of communion even in that state of estrangement from God as *katnut* is frequently pictured. One saying has it that "in the time of *gadlut* man is literally cleaving to God, which cannot be said to apply in the time of *katnut*." For when man falls into this state—and there is no exception to the law that necessitates this periodic occurrence—he finds himself in melancholy sadness and estrangement. His worship contains an element of compulsion and not those high qualities of pure fear and love which characterize that worship out of an overflowing heart which is essentially what *gadlut* means. Only by constantly striving to overcome this state of separation and to attain anew the higher state, by the very struggle to get oneself out of the spiritual desert, there remains some indirect approach to God. This is the point on which the Baal Shem's defense of his behavior with simple folk is centered. *Katnut* is the time to serve God even through idle talk or story telling! For, even by this means, man can bring about the spiritual concentration which will help him to attain *devekut*. In *katnut*, man should devote himself to external action or worldly talk, but even then the true Hasid will be meditating on the spiritual side of what seems to be a purely material undertaking. Nobody may notice it, yet he transforms the lowest forms of activity into something of a higher order. It is obvious, and I need not labor the point, that this thesis can be as sublime as it may prove dangerous. The mystic content of idle talk—that is certainly a thesis full of perverse possibilities! And a very popular thesis at that. It is constantly emphasized in the doctrinal tradition of early Hasidism and must be considered as an active factor in its propaganda.

*Katnut* is, therefore, the time of trial through which the perfect man, no less than anybody else, must pass. There is, to be sure, a twofold aspect of *katnut*: it can be the natural relaxation after the strain of *devekut*, but it can also be an intentional descent, because of some hidden purpose. This second aspect plays an important part in Hasidic doctrine. It is connected with the motif of the falling, or stepping down, of the *zaddik*, a problem that had a special fascination for the Hasidim. I do not think it could have acquired this importance had it not been for the Sabbatian theories of the necessary fall of the Messiah and its later Podolian metamorphosis. Only after Sabbatianism, the problem of *nefilat ha-zaddik*, (fall or descent of the *zaddik*) became an acute one that needed to be discussed. Earlier Kabbalistic ethics does not know it as a pressing one. Now, from the Baal Shem's sayings till Elimelekh of Lezajsk, it takes on rather astonishing dimensions. In my view, it is a sublimation of an antinomian thesis, on a plane where it was calculated to lose its sting. The deliberate stepping down from holiness into a state of *katnut*—says the Baal Shem—is very dangerous, and there are many who have remained there and could not rise again. This sounds very much like an echo of the Sabbatian turmoil!

Another saying of the Baal Shem has it that, "if it happens to a perfect man that he cannot study or pray, he should realize that this also shows the hand of God who is pushing him back in order that he may come nearer." Here we have essentially the principle which, as far as I can see, was formulated in its final shape by Rabbi Ber of Miedzyrzecz, if not by the Baal Shem himself. The formula *yeridah sorekh aliyah*, "the descent, or stepping down, is necessary in order to ascend to a higher rank"—something perhaps best translated by the French phrase, *reculer pour mieux sauter*—recurs constantly in Rabbi Ber's sayings on the meaning of *katnut*. But he admits two kinds of "stepping down": "Sometimes," he says, "a man falls from his rank because of himself . . . and sometimes the state of the world causes him to fall, and in both cases the descent is for the sake of an ever higher ascent." *Katnut*, then, for all its personal color, is not only a matter of purely personal causation. It may depend on the surroundings of a man, his fellow men, or other factors. This explanation was very frequently used to justify the deliberate or quasi-deliberate stepping down of a perfect man, a *zaddik*, in the Hasidic sense of the term. If all the world is in a state of *katnut*, he should join in and associate his efforts with theirs in order to reach *gadlut*. It is in this

context that Jacob Joseph of Polonne uses almost the same formula as the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz. (Incidentally, since he uses it immediately before a quotation from the Baal Shem, we may infer that the formula itself was not known to him as a saying of his master; otherwise he would have acknowledged it as such.)

We even have the prescription of the Baal Shem as to which parts of prayer should be said in a state of *katnut* in order to be able to pray the other parts in the ravishment of *devekut*. It is obvious, therefore, that a state which is considered as preparatory to *devekut* does *not* constitute a sin in the sense I have explained before. Of course, there is danger in *katnut*, namely the danger of remaining in what should be only a transitory stage. But the whole teaching of the Baal Shem is centered around this conception of a steady ebb and flow in the spiritual life of man: in *gadlut*, there is communion and even ecstasy, but in *katnut*, there is preparation for it. Understood in this right sense, no fault is to be found in such a state.

