

Spirituality in logotherapy and in Hasidic Judaism

Lecture given by Professor David Guttman at the logotherapy conference in Vienna, May 2014

Introduction

This presentation is dedicated to Eleanor Frankl, my dear and beloved friend, as a tribute to our thirty years of friendship.

I am not a religious Jew in the organized sense of this term. Nor am I a missionary, or a spokesman for Hasidic Judaism. I speak only in my name as a survivor of the Holocaust, an educator, and practitioner in logotherapy and existential analysis for the past three decades.

I have selected some Hasidic tales, stories and sayings for presentation here, because they are very close to the spirit of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, yet uniquely spiritual in a religious sense. I wish to concentrate my presentation on what is fascinating in Hasidism, what's best in it, in terms of its spirituality and teaching, and compare it with the secular approach to spirituality in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy. We live in an increasingly materialistic world in which traditional values are crumbling and people look desperately for an anchor of security, spiritual strength and guidance.

My love for Hasidic stories and sayings began long ago, and goes back to my childhood. I was always fascinated by the stories I heard. Later, when I became a teacher, I found a way to blend both logotherapy and Hasidic stories, sayings and approach to life in my lectures and workshops all over the world, without becoming a Hasid myself...

Before embarking further in this presentation, a short description of Hasidic spirituality needs to be briefly reviewed. Hasidic spirituality emanates from a popular Jewish religious movement called Hasidism that encompasses hundreds of thousands of Jews all over the world. This movement was inaugurated by Rabbi Israel Ben Eliezer, the Holder of the Good Name, or the Baal Shem Tov in Hebrew. He lived in the eighteenth century between 1700 and 1760. His movement has quickly spread all over the globe during the past two hundred years, and continues to grow in our days.

A Hasid is defined as a pious person, a member of a Jewish sect, one who follows and observes a form of Orthodox Judaism according to Mosaic Law. The word Hasid is derived from the Hebrew "hesed", which means kindness and benevolence. These are the traits and attributes of God.

According to Elie Wiesel, a Hasid loves God and all his creatures with fervor and enthusiasm (Wiesel, 1972, p. 262). For illustration:

"A young child once asked a rabbi why man was created with two eyes instead of one, like the nose and the mouth. The rabbi replied: With the left eye you should look at yourself, to see how you can improve yourself. And with the right eye you should look at all the others lovingly, always seeking out their best qualities", (Jacobson, 1995. p. 62).

Hasidism is a branch of Orthodox Judaism that promotes spirituality as the fundamental aspect of the faith. It is built on a conglomerate of some 30 large groups and on many smaller ones. The leaders of these groups are regarded by their followers as the intercessors of Divinity. Each Hasidic dynasty follows its own principles and costumes, yet there is some commonality and sharing of philosophy, worship practices, and dress codes.

Hasidic philosophy has four main goals: Revival, Piety, Refinement and Demystification. Hasidism developed in order to revive the physically and spiritually oppressed Jews in Eastern Europe. Its purpose was to make the esoteric teachings of the Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, understandable to everyone and to help the Hasid to achieve the goals of refinement and demystification.

Hasidism is built on three pillars, upon which Hasidic spirituality and stories rest: These are: Intention, Work and Enthusiasm. Their overall purpose is to make the Hasid more whole as a person, to be in tune with his self and with a higher level of spiritual existence.

The Rabbi of Medzibosh has summed up the meaning of Intention by stating that the individual was placed in the world to contribute towards its improvement. Man should live a moral life. He should fulfill his obligations and responsibilities with the intention of doing good deeds, in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah, when all suffering will cease and people will live in peace. Logotherapy shares and espouses these intentions without waiting for the Messiah to come...

Work means prayer and service, that is, caring for the healthy aspects of life, and the welfare of people. According to the Hasidic Sages, there are many ways open to the individual in serving God. Man must find his own way and devote himself to that way in serving God with all his heart and might.

