

Hasidic Primary Works in English Translation

By: Yisrael Meyerowitz

Description: This presentation will address the current state of primary Hasidic literature in English translation. The focus will be on expository literature that presents its author's views on the theology and philosophy of Hasidut, rather than on folkloric or hagiographic writings. A few of the important works that serve as a base for the Hasidic worldview will also be dealt with. Due to the difficult homiletic style of most primary Hasidic works, a mere translation will not properly convey the author's intent. Extensive annotation is necessary to explain both the intricate wordplay and Kabbalistic underpinnings of the text. Various translations will be compared as to how effectively they present Hasidic thought to the English speaking public.

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A) The problems inherent in the translation of Hasidic primary works into English (or other languages) can be summarized as follows. (Summary based on statements of Joseph Dan, Aryeh Kaplan, and Norman Lamm, in addition to my own observations.):

1) The literary character of many Hasidic works is that of *darshanut* (homiletics). A verse or verses, often mixed with quotations from rabbinical literature is interpreted in a non-literal fashion. The verse or quotation is removed from its natural context and made to apply to the subject that the Hasidic author wishes to address. Heavy use is made of purposely non-grammatical readings of the prooftexts together with the reinterpretation of words to refer to subjects that are homonyms of the words present in the prooftext. At times prooftexts whose intention is clearly non-literal are read in a hyper-literal fashion. Even the Hebrew letters of the words in the quoted verse are utilized for the support of the author's ideas. Various systems of *gematria* (the numerical equivalent of letters) and *notrikon* (letter manipulation through the substitution of one letter for another and through the usage of acronyms) are employed. All of these methods are readily meaningful only in the original language of the prooftext. If the text has been translated and/or the reader is unaware of the methods of *darshanut*, extensive explanation is necessary to convey the author's intent.

2) *Darshanut* is by its very nature an oral form of teaching. In order to keep its listeners entertained it makes use of suspense and misdirection. Digressions that the speaker felt would be edifying will appear in the middle of a homily. Repetition and rhetorical flourishes are all part of the speaker's art. All these factors cause a *derashah* to be prolix in form. At the time that style was appreciated, nowadays, the taste is generally for a more concise form. Also, it is quite possible that if the speaker, himself,

were to transform his ideas into book form he would streamline the presentation considerably. However, many Hasidic works were not written by their actual "author" but rather compiled by a student (or students) based on the original talks. These students often left the presentation in its original form. Of course, the problem of an oral teaching being transmitted in written form already exists in the original texts. It does make it difficult though, for the translator to produce a work that will be appreciated by modern sensibilities.

3) As mentioned above, the original Hasidic talks were usually recorded by students. Since the talks were often given on *Shabat*, the recording had to be done from memory after *Shabat* was over. Also, with the exception of the prooftexts and certain technical language, the Hasidic *derashah* was given in Yiddish. Those who recorded and compiled the talks would then make the translation to Hebrew. Since Hebrew was not their spoken language the grammar is sometimes faulty and the vocabulary somewhat limited. These factors may be to blame in situations where the resulting literary quality can be faulted. A dilemma now exists for the translator. He must decide how closely to conform to the style of the original.

4) Hasidic works are filled with many concepts drawn from the *Kabalah*. These concepts often do not have any direct equivalent in English. Also, the meaning of certain words as used in *Kabalah*, is specific to *Kabalah*, and can not be directly extrapolated from their meaning in other contexts. It is necessary to consult the basic works of *Kabalah* and to study their usage in various exemplars of Hasidic thought in order to truly explain the meaning of these words to the reader. A mere translation will not convey the true intent of the authors.

B) The following issues must be decided on by the translator before commencing translation:

1) How closely to adhere to the style of the original? Will the prolix form and awkward syntax be retained thereby properly conveying the style of the original? Or will the translator opt for a "rewriting" that will present the author's ideas faithfully but in a style more acceptable to modern tastes?

2) Should the homiletic flourishes within which a Hasidic author's ideas are inevitably packaged be reproduced in the translation? Including them will convey more of the spirit of Hasidic thought but will necessitate extensive footnotes explaining this foreign methodology to the English speaker. Perhaps, the translator should only reproduce the conceptual portion of the text and leave out any wordplay that is not directly translatable?

