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The *Tzadik*: Mystical Behaviour and Community Responsibility

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Abstract

The article analyzes the mystical behaviour of *tzadikim* in the context of Hasidic movement. There are presented their inexplicable gestures, attitudes and sayings which possess a hidden meaning and are often interpreted by community as divine expressions and signs of religious ecstasis. This kind of conduct is a constant of the great Hasidic *tzadikim* and its evaluation offers a deeper understanding of the ethos of this renewal spiritual movement. The religious phenomenon of mystic insanity even if it is present in different shapes in Christianity, Gnosticism and Islam, has its particular features in Hasidic Judaism.

Keywords

Tzadik, History of Religions, Hasidism, mystic behaviour, eccentricities

In the history of Jewish mysticism there is an inedited chapter from the religious phenomenology point of view. Precisely, it is about a particular behaviour that through its mysterious appearance and pointless nature go over the codified social, religious and moral frameworks of traditional

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Judaism However, these behavioural manifestations beyond their outrageous nature prove to be more than mere eccentricities.

We present here a series of elements from the lives of some spiritual men, namely the Hasidic *tzadikim*, the deep meaning of their deeds and words of wisdom and their relations with community. We don't intend to stress the range of their inner experiences but especially their manifestation in the historical and mystical context of the Hasidic religious revival movement. In fact, what is striking about these mystics there are especially their contradictory exterior doings which are an encrypted display of their clear-sightedness and spiritual experiences, or sometime a symbolical reflections of certain social situations.

The *devekut*, the spiritual goal which the Hasidic ethos aim for, was conceived as a veritable manifestation of Divinity power particularly by means of *tzadikim*. The mystic becomes a channel through whom the divine blessings come down over community so that all his quotidian gestures and words may express the divine signs.

I. The Ethos of Hasidic Movement

The Hasidic movement was founded in times of historical torment: in 1648, Chmielnicki's Kazaks massacred hundreds of Jews in Ukraine and Poland, the Jew communities in these areas bore the burden of exaggerated income taxes, the authorities were covering different anti-Jewish persecutions and, above all these – if we may say, in the interior – the numerous moments of disappointment or disillusion caused by the messianic movements as those of Sabbathai Tzvi or Jacob Frank. These events generated a serious misunderstandings between the rabbi leadership, which didn't put up any attitude concerning these situations, but continued to keep tight and even restrict their attention on problems of doctrine and on the case study of Talmud, and on most of the believers, whose spiritual needs came to be more and more evident.

The latter's attention focused on the groups of mystics, survivors of the messianic movements that had vanished, but who had and used their older Jewish mystical traditions¹. These groups, usually isolated, were

¹ The hypothesis according to which the Jewish mysticism produces spiritual solutions to different historical crisis is considered by Gershom Scholem to be only valid for

characterized by a distinctive way of life, usually reclusive, and a special kind of behaviour during prayer; the trend was heterogeneous, and even between mystics there were differences in opinion: some focused on fast and mortification, others on ecstasy “in serving God with joy”².

Gradually, the Israel Baal-Shem-Tov (Besht)³ group came up front, as its main characteristics were the ecstatic behaviour and a tendency towards anti-ascetism, although by the time the founder of the movement died, it had more admirers than followers. It was not until the second generation, when the leadership was given to Dov Ber of Mesritsch, that the Hasidic movement became a popular movement. A movement in which the optimism, in spite of all the hardships through which the common and illiterate believers had went, became a way of life, of prayer, of direct communication with God.

Even though the messianic hope in collective redemption proved itself useless, the ideal of personal salvation was not lost. On the contrary, the communication with God is stated in the Baal Shem Tov doctrine through ecstatic prayer, which becomes active especially through its exterior manifestations; during the prayer there were used even artificial stimuli such as violent gestures, singing and dancing, and this mystical fervour meant a great deal for the masses which had gone through so many hardships. Consequently, the Hasidic movement started to proclaim a

Hasidism. It is still controversial, as Moshe Idel says: “Hasidism can be understood not so much as a reaction or solution to, but rather as a synthesis of diverse mythical elements and paradigms present in earlier types of Jewish mysticism” cf. Moshe Idel, *Hasidism between Ecstasy and Magic*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1995, p. 18.

² ****Enciclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7, col. 1391.