Enthusiasm means that a Hasid is expected to pronounce his prayer in public, or alone, with great fervor. According to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730-1788), if a person worships God with pleasure and delight, his soul is satisfied. But if one does not serve God joyously, the soul searches out other forms of pleasure and turns to base delights, Heaven forbid.

The ideals of the great Hasidic Masters preceded modern existentialism by one hundred years at least.

The Baal Shem Tov, or Holder of the Good Name, leader and founder of the Hasidic movement used to travel even to remote villages to spread the word about Hasidism. He was a charismatic person whose life and every move and saying were told over and over in hundreds of stories, tales, and legends. He is credited with being able to

restore to individuals their sense of dignity and confidence, similar to what Frankl did with his logotherapy in our days.

The Holder of the Good Name maintained that man precedes theories and reality is more important than knowledge. Intuition was superior for him than logic. He has emphasized that "feeling together" and sharing are above everything else.

According to a Hasidic legend, the world exists due to 36 Just Men, disguised sometimes as wanderers or beggars. Therefore each meeting, each encounter with another human being can be fateful and meaningful. The same idea is expressed in logotherapy in the concept of the "meaning of the moment".

Hasidic sayings are attributed to the great Tzadikim, or the Righteous Men. Their sayings were scattered through hundreds of books by their disciples. Martin Buber, the great scholar of Hasidism, has selected and refined them according to their major themes. He did so, as he said, not because they are beautiful and interesting, which they are, but because they may serve to show the way to true life".

Hasidic sayings revolve around a single question: How can we fulfill the meaning of our existence on earth? Hasidism opposes the idea that it is possible to correct the world and humanity by science and technology alone, and rejects cognitive and behavioral approaches to the task of "fixing one's soul".

Rabbi Dov Ber, a great leader in Hasidic Judaism maintained that, the role of man in this world is to contribute to its welfare. He said that "one who think nothing at all of his self, and makes himself nothing, grows spiritual. Spirit does not occupy space. He can be north and south at the same time", (Buber, 1991. p. 109).

Hasidic tales draw from both European literary tradition and from a variety of Jewish sources, such as the Bible, or the Kabbalah. Hasidic tales are usually short and told in terse language. They tend to carry a strong and rather obvious point, with little extra information. Their aim is to inspire the Hasid and to convince the "simple folk". The Hasidic Masters used these stories to convey a message that is easy to take to heart. "A good story in Hasidism is not about miracles, but about values, friendship, and hope.

The following Hasidic tale, taken from the work of Martin Buber (1995), illustrates what was said so far:

To the Rabbi of Kotzk came a Hasid, a pious Jew, and complained:

"Rabbi, I have some terribly disturbing thoughts".

"What are those, asked the Rabbi?"

"I am afraid of raising them to my lips".

"Nevertheless tell me", commanded the Rabbi".

"Sometimes I reflect that God forbid there is no Law, and there is no Judge".

"So, what does this matter to you", said the Rabbi.

"If there is no Law and no Judge, cried the Hasid in a loud voice, then what is the purpose of the world, and this Rabbi matters to me a lot".

So, what does it matter to you that the world has no purpose, said the Rabbi.

"If the world has no purpose, said the Hasid, then there is no sense to the Torah, and there is no sense to life, and this, Rabbi, matters to me a lot".

"If this matters to you so much", said the Rabbi, "then you are a decent Jew, and a decent Jew may have such thoughts". (p. 331).

Attitudes to human existence, and to the superiority of the spiritual dimension over the physical and biological one, are rather similar in logotherapy and in Hasidic Judaism. Both teach how to say "yes" to life. Both believe that life will go on as long as there is someone to sing, to dance, to tell stories and to listen (Oren Lyons). Both teach that human beings are capable of transcending themselves in situations that require such a response. Both believe in a "higher authority", even if this belief is expressed dissimilarly.