3) How much information and explanation will be necessary to properly explain the Hasidic and Kabbalistic terminology found in the original text? In what form should these concepts be explained: an introduction to the book/chapter, as footnotes, or a combination of the two?

4) Should the translation include the original Hebrew text? If included, should the Hebrew text be printed on opposite pages to the English, interspersed with the English, or in some other arrangement?

C) Due to the inherent difficulties involved with the proper translation of Hasidic works, it is not surprising that there is a long way to go before most of them are available in English. In fact, in regards to the dearth of translations, Joseph Dan writes: “[t]here is no way of changing this situation dramatically, because these original sources are really impossible to translate” (Joseph Dan, *The Teachings of Hasidism*, 1983, p.ix). Nevertheless, we will see that for sufficiently motivated and financially supported individuals, it is not impossible to produce excellent translations of Hasidic texts.

- 1) The most numerous and well done translations are to be found in the works of Breslov and HaBaD-Lubavitch. This can be attributed to the fact that the study of their leaders’ works is considered of the utmost importance in the daily life of Hasidim of these movements. The primary texts hold a greater importance amongst these Hasidim than among other, more mimetically based, movements. Another important factor is that these two movements are uniquely receptive to *ba’ale teshuvah*, who desire access to the movements canonical texts translated into their native language.
- 2) Other important primary works have yet to be translated and annotated. Often, the writers of these works have left no present-day dynasty to invest the time, money, and effort into translating their works. Such seminal early Hasidic works as *Toledot Ya’akov Yosef*, *Magid Devarav le-Ya’akov*, *Degel Mahaneh Efrayim*, *No’am Elimelekh*, *Kedushat Levi*, and *Me’or va-Shemesh*, to name just a few, can be read in full, only in the original Hebrew. Scholars or knowledgeable laymen are needed to make the riches found in these works accessible to the English speaking public.

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The following are examples of two ways to translate a Hasidic text. One is a literal, non-annotated, translation. The other is a less literal, heavily annotated, translation of the same homily.

Non-annotated translation of a representative Hasidic homily – *not recommended*:

"May the Glory of G-d be forever" (Psalms 104:31). Because: the brilliance of the Holy One, blessed be He, all the worlds are unable to bear it - but He, may He be blessed, makes many constrictions in order that they should be able to bear it. And there is a question: theoretically it is more of an honor that the worlds are unable to bear it? But "G-d takes joy in His works" (ibid.), that He wants to rejoice in His works. Like the parable: a father has a young son, and the young son wants to take a staff to ride on it as on a horse; even though the way of a horse is to carry the person and he carries it, nevertheless he has pleasure from this. And his father helps him, and gives him a staff, to fulfill the desire of the son. So too, the righteous want to run the world. And the Holy One, blessed be He, created the worlds in order that they should take pleasure in running them. And the Glory of His Essence we do not grasp, therefore He constricted himself in the worlds, that He should take amusement in the pleasure of the righteous that they have pleasure from the worlds. And this is: "The will of those who fear Him, He does" (ibid. 145:19) - that in the Infinite there is not Will; rather the will of those who fear Him (i.e. the righteous) acts. This accords with the approach: "[He] consulted with the souls of the righteous" (Bereshit Rabah 8:7, Rut Rabah 2:3).

(R' Dov Ber, the Mezritcher Magid, *Magid Devarav le-Ya'akov: Likute Amarim* (edited and annotated by Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer), chpt.7)

Annotated translation of a representative Hasidic homily – *recommended*:

“*May the Glory of G-d be forever*” (Psalms 104:31)

None of the worlds¹ should be able to bear the brilliance² of the Holy One, blessed be He.

However, He, may He be blessed, makes many constrictions³ of His brilliance - in

¹ **None of the worlds...**: "Worlds" is a reference to the concept that there are many spiritual planes of existence in addition to our physical one. None of these worlds can "bear" i.e. coexist with a revelation of G-d's Essence. They would be nullified in the overwhelming "light" of the revelation.

² **...bear the brilliance...**: The concept "brilliance" is here used to refer to G-d's Infiniteness and Essence (Schatz-Uffenheimer).