³ Rabi Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760) named “The Master of Good Name” (frequently called *BeshT*) was born in Okopi in Ukraine, at the border with Moldavia. He started to study Kabala very early, as he was also working to make a living. After marriage he came to Moldavia, where he earned his existence as worker in a clay mine, but gives it up, dedicating himself to meditation. As he had a great deal of knowledge of the herbs, he earned his reputation as a thaumaturge and got the title of “master of the name” (*ba'al shem*), using for that purpose different amulets and magical formulae. He started his mission at the age of 36, as the result of a “revelation”. There are different opinions concerning his friendly relations to the monks and hermits who lived in the Moldavian monasteries and who he used to meet during his walks in the mountains. He might have been influenced by them to a certain degree (although this remains as a hypothesis), especially because during that time in Moldavia the monastic life was going through a time of spiritual revival.

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positive overview on the world⁴ which, although sentimental, insured an equilibrium between morality and the love of life and it left an important mark on the Jewish communities in South-Eastern Poland, Lithuania and, later on, in Galitia, Bielorussia and Central Poland. They were seduced by that fascinating and mysterious way of life⁵. But above all the conditions that encouraged the spreading of such movements, its success was due to the fascinating character represented by the *tzadikim*, as well as that of the mystical saints, without which the Hasidic movement could not even be imagined. If *Besht* might be called the founder of the Hasidism, than the title of organizing and missionary genius is to be attached to Dov Ber, known as the “Great Maggid”. Unrivalled speaker, he is the one who introduced and developed the notion of *tzadik*, of the impeccable believer, whose duty was to help the Hasidim, to lead them, to improve them and even to help them, but not to replace them in their approach of God.

II. The Aura of Tzadik

Although it is usually translated as “the righteous one”, the literal meaning of the word is “the one that has been checked up” or “the hard tried”, and usually designates the leader of a Hasidic community or, if we are to be precise, a Hasidic leader or a rebbe⁶ of the first six generations of the

⁴ Isidore Epstein, *Judaism*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1959, p. 272.

⁵ The spreading of the Hasidic movement in the Romanian area, especially in Moldavia and Bucovina, was made in the 18th century, although there are some vague information on the existence of some Hasidic communities here even at the beginning of the spreading of the movement, especially that *Besht* has been living for some time in the Moldavian Carpathians; only at the half of the 19th century there is a mention of the Bucovina local dynasty of *tzadikim*, especially Sadagura, her founder being the famous rabbi Israel of Rizhin, who fled from Russia to Iassi, and left afterwards for Sadagura, next to Cernaviti (cf. Simon Dubnov, *Istoria hasidismului*, Hasefer, București, 1998, p. 372).

⁶ Martin Buber, *Povestiri hasidice*, trans. by Amelia Pavel, Editura Univers, București, 1998, p. 13; “In the rabbinic literature, the term *tzedakah* means “charity”, “alms”, “good-will”, but does not refer to righteousness in general, because there is no such special term. Still, the name *tzadik* “right man” (pl. *tzadikim*) is to be found in the rabbinic literature and it describes a good man, without sin, a man that fulfil his obligations towards God and people. A legend says that there are less than 36 *tzadikim* in the world that can see *Shekina* every day. But in general the term did not represent at the beginning an unusually pious man, but the simple fulfilment of the divine wish [...].

Hasidic movement. The *tzadikim* were the most important representatives of the Hasidic movement and, in the same time, the most dramatically and contradictory ones. Generation after generation, all changes in the core of this fascinating movement were reflected in their lives, who intermingled with legend and were to be idealized later on by their spiritual descendents.

From the very beginning, the *tzadik* had a fascinating aura due to his spiritual power, his social role and his deeds, which had magical and deep mystical meanings in the eyes of the contemporaries. If the Hasidic movement was a way of living and praising God in a state of permanent joy and enthusiasm, the *tzadik* had the role of filtering the grieves and sorrows which came upon the community, and this task had its bouncing effects: “From each man’s sorrow, a trace is engraved in my heart” said rabbi Mendel of Rymanow. This secret work of his was never to be revealed, as it was shouldered in silence. This is why the weird behaviour of the *tzadikim* was seen from the point of view of the act of assuming everybody’s evil by strange means there were not understandable for outsiders. There is not a form of rejection of the material reality and of the world in a gnostic or maniheic manner⁷ in their attitudes and the dualistic view is not present in their acts, ideas or sayings⁸.

As follows, the *tzadik* is exclusively a go-between, and this position insures a tight relation with the community⁹, without which he could not be conceived. In turn, the community relies on the *tzadik*¹⁰. Even more, in

Among the Kabalists, the term *tzadik* is related to the meaning of “saint”. The *tzadik* is not an ordinary man, he is a saint that has reached a very high spiritual level [...]. In Hasidism, he is the maker of miracles, a holy man, the teacher of Hasidim, “the one that has no bad influence as he had killed it during fasting”. cf. *** *Enciclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 14, by Keter Publishing House Ltd., Jerusalem, Israel, 1974, coll. 181-183.