Logotherapy and Hasidic Judaism maintain that man has freedom of the will and this freedom enables man to direct his life. Both claim that man is responsible for his deeds. And both agree that meaning is subjective. One needs to discover his unique role and task to fulfill his meaning of life. Logotherapy basically agrees with Hasidic Judaism that the search for meaning should begin in one's heart.

Spirituality as nonmaterial reality

Spirituality in general refers to a nonmaterial reality. Spirituality is a matter of inner perception. Spiritual entities are not inherently superior or better than material ones, for good and evil can both be spiritual and physical, as attested to in human history from early times to the present. Spirituality is closely related to the psychological well-being of a person, especially in its traditional expression. Man is primarily a spiritual being, whose true wealth is measured in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual gains. The soul is the main force in life. Unlike the body, the soul never ages. It only grows.

Spiritual life requires an integrated approach, a unity of faith and action that addresses the needs of the whole person, body, mind and soul together. Spiritual growth invigorates the body, refreshes one's mind, and strengthens one's resistance to premature decay.

Martin Buber, (born in Vienna in 1878 and died in Jerusalem in 1965) a great personality in Jewish religious life, was first and foremost an educator. He became known in the world as the translator of the Old Testament into German. He was an author of important works in social psychology and religious existentialism, such as "I and Thou" (1991), and "Between Man and Man" (1975). Buber did not belong to an organized religious community. He did not attend religious services in a synagogue. His religion was rather similar to that of Viktor Frankl and mine. It was completely personal. What really mattered for him was not the way one fulfilled his religious obligations, but the intention that stood behind one's actions.

Frankl's concept of "self-transcendence" corresponds with Buber's emphasis on a "higher dimension" of the self, the spiritual dimension. Logotherapy has adopted Buber's philosophical relationships to human beings, particularly his emphasis on face-to-face and direct relationships in which the parties to this relationship are perceived as equals.

According to Buber, God is the eternal "Thou" who sustains the "I-Thou" relation eternally. The divine spark is hidden in the hearts of all of us. And it is the task of each human being to let this spark ignite his soul to accomplish his unique way and destiny in this world.

Spirituality in Jewish perspective

"Where is the dwelling of God"? This was the question with which the Rabbi of Kotzk surprised a number of pious men who happened to visit him. They laughed at him. "What a thing to ask! Isn't the whole world full of his glory?" The Rabbi looked at them for a long time in silence, shook his head, and answered his own question: "God dwells wherever man lets him in". (Buber, 40-41).

In Hasidic spirituality love is directed toward God and all human beings. This love gives the believer inner strength and resolve. Jewish religious spirituality stems from an unconditional belief in the Almighty. This belief is what kept many Hasidic Jews alive in the German death camps during the Holocaust, (Eliach, 1982). Such belief can produce miracles. The inner strength of a true believer in God is never shaken by what's done on earth.

The late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the foremost Hasidic leader in the Jewish world, respected Viktor Frankl's spirituality. He said: "I have interested myself particularly in the writings of Dr. Frankl. To my astonishment, his approach has not been widely disseminated and accepted as it should". Rabbi Schneerson implied that Frankl's approach to spirituality coincides strongly with the nature of the human being as Torah understands it. The Rabbi also said that "the real reason for the failure of Frankl's approach to gain the currency it deserved was a limited supply of therapists who could constitute a "living example" like Frankl to the patient. The therapist has to be an example of that which spiritually a human being is, in terms of spiritually universal values, (Cowen, 2002, p. 88). Frankl's spirituality shone through and galvanized the objective spirituality of his patients. He was indeed a "living example" of that spirituality".

When Rabbi Schneerson was a young child, he played with a group of other children who were climbing a ladder. All his friends were afraid to climb to the top, but he had no fear. Later his grandfather asked him: "Why were you not afraid to climb while the others were?"

"Because as they climbed they kept looking down", he replied. "They saw how high they were, and they were frightened. As I climbed, I kept looking upward. I saw how low I was, and it motivated me to climb higher", (p. 7). This story is a wonderful illustration to Frankl's concept of logotherapy being "height psychology" in its truest sense...