³ **... makes many constrictions ...**: The term *tsimtsum*, "constriction", is Kabbalistic in origin. In the thought of R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi (one of R' Dov Ber's disciples) it

order that they should be able to bear it. [In accordance with this concept, the above-mentioned verse, “*May the Glory of G-d be forever*”, will be homiletically read as: “*May the Glory of G-d be for the world*”⁴. This means that G-d constricts the revelation of His Glory⁵ in order that the world should be able to exist.]

It can be asked: It would seem to be more in accordance with G-d's honor that the worlds should remain unable to bear His brilliance?

This question is addressed by the continuation of the verse which says: “*G-d takes joy in His works*”. G-d wants to rejoice in His works. Therefore He constricts His brilliance - allowing for the creation of the worlds that He will then rejoice in⁶.

The following parable is applicable: A father has a young son. This young son desires to be given a staff. He intends to ride on it while pretending that it is a horse. Now a real horse transports its rider. In this case though, the "rider" (the child) is actually transporting the "horse" (the staff). The sole purpose of this charade is to give pleasure to the child. A father will assist his son in this by giving him a staff. The father does this in order to fulfill the desire of the son.

The application of the parable is as follows: The righteous want to run the world⁷. The Holy One, blessed be He, created the worlds in order that they should have the pleasure of running them⁸.

Now, the Glory of His Essence we can not grasp - only His Glory within the worlds⁹, can we grasp. He, therefore, constricted Himself within the worlds. This enables

refers to G-d's seeming to constrict the revelation of His Glory thereby allowing "room" for creation's existence.

⁴ ... **for the world** : The Hebrew word *le-olam* which in this verse means "forever" can also mean "for the world". It is this meaning of *le-olam* that R' Dov Ber is making use of here.

⁵ ... **His Glory** ... : The term *kavod* "Glory" in the verse is being understood as a reference to a revelation of G-d's "brilliance" i.e. "Infiniteness and Essence" (see above note 2).

⁶ ... **rejoice in** : R' Dov Ber seems to be assuming that the ability of the world to exist is in fact, so to speak, a diminishment of G-d's honor. G-d tolerates this diminishment of honor for the sake of the joy He takes in His works. The homily will now go on to explain what the nature of this joy is.

⁷ ... **run the world** : The concept of "running the world" refers to actions involving, and influences devolving from, the spiritual world; not the expression of political power (Schatz-Uffenheimer).

⁸ ... **running them** : The connection between the parable and its application may be as follows: A real horse bestows the benefit of transportation on its rider. That is its purpose. The child's "stick horse" not only does not give transportation to its rider - it relies on the rider to transport it. The "stick horse", therefore, has no real purpose. Nevertheless, the father has joy from the pleasure his son takes in the "stick horse". The father will give his son a stick. So too, G-d created this world (which has no inherent purpose) in order to give the righteous the pleasure of "running" it. G-d has joy, so to speak, from the fact that the righteous are getting this pleasure.

⁹ ... **His Glory within the worlds...** : The phrase "His Glory within the world", refers to the concept of *Shekhinah*, the revelation of G-d in the world.

Him to take amusement in the pleasure that the righteous have from the worlds¹⁰.

Keeping the above in mind, we can examine the meaning of the following verse: “*He does the will of those who fear Him*” (Psalms 145:19)

The concept of Will¹¹ does not apply to the Infinite¹². Therefore, one must say that the Will that acts upon the world is, in fact, the will of “those who fear Him” (i.e. the righteous). [The above-mentioned verse (Psalms 145:19) is being read homiletically to mean: “*He acts by way of the Will of those who fear Him*”.]

This approach accords well with the statement of the Sages that [prior to creating the world] G-d “*consulted with the souls of the righteous*” (Bereshit Rabah 8:7, Rut Rabah 2:3). [The consulting was, in fact, their supplying the necessary Will for Creation to occur. The nature and source of the righteous’ Will, as mentioned earlier in the text, was their desire to “run the world”.]

(R' Dov Ber, the Magid of Mezritch, *Magid Devarav Le-Ya'akov: Likute Amarim* (edited and annotated by Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer), chpt.7)

¹⁰ **... from the worlds** : This explains the pleasure that the righteous take in “running” the spiritual world. The interaction with G-d that occurs through the theurgy of the righteous would be impossible without the constriction of G-d's revelation that takes place in the world. Unconstricted revelation would overwhelm the righteous. At the same time, it is G-d's immanence (and revelation) in the world that the righteous are really taking pleasure in when they interact with the world.

