CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DEBATE OVER BUBER’S INTERPRETATION
OF HASIDISM

1. Introduction

The debate over Martin Buber’s interpretation of Hasidism revolved around three main issues: a) Buber’s use of the Hasidic tale rather than Hasidic exegetical writings; b) the question of the reality of this world, and within that context the significance of “service in corporeality” and the “raising up of sparks” in Hasidism; c) the nature of man’s contact with God in Hasidic mysticism—is it passive or active?

I would like to begin this chapter by relating to the critiques of Gershon Scholem and Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer (or, as below: Schatz) regarding the general contours with which Buber chose to present Hasidism, and thereafter turn to the question of the reality of this world in Hasidic sources, and from there to the significance of “service in corporeality” in Hasidic thought. All this will be considered in light of the solutions offered to these issues by Hasidism, as understood by Buber and by his critics. This is also, in my opinion, one of the most significant questions to be considered in discussing the degree of intellectual integrity with which Buber approached Hasidic sources—as well as being one of the most important issues for understanding the message of Hasidism.

1 Here I would like to mention in particular Buber’s earlier books, mentioned above: The Tales of Rabbi Nachman and The Legend of the Baal-Shem, which are reworked collections of stories and anecdotes from the lives of R. Nahman and of the Baal Shem Tov; and Buber’s influential book, Tales of the Hasidim, consisting of tales and anecdotes of the various Hasidic teachers. This book was first published in German in 1924, was incorporated in Buber’s 1927 collection of writings on Hasidism entitled Die chassidischen Bücher, appeared in Hebrew in 1946 under the title Or ha-Ganuz, [and in English in 1947–48 (two volumes) as Tales of the Hasidim.] I should also mention Buber’s booklet, The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism, published in Hebrew in 1957 and included in the collection Hasidism and Modern Man (123–176), and his Hasidic novel, Gog and Magog, published in Hebrew in 1955, and in English under the title For the Sake of Heaven. Buber’s preference for the Hasidic story, as conserving the power and vitality embodied in Hasidism (above, pp. 195, 198–205), is also expressed in his theoretical essays on Hasidism.
This issue also relates to the two other subjects which I have mentioned. Regarding the relation between the Hasidic tale and the more formal teachings of Hasidic homilies, it seems to me that, if we are convinced that Buber’s interpretation of the Hasidic outlook regarding the status of this world has a basis in Hasidic homilies, this will constitute an answer to Gershom Scholem’s claim that Buber derived existentialist conclusions from Hasidic sources because he concentrated upon the Hasidic tale as opposed to the Hasidic homily.

The third matter, relating to the nature of Hasidic mysticism, also relates to the status of this world in Hasidism. As stated earlier (pp. 258–270), Schatz’s claim that the relationship of Hasidism to this world, including service in corporeality, is secondary to that of attachment to God (i.e., the issue of mysticism)—that is, that it enables an additional space to the possibility of attachment to God—is suitable to some typologies of devekut in Hasidism, but is not necessarily appropriate to that one which combines devekut with the ideal of raising the sparks and of turning matter into form. The inclusion of the latter does not allow us to present Hasidic mysticism as hostile to the concrete level of reality and as having “an internal connection to quietistic concerns” as suggested by Schatz (Hasidism as Mysticism, 55–64, esp. 63). The sources I have brought from the Baal Shem Tov’s disciple, R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoyye, as well as the description of the life of the Baal Sham Tov in Shivhei ha-Besht, the teachings attributed to him (such as the doctrine of alien thoughts), and the mystical experiences of the Baal Sham Tov (‘aliyat neshama), are all indicative of great activity. Even if we agree with Scholem’s claim that the Hasidic doctrine of sparks referred to the redemption of the sparks and not to that of the concrete world (see below, §3), extended activity in the realm of sparks per se indicates that it is impossible to identify Hasidic mysticism exclusively with passivity or with an all-inclusive desire to arrive at a state of annihilation. The perception of mystical experience as one thing and its practical derivatives as another, as suggested by Schatz, is artificial and has no real basis. It does not take into consideration the

2 In the words of Schatz-Uffenheimer: “Man’s relationship to the concrete is a secondary problem in Hasidic teaching” (in her “Man’s Relation to God,” 405).
3 On the transformation of matter into form, see below, §3.
4 On the understanding of mysticism in its Hasidic context in Schatz, see Margolin, The Inner Temple, 45–46.
5 Above, Chapter 2.4, and also in Chapter 8, and further Hasidic sources brought below.