## V

In the foregoing analysis of *devekut*, I have laid stress on those points which characterize the specific color and significance the term has taken on in Hasidic parlance, and particularly with the Baal Shem. They are more or less typical of the conception of *devekut* in the bulk of Hasidic literature. But there is one further point which I think should be discussed here. I have said that communion, for all its depth and importance, is not union. But is this truly so? Are there no stages of deeper contemplation, ravishment, and ecstasy where one state passes into the other? Since much has been made of the allegedly pantheistic leanings and doctrines of the Baal Shem and his early pupils, especially by S. A. Horodetzky and Jacob S. Minkin, it may be worthwhile to go into the matter. All the more so, since Horodetzky uses the term pantheism in a very loose way which tends to make pantheists of a great many inside and outside of the Hasidic camp who might never have so much as dreamed of such a faith as that venerable author ascribes to them. If Creator and Creation are essentially one, then *devekut* may indeed be union. I propose, therefore, to examine this question, if only briefly, in order to reach a better understanding of some shades of the concept of *devekut* which deserve our attention.

As to the Baal Shem himself, there is no proof, in his authentic sayings, of any doctrine which might properly be called pantheistic. In contradistinction to this absence of an identification of God and the universe, of the Creator and Creation, there is full proof of his belief in the immanence of God in every one of His creatures. It is at most what philosophers call "panentheistic" teaching—all Being *in* God, but not all Being God. This sort of teaching was current in Kabbalism, especially in Cordovero's works. If we knew for sure that the Baal Shem had studied Abraham Azulai's *Hesed le-Avraham*, which is an abstract of Cordovero's Kabbalah, we would better understand the genesis of some of his formulas as quoted in the books of the Rabbi of Polonne. For Azulai sharply accentuates the panentheistic core of Cordovero's teaching. But all we know positively is that this rabbi himself had read the book, which was printed as early as 1685. Whether his master knew it we can only guess. Azulai states, for instance, that man is "in communion with God," because "there is nothing that is separated from Him." But the reason he adduces for the latter statement is perfectly orthodox and non-pantheistic; it is the chain of cause and effect which, in the last resort, links God with His Creation. The formula of the "chain of causes" enables the mystics to reinstate God as the immanent soul or life of all being. And it is only in this quality, and not as the last and transcendent cause, that God appeals to the mind of the Baal Shem. His thinking on this score is very simple and unsophisticated. He repeats the old formulas which every Kabbalist had used before him, and, with one notable exception, without additions of his own: "Everything is full of His glory," "No place is void of Him," "Thou keepest them all alive" (Neh. 9:6), which was frequently understood to mean: Thou art the vital force, *hiyut*, of everything. To this last quotation the Baal Shem made the significant addition, of everything, even of sin, an idea which he repeated in a great many variations.

On the other hand, the Baal Shem was fond of telling a parable which recurs in several variations in the books of his disciples and apparently carries quite a different meaning.

A king had built a glorious palace full of corridors and partitions, but he himself lived in the innermost room. When the palace was completed and his servants came to pay him homage, they found that they could not approach the king because of the devious maze. While they stood and wondered, the king's son came and showed them that those were not real partitions, but only magical

illusions, and that the king, in truth, was easily accessible. Push forward bravely and you shall find no obstacle.

The interpretations put on this parable in Hasidic literature differ widely. Its literal sense conveys no pantheistic meaning but rather an "acosmic" one: the world is denied real existence, reality is seen rather as a sort of "veil of Maya." The perfectly devout man, the "son of the king," discovers that there is nothing that separates him from his father. External reality is but an illusion. This is the way the parable is commented on by the Baal Shem's grandson. But others, for instance the Rabbi of Polonne, give it a pantheistic turn: "People with true insight know that all the walls and partitions, all the outward clothes and covers are in truth of His own essence, for there is no place void of Him." If the formula alone were decisive, we might safely say that there is, indeed, a pantheistic element to be found, at least in some of the Baal Shem's disciples. But the ideational content of the formula is, almost in every case, limited to a much less radical interpretation, by reading into it either the doctrine of divine immanence or that of the annihilation of reality before the contemplative mind. For if one looks closely into the context of such passages, all that remains of the high-flown formulas is always the omnipresence of the divine influx, *shefa*, and *hiyut*, the vitalizing power, instead of that of the divine substance. I think that the numerous writers who have compared the Baal Shem's teaching to that of Spinoza have considerably overshot the mark. I, for one, am unable to find any teachings reminiscent of Spinoza in the Baal Shem's doctrinal sayings.

An excellent example of the shifting of emphasis in the use of extreme formulations is provided by a saying of Pinhas of Korzec on the subject, in his *Midrash pinhas* (1872f., 9b, 60):

If a man fulfills the commandments of the Torah, such as the commandment of the phylacteries, and says the formula prescribed by the Kabbalists, namely, "In the name of all Israel [I am doing this]" then he lifts up the whole universe to its "root" above, *for the world is really God Himself*, like the locust whose clothing is part of its own self. Therefore, he annihilates [by his action] the [outward] existence of the whole universe. And if we see that in spite of all this the world is still there, it is because the vital energy of God is always active and the world is incessantly renewed.