⁷ Manolache Stelian, *Dualismul gnostic și maniheic din perspectivă teologică*, Editura Universității Transilvania din Brașov, 2009, Brașov, pp. 194-195.

⁸ For example: “the Gnostic thinks that his existence is different from the others. He experiences life, time and the world as a prison of the soul. Gnostics compare this isolation of the soul to a terrifying nightmare, [...]. The image of the world is that of an infernal prison with the material body as an enemy [...]” in Manolache Stelian, *The Fight of the Gnostic Man from a Hermeneutical Perspective in the Gnostic Textes of the Nag Hammadi Library*, în “European Journal of Science and Theology”, Vol. 8, Suppl. 2, 2012, pp. 271. This behaviour is not met in the *tzadikim* ethos!

⁹ “If the *tzadik* serves God, but he doesn’t take the trouble to teach the multitude, he will descend from his rung”, rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav said later (cf. M. Buber, *Povestiri hasidice*, p. 18).

¹⁰ Julien Bauer, *Les Juifs hassidique*, Coll. *Que sais je?*, Imprimerie de Presses Univer-

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order that the mediation be real, it requires not only symbolic involvement, but also a visible one, as: “If a man falls into the mire and his friend wants to fetch him out, he must not hesitate to get himself a little dirty” This phrase, belonging to *Besht* and passed on by Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, the first writer of Hasidism, was interpreted most of the times in a literal manner: the *tzadik* has to lower himself to the level of his sinners in order to redeem them. His actions might be sometimes straightforward bizarre, his behaviour – outrageous, but he has plenty of inner motives to do what he has to do; if his doings were to be seen in the light of their hidden agenda, those who look and judge from outside might be enlightened¹¹. Sometimes even the *tzadik* sheds light on his actions. On other occasions, the Hasidim themselves figure it out after a while, and most of the times his act remain without any explanation, but beyond any doubt. All these generated a special *tzadik* cult, which is kept until today in mitigated forms¹².

The *tzadik* was not exclusively a mystic whose behaviour camouflaged some forms of recluse life, but he was an ecstatic as well¹³. This is why, from a certain level, many of his acts could be attributed to ecstasy and this thing explains their value for the conscience of the communities in which they lived. In the Hasidic view the *tzadik* is endowed with remarkable supernatural gifts. He is capable of reading the thoughts of others, and can at a glance observe happenings all over the world and foretell the future. Because of his intermediary position between worlds he has the power to channel blessings from on high to his community and followers. His magical and theurgic power could alleviate pain and cure illness, and some Hasidim purportedly engaged non-Jews to travel to the *tzadik* on the Sabbath so that they could beseech him to pray on behalf of the ill¹⁴.

sitaires de France, Paris, pp. 35-37.

¹¹ “The right ones do not act only after the word and the principle of God, but they fulfil the will of God, which is not to be understood” (in Talmud) cf. S. Dubnov, *Istoria hasidismului*, p. 177.

¹² J. Bauer, *Les Juifs hassidique*, p. 33.

¹³ “... on the social level the Hasidic master was portrayed as the leader of the community not only because of his spiritual attainment but also because of his ability to return from his mystical journey and provide sustenance for his flock” cf. M. Idel, *Hasidism between Ecstasy and Magic*, p. 221.

¹⁴ Elijah Judah Schochet, *Hasidism and the Rebbe/Tzaddik: The Power and Peril of Charismatic Leadership*, in “Hakirah”, vol 7, 2009, p. 59.