¹¹ **... concept of Will ...** : *Ratson*, in Hebrew.

¹² **...the Infinite** : *En Sof*, in Hebrew. This term refers to our perspective of G-d prior, not only to any seeming constriction of His revelation, but also prior to any revelation (or creation), in the first place. At least according to some Kabbalists, when we use the term *En Sof* we are speaking of G-d Himself and not His Actions. On this line of the *Magid Devarav le-Ya'akov*'s text, R' Aryeh Kaplan references the *Shomer Emunim* (ha-kadmon), vikuakh 2, no.20[- no.33]. There we find the following discussion: How can the Kabbalists, as we find they do, speak of G-d's Will or *Ratson*? The ascription of *Ratson* to G-d Himself, would seem to imply a multiplicity in G-d, namely He and His Will – that would be an anathema to Jewish thought, says the *Shomer Emunim*. The *Shomer Emunim* answers the problem as follows: There are “bad” qualities of *ratson*; namely, *ratson* is something additional to an entity (i.e. there is the entity and there is the entity's will) and *ratson* is subject to change. This is why *ratson* can not apply to G-d. However, there are also certain good qualities associated with *ratson*. When the Kabbalists talk of G-d's *Ratson* they are merely trying to convey the following “good” qualities: G-d's actions are not unintentional or compelled. In our homily, R' Dov Ber seems to be bothered by the *Shomer Emunim*'s question. He answers the question by saying that the *ratson* for creation is *not* to be found in *En Sof*. The *ratson* is actually supplied, says R' Dov Ber, by the *tsadikim* (righteous).

References

The following, are references to works consulted in the course of preparation of the presentation, and of the sample translations:

Dan, Joseph. *The Teachings of Hasidism*. New York : Behrman House, 1983.

Dov Baer of Mezhirech (d. 1772). *Magid Devarav le-Ya'akov* (edited and annotated by Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer). Yerushalayim : Hotsa'at Sefarim a.sh. Y.L. Magnes – ha-Universitah ha-Ivrit, 736 (1975 or 1976).

Ergas, Joseph ben Emanuel (1685-1730). *Sefer Shomer Emunim [ha-Kadmon]*. Yerushala[y]im : Hotsa'at be-Ferush uba-Remez, 725 (1964 or 1965).

Kaplan, Aryeh. *The Chasidic Masters and Their Teachings*. New York : Moznaim, 1989.

-- *The Light Beyond: Adventures in Hassidic Thought*. New York : Maznaim, 1981.

Lamm, Norman. *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary*. New York : Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, c1999. -- (Sources and studies in Kabbalah, Hasidism, and Jewish thought, v.4)

Suggested Hasidic Primary Works in English Translation

Highly Recommended

The Religious Thought of Hasidism : Text and Commentary / [translated and edited by] Norman Lamm ; with contributions by Allan Brill and Shalom Carmy. -- New York : Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, c1999. -- (Sources and studies in Kabbalah, Hasidism, and Jewish thought, v.4)

If you are only going to buy one book on *Hasidut*, make it this one! This work gives excerpts from fundamental early Hasidic works. The excerpts are arranged according to various important theological topics. This allows the reader to get a sense of the breadth and depth of Hasidic thought on such topics as “G-d and Providence”, “Faith”, “*Devekut*”, “Torah Study”, “The Zaddik”, “Evil and Suffering”, and “Women”, amongst others. An extensive scholarly commentary, that both explains the texts and comments on their broader implications, is provided. There are a number of similar and useful works, but this is the most comprehensive. The main regret is that Dr. Lamm didn't reproduce the original Hebrew texts that he translated from. Of course, if he had, this already weighty book would have become too large to fit in one volume.

Likute Moharan = Likutey Moharan / by R' Nahman of Bratslav, 1772-1811 ; translated by Moshe Mykoff and Simcha Bergman. – 2nd rev. ed. – Jerusalem/New York ; Breslov Research Institute, c1995 - .