Spirituality in logotherapy

In the spiritual approach to life in logotherapy, one can transcend physical and psychological barriers and conditions when he has a reason, and a meaning, for which survival is worth all the sacrifices, all the pain and suffering in this world.

Frankl's attitude to that meaning resembles that of the Hasidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730-1788), the chief disseminator of Hasidic Judaism in Belarus. He used to say that man's basic humanity is found in his ability to be attached to something greater than he.

In creating logotherapy, Frankl relied on the ideas and works of various philosophers and psychologists. And in his discussion of supra-meaning, there are no references to God, or to the concepts of Hasidic Judaism. But a close look at his life reveals that he managed to embody the three pillars of Hasidic Judaism, namely intention, work and enthusiasm remarkably well. For I know that he lived according to the ideals contained in those three pillars. And those pillars can serve as guides to life for all people.

Frankl devoted two of his books to clarify his concept of ultimate meaning. The first, published in 1985 as his dissertation for the PhD was *The Unconscious God: Logotherapy and Religion*. The second, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, was completed close to his death in 1997. In the latter Frankl pointed out that within the framework of logotherapy, the concept of "spiritual" does not have a religious connotation. He referred to the specifically human dimension found in every human being.

The concept of Supra-meaning was presented first in Frankl's book *The Doctor and the Soul*, (1946), and later in his bestseller: *Man's Search for Meaning*, that was first published in the same year (1946). Of the two early publications dealing with this concept, the first is, in my opinion, the most relevant from the perspective of logotherapy. For in this publication Frankl has elaborated his own version of the secular approach to spirituality that characterizes logotherapy.

Frankl has emphasized that a therapist who ignores man's spiritual side ignores this person's will-to-meaning. He is giving away a person's most valuable asset. For it is this will that a psychotherapist has to appeal to (Frankl, 1986, p. xvi). But a question can be raised: What kind of spiritual side Frankl is talking about? We may safely assume that he is referring both to the religious and the secular sides of the individual.

When Frankl speaks of a psychotherapy that not only recognizes man's spirit, but actually starts from it, he speaks of logotherapy in its double meaning. He speaks of "logos", which signifies the spiritual aspect of meaning" and therapy in its original sense in ancient Greek philosophy.

Ultimate meaning, according to Frankl, exceeds man's limited intellectual capacity. As an abstract concept, the term "ultimate meaning" is difficult to grasp, yet its existence is evident. We just have to look around in nature and the cosmos to see that there is some order in the world and beyond in the infinite space. How did this order come about? How does it work? How does it affect the lives and collective destinies of the people on Earth? There are opportunities in life when we can experience something extraordinary that reaffirms the existence of that special dimension. Frankl's concept of ultimate meaning is that upper floor in the imaginary building of psychology that provides open vistas to the world beyond.

Frankl is aware that not every person can grasp that there is a meaning beyond the physical or psychological world. Therefore he uses the concept of ultimate, or supra-meaning to convey that this meaning is not comprehensible with our scientific means at present. Frankl thus supports Buber's concept of the eternal "Thou". This concept is not an object of experience or thought. It cannot be investigated. It can be known only as the absolute entity that gives unity to all being. Even those who do not believe in God are aware that such superhuman dimension exists.

According to Frankl, logotherapy and religion are two distinct domains. The first deals with healing and the second with salvation. Religion has more than psychological health and personal satisfaction as its aim. It has a moral dimension and ultimate concern. Frankl wanted logotherapy to apply to both the religious and the non-religious person because logotherapy and religion overlap in actual experience. And he wanted professionals to be aware of the difference and to respect it in their roles and aims.