III. A Hermeneutic of *Tzadikim* Acts

Besht's contemporaries had long before adopted a contradictory way of life, which seemed strange for the community they belonged to. In this respect, there is the example of rabbi Mechel of Jampol, who justified his concealed inner life and the fact that he was taken for a fool as an expression of the grief for the *Shekhina*¹⁵ exile or, later on, the other example of rabbi Menahem Mendel of Witebsk who shocked the Hasidim described by Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye because of his uninhibited appearance, but whose meekness was to be revealed later by rabbi Jacob to his followers¹⁶. There are some situations in which the anonymity of the sacred persons appears to be almost an authority that has to be consulted at all times, even though it hides beneath a mask of carelessness or stand-offishness under which one could barely notice the inner wisdom. The case of rabbi Gabriel's story, the student of rabbi Elimelech of Lisensk, is a strange good example for this. The student pays a visit to his former teacher. For this, he borrows a hackney coach from an old lazy coachman who nags and troubles him all the way "making all kinds of vulgar and impolite jokes". To his surprise, when he gets to the *tzadik's* place, rabbi Elimelech shows he is more pleased by the nasty coachman's visit in front of whom he acts like a student, asking for advice. In the meantime, he treats his most important guest with indifference. On his way back, the real student tries to find out from the coachman the motive of his teacher's strange behaviour, but the coachman was very quiet and disdainful towards him. After a while he sees his companion in an inn as he was talking to a certain mason and tries to overhear the conversation. He manages to get just bits of their conversation: "You can find at Melech's (rabbi Elimelech) place a piece of truth and nowhere else!" says one of them, as the other confirms: "At Melech's place there is till a piece of truth!", but the intruder's presence is discovered and both start to get nervous and put on foul language: "Go away", they shouted, "what are you looking for amidst common people?" Rabbi Gabriel's feeling about this episode was to be uncovered after some years, after rabbi Elimelech's death, by rabbi Uri, his friend. The two rabbis comment overcome with sadness: "There was a fragment of truth

¹⁵ M. Buber, *Povestiri hasidice*, p. 99.

¹⁶ M. Buber, *Povestiri hasidice*, p. 113.

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in the world and even that one was taken away from us”, and they refer to the human lack of capacity to understand the message transmitted by holy persons hidden among “common people”¹⁷.

The secret character of holiness was to be seen in speech acts like rabbi Avraham *Yehoshua Heshel*'s of Apta, who liked very much to imagine and to tell all kinds of exaggerated stories which could trigger the perplexity of the audience, sometimes even irony and laughter, although his Hasidim apprentices understood the deep meaning of his apparently pointless words. “The dough for the noodle tart from my son’s wedding has been lain on all fences and roofs”, he used to say in a serious manner during a conversation to his apprentices who were ready to laugh at the smallest sign of good spirit shown by the *tzadik*. His smile did not appear, and only rabbi Baruch’s words remained, after rabbi Heshel left: “I have never seen such a golden mouth!” The same tendency towards pointless conversations was also shared, from the point of view of rabbi Shmelke’s followers, by rabbi Isaac Levi of Nikolsburg who, during a visit paid to their rabbi, irritated them by his interest in down-to-earth conversations on subjects totally void of importance: he was interested in meals, the cook’s abilities, and at the synagogue he spoke nonsense with “a man good for nothing” from the community. He was so passionate about the subject that he didn’t give up talking even after he was warned that he is interfering with the prayer. Rabbi Shmelke treated with great respect the talkative newcomer to the indignation of the apprentices who asked for explanations. The answer of the *tzadik* made them understand the high level of spirituality that rabbi Isaac had reached, as well as the reason for this shallow behaviour¹⁸.

¹⁷ M. Buber, *Povestiri hasidice*, p. 142.

¹⁸ Rabbi Shmelke answered: “There is written in Gemara that “Rav (Abba Areka, talmudist of the 2nd century) was never able, all through his life, to have a worldly conversation”. Such an commendation seems strange: is it that other masters have lost their time with worldly small talks, and there is nothing good to say about Rav? The key is this: whenever they would have had something to talk with people regarding their daily problems, each of his words had a signification and a hidden intention, acting in the layer of superior worlds, and his spirit was able to resist to such an effort for an entire day. This is why our wisemen brought words of praise to him more than to others: as others were not able to resist more than three hours, when they would be tired and consumed with inner tension, he was able to resist for a whole day. The same with rabbi Isaac: whatever I cannot do but for three hours daily, he is able to do all day long: to concentrate his spirit for such a long time that he was able to act in the celestial world by means of seemingly useless conversations” in M. Buber, *Povestiri*

Most of the time, the reason of *tzadikim's* behaviour was hard to grasp. Their apparent illogical doings were due to their clear-sightedness, or could have been interpreted as bearing magical undertones. Rabbi Elimelech's case speaks for itself, as he turned, during a Sabbath feast, his soup plate upside down, spilling its contents on the table. His closest apprentice, the future rabbi of Rymanow, spays really worried: "Rabbi, what are you doing? They're going to get us all arrested!" This sparkled the Hasidim's laughter, who tried not to make fun of such an unjustified attitude as that of the apprentice. The rabbi calms down the worried young man, but doesn't give any further explanation on the incident. After a while, all those present were to find out the reason for this act: the same day, the emperor of Austro-Hungary, after a few hesitations, signed a decree against the Jews across the Empire. By mistake, he had spilt the inkwell on the paper that he had just signed. Then, he tore the document in fury and refused to promulgate it. Strange enough, this incident took place in the same time with the weird gesture made by rabbi Elimelech¹⁹.