This is a monumental, many volume project which is not yet complete. A tremendous amount of effort has gone into the detailed explication of one of the most difficult Hasidic works. The original Hebrew is provided together with an English translation on facing pages. Extensive footnotes (in English) explain the text and summarize the traditional Breslover commentaries that have been composed on *Likute Moharan*. Much effort is expended in making clear the intricate word-play and system of *behinot* (aspects) used by Rabbi Nahman. Volumes 1-6 (Lessons 1-57) and Volumes 10-11 (Lessons 109-286) are presently available.

Lessons in Tanya = Shiurim be-Sefer ha-Tanya : the Tanya of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi / ... elucidated by Yosef Wineberg ; translated by Levy Wineberg ; edited by Uri Kaploun. -- Brooklyn, N.Y. : Kehot, 1987-c1993.

This work (itself a translation of R' Yosef Wineberg's *Shiurim be-Sefer*

ha-Tanya), is more than just lectures on R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi's seminal work, *Likute Amarim* or *Tanya*. It is a translation and explanation of said work. A line of Hebrew text is followed by its translation. Then a restatement of the ideas contained in the line is often given, together with any outside information necessary to properly understand the text. The commentary assists in the navigation of R' Shneur Zalman's complicated thought by alerting the reader at critical junctions to what R' Shneur Zalman is about to discuss. Available in 5 volumes, covering the entire *Tanya*.

Recommended

Upright practices ; The light of the eyes / R' Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (ca. 1730-ca. 1797); translation and introduction by Arthur Green ; preface by Samuel H. Dresner. - New York : Paulist Press, c1982. -- (The Classics of Western Spirituality)

R' Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl's *Me'or Enayim* (including his *Hanhagot Yesharot*) is translated by one of the country's foremost scholars of Hasidism, Professor Arthur Green. The translator's informative and scholarly introductions (both to the book as a whole, and to the individual homilies) assist greatly in the comprehension of this famous work. It must be stressed, however, that the entire *Me'or Enayim* will not be found here. The translation only covers the author's list of "Upright Practices" and his treatment of the Book of Genesis. R' Menahem Nahum's talks on the other four books of the Pentateuch, and on Talmudic *Agadata*, are not dealt with. Hebrew words that are necessary for understanding the text are given in transliteration.

The Torah discourses of the Holy Tzaddik Reb Menachem Mendel of Rimanov, 1745-1815 / Rymanower, R' Menachem Mendel (d. 1815) ; translated by Dov Levine. -- Hoboken, N.J. : KTAV Pub. House, c1996.

This work contains translations of excerpts from the teachings of R' Menachem Mendel. Both the Pentateuch and the cycle of Holidays are covered. Special attention is paid to R' Menachem Mendel's homilies on Exodus 16 (known as *Parashat ha-Man* [section dealing with the Manna]). An extensive hagiographic account of R' Menachem Mendel's life and teachings acts as an introduction to the translation. Only quotes from the Tanakh or rabbinical writings are also given in Hebrew. For some reason, the references at the bottom of the page are *only* given in Hebrew.

Living waters : the Mei HaShiloach : a commentary on the Torah / by Leiner, Mordecai Joseph, of Isbitza (1802-1854) ; translated and edited by Betsalel Philip Edwards. -- Northvale, N.J. : Jason Aronson, c2001.

I was unable to find any reference in the translator's introduction to how much of the original was translated. The translation contains homilies on the Pentateuch and some books of the Prophets and Writings. An introduction provides an overview of R' Mordecai Joseph's thought without, perhaps, making fully clear the controversial approaches to antinomianism, existentialism, and predestination to be found in it. Endnotes (unfortunately found at the end of each section and not after each homily), assist in the understanding of the difficult allusions. No accompanying Hebrew text is provided.

Shem mishmuel = [Likutim mi-Sefer Shem mi-Shemu'el] : selections on the weekly parashah and festivals / R' Shemu'el ben Avraham (1856-1926) ; rendered into English by Zvi Belovski. -- Southfield, MI : Targum Press, Mishnas Rishonim, 1998.

This text renders selected portions of the writings of R' Shmuel Bornstein (the Sochazev Rebbe), into English. The homilies cover both the weekly Torah portions and the Holiday cycle. R' Bornstein's talks are easier to translate than other Hasidic works, because they use the thematic motifs of the Midrashim as springboards for the homily, rather than the intricate wordplay common with other writers. The translation is lucid and acts as a good introduction to the thought of this seminal thinker. No accompanying Hebrew text is provided.