Frankl claims that life is a task. And the religious man is different from the apparently irreligious man only by experiencing his existence not simply as a task, but as a mission. Frankl says that religion provides man with a spiritual anchor, with a feeling of security and strength. Such a belief adds immeasurably to human vitality. To such a faith there is, ultimately, nothing that is meaningless. He also said that the more inclusive the concept of meaning, the more impossible to grasp it. At a final analysis, this ultimate meaning cannot be grasped by the presently existing human intellect. "When we are completely alone", he said, when we conduct a truly sincere dialogue with ourselves, then it is absolutely right to call our partner God – irrespective whether or not we are believers or atheists" (Frankl. 2002, p..

How did I become a "Hasid of logotherapy"?

When I introduced myself to Viktor and Eleanor Frankl in 1984, in San Francisco, what struck me in particular was the air of Jewish spirituality that emanated from him. I literally saw this air, or rather aura, for it was clearly written on his radiant face. He had the radiance of the great Hasidic Masters. This radiance is the hallmark of a great personality. And Elly too had the same aura around her head.

According to a Hasidic legend, the Founder of Hasidism conquered his best friends by the intensity of his gaze; by his tales, and by his fire. Frankl had these three characteristics combined together in his personality. No wonder that I fell immediately in his charm.

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize winning writer tells in this book how in earlier days Hasidic Jews used to travel great distances just to get closer to their beloved Tzadik, or righteous man.

My journey from Israel in 1984, to the logotherapy conference in San Francisco, was devoted to such an undertaking. In San Francisco I attached my soul to the soul of Viktor Frankl. There and then I became a faithful friend to him and to his family. I must confess that his personality had a tremendous impact on me. And after our meeting I felt like a new "convert" to logotherapy. As a result of this meeting, I

decided there and then that I would use my energy to spread his ideas, his philosophy, and his concepts in my lectures, teaching, research, and practice all over the world.

Frankl was religious in a deeply personal sense. Many strictly religious Jews could not accept that a man whose ancestors were famous Jewish scholars and personalities, such as the Maharal, the "Grand Rabbi Low of Prague, who, as legend tells us, created the Golem, would marry a Gentile woman. They couldn't know how fortunate he was. For Elly Frankl is truly a "woman of valor". She was a pillar of strength and support for Viktor during their 52 years of marriage.

Frankl kept his Judaism alive and well all his life! He put on tefillin, the phylacteries containing portions of Scripture on the arm and head, and prayed daily. And he chose to be buried in the Jewish cemetery in Vienna. His Jewish religious behavior was hidden from the public and kept in absolute privacy. This is the reason why many people in the Jewish community looked upon him as someone who has alienated himself from Jewish religious and communal life.

There is a lovely story told about the Bal-Shem-Tov, the "Holder of the Good Name", about the nature of alienation and faith:

One day on a journey he met a child who was crying. And when he asked him why, the child said: "I was playing with my friends and I was to hide, but I have hidden myself so well that they cannot find me." Buber, (1995, p. 269).

But even if Frankl's Jewish religious behavior were widely known, the strictly orthodox Jews would still consider him someone who has abandoned his faith. They would say that according to Jewish religion, all marriages to any non-Jew are forbidden and prohibited by Jewish religious law.

How Frankl kept his relationship with his own God, his ultimate meaning was his business. What matters for all of us is what he left behind him. And what he left, his legacy and work, touched the hearts and souls of millions of people, both Jews and Gentiles, all over the world, and continues to offer solace and hope to everybody.

Frankl was for me more than a much beloved and respected friend. I understood and respected his unique way of being Jewish. For me he was, still is, and always will be a good Jew and a great human being. I admired his courage and perseverance in facing all calamities and even death bravely and in dignity.

I would like to end my presentation with a Hasidic story that summarizes Frankl's human quality:

Two famous Hasidic Rabbis, Rabbi Zusya and his brother Rabbi Elimelech were once discussing the subject of humility. Elimelech said: "If a man contemplates the greatness of the Creator, he will arrive at true humility". But Zusya said: "No! A man must begin by being truly humble. Only then will he recognize the greatness of his Creator". They asked their teacher who was right? He decided it this way: "These and these are the words of the living God. But the inner grace is his who begins with himself and not with the Creator", (Buber, p. 243).

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