Here, then, we have within one sentence the different motives I have just mentioned, and this, I think, should warn us against over-stressing such

formulas as "the world is really God Himself." What is particularly interesting in this view is that the performance of the *misvah* does not give more meaning and reality to the world, as modern interpretations of Hasidic theology would lead us to expect but, on the contrary, detracts from its apparently illusory reality and leads from the Aught to the verge of the Naught. For the "root" of the world is the Naught which the mystic contemplates, with which he communes and in which he longs to "stand." At their "root" the created things lose their identity as creatures, because all that can be beheld there is God alone. But we should not forget that, to reach that state, Creation as Creation must be "annihilated," which implies that Creation, in its own right, is not what pantheism would declare it to be, namely a mere mode of Infinity. We are indeed, as we may put it, dwelling in God, but we are not God. Also, it should be borne in mind that the "son of the king," who pushes through to his father, sees his father and cleaves to him, but does not become one with him.

This, then, brings us back to the point I have raised: are there, in original Hasidic teaching, more radical formulations of the central doctrine of *devekut* than those we have been considering? The answer is that there is a definite turn toward a more mystical formulation of it in the teaching of the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz and some of his pupils. The Baal Shem and Jacob Joseph of Polonne do not emphasize a "union" or "unity" (*ahdut*) between God and man, and their formulations are much more careful than those found in Rabbi Ber's sayings. This adds further weight to what I have said about the necessity of taking Jacob Joseph's allegedly pantheistic statements with not too small a grain of salt. Comparing the two most conspicuous pupils of the Baal Shem, there can be no doubt that Jacob Joseph is the relatively sober one, whereas Rabbi Ber of Miedzyrzecz has gone far on the way of what must be described as mystical intoxication. The difference between the sermons of the two, which have come down to us, is tremendous. I have mentioned the streak of soberness that characterizes the Baal Shem. In Rabbi Ber, this trait has disappeared. He is no longer the friend of God and the simple folk, who roams through the markets. He is the ascetic whose gaze is fixed on, or, I might rather say, lost in God. He is a mystic of unbridled radicalism and singularity of purpose. His predilection for the more paradoxical figures of mystical speech colors his sermons to a degree equaled by few of his predecessors in the history of Jewish mysticism. It

is, therefore, not astonishing that he should use the terminology of mystical union in describing some stages of *devekut*, although here, too, it may be wise not to lose ourselves in his terminology, which is radical indeed, but to consider the context of his thought.

It will serve as an illustration of this peculiar mystical bent of Rabbi Ber if I close by summarizing his bold explanation of Numbers 10:2 which, as a description of the ultimate goal of *devekut*, goes as far as anything in early Hasidism. The rather inoffensive prescription of the Torah: "Make thee two trumpets of silver, of a whole piece shall thou make them," gives birth in Rabbi Baer's mind to the following enthusiastic explanation based on a mystical pun, the word *hasoserot*, trumpets, being taken as two words, *hasi-surot*, halves of forms. Man and God, he says, are each only a half-finished, incomplete form. Man without God is really not man, *adam*, a sublime and spiritual being, but only *dam*, blood, a biological entity. He is lacking the *a* or *alef*, which is God, *aluf shel olam*, the master of the world. Only when the *alef* and *dam*, God and man, get together, the two form a real unity, and only then does man deserve to be called *adam*. But how is such unity, *ahdut*, accomplished? By *kisuf*, which means "the constant striving for union with God." If man casts off all earthly or material elements and ascends through all the worlds and becomes one with God to the degree of losing the feeling of separate existence, then will he be rightly called *adam*, Man, "being transformed into the cosmic figure of the primordial man whose likeness upon the throne Ezekiel beheld." This, according to Ber, is the transfiguration of man which is reached through, or in, the state of *devekut*: man finds himself by losing himself in God, and by giving up his identity he discovers it on a higher plane. Here, and in many other sayings of Rabbi Ber, *devekut* is said to lead not only to communion, but to *ahdut*, union. But—this union is, in fact, not at all the pantheistic obliteration of the self within the divine mind which he likes to call the Naught, but pierces through this state on to the rediscovery of man's spiritual identity. He finds himself because he has found God. This, then, is the deepest meaning of *devekut* of which Hasidism knows, and the radical terms should not blind us to the eminently Jewish and personalistic conception of man which they still cover. After having gone through *devekut* and union, man is still man—nay, he has, in truth, only then started to be man, and it is only logical that only then will he be called upon to fulfill his destiny in the society of men.