All these situations, doings and words, compelled recognition and were forged into the conscience of the Hasidic communities as strange things, but their deep meaning was not to be discussed. This made the *tzadik's* fame bigger and surrounded him with an aura of mystery.

The figure of rabbi Israel of Rizhin comes foreword, for example, because of his life led in total collision with the usual cannons of an usual *tzadik* way of life. It was really unbelievable to see the grand-grandson of the Great Maggid, the descendant of a dynasty called "the golden" Hasidic dynasty, dressed in gold, wearing the legendary pair of shoes which, as the legend tells, made even the tsar become envious! And all these happened at times when Baal Shem Tov himself lived in poor conditions and poverty altogether with his disciples, some of his followers being almost beggars. His ancestors should have made him a living example of modesty and interest in the study of Torah, and under no circumstances of opulence or business. His eccentricities were so well-known that they were easily objectionable.

All in all, every *tzadikim* who paid him visits, as Isaac Meir of Ger, Isaac of Work, Chaim of Sanz or the fierce theoretician of the modern

hasidice, p. 126; "Even when he talks to other people, his thoughts (*tzadikim's*) fly towards hights, to the glory of God, realizing different unifications" in David Cohn-Sherbock, *Mistica iudaică. Antologie*, Hasefer, Bucureşti, 2000, p. 228.

¹⁹ D. Cohn-Sherbock, *Mistica iudaică. Antologie*, p. 140.

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Orthodox branch, Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt (1808-1888), were impressed by his personality and were not the least shocked by his image who could have easily be taken as outrageous, because rabbi Israel of Rizhin, as every guest used to say as he was leaving, was a man above all judgment. When rabbi Avraam of Apta, for example, fixed a certain day of feast and prayer for some Jewish communities which were in danger, rabbi Israel called with open heart some musicians and threw a party, ignoring all of rabbi of Apta's decisions. Which was the attitude of rabbi Avraam and of the others *tzadikim* toward this proof of indifference? It is told that only rabbi Avraam made a short comment, to which everybody agreed: "No one can understand the ways of Rizhiner!"

The apparent reason for this lack of reaction was simple: rabbi Israel's ancestry put him in a position safe of every criticism as well as his privileged position of a leader of the Hasidic movement, as he was the last undisputed leader. But above all these, there was something more to it. From the age of five, when he had been seen by the old rabbi of Apta, a very respected figure, during a very important meeting of the Hasidic dynasties, he stood up and spoke up to the bewilderment of the Hasidim and the *tzadikim* who witnessed the scene: "Make way, make way! Do you know who's coming? The king melech Israel is coming!", and on other occasion, he also said: "Israel did not forget one thing that the angels taught him before he was born"²⁰. Strange as it was, Israel refused from his early years to pay attention to the study of Torah, although he later on proved to be a true expert and nobody figured out where he got his knowledge from. This attitude which is difficult to understand for a rebbe came up again when he was asked to become a leader of the Hasidim: "What?" rabbi Israel said in a loud voice. "Another schoolteacher? No! I want to become rich!"

His way of passing on his knowledge was as encrypted as all his way of life. When rabbi Moshe of Savran came to ask for some advice, rabbi Israel went directly to his stables and showed his beautiful cart, which he praised with pride. After rabbi Moshe went on his way, he said: "All this talk of horses was allegorical. Actually, the Rizhiner was referring to the celestial chariots, symbols of the mystical relationship between the Creator maintains with creations"²¹. The same was the talk with rabbi

²⁰ Elie Wiesel, *Souls on fire: portraits and legends of Hasidic Masters*, Random House, New York, 1972, p. 146; in Hasidism there was the theory of methempsychosis.

²¹ "The *tzadikim* were conceived, from the very beginning of Hasidism - apparently under the influence of a long tradition starting with Rashi, Abraham Azulai, and the

Jacob Ornstein of Lvov, adversary of Hasidism, who was waiting for a meeting with rabbi Israel in order to put him in a delicate position in what theology and doctrine were concerned. The rabbi was very amused by the indifference of the *tzadik* of Rizhin, who showed more interest in what were the buildings in Lvov covered in than in the theological subtleties. As he found out that the roofs are covered in tin, he was not very pleased and, very seriously, he stated that they had better be covered in tiles. “And this was the man the crowds are running after?” was told to be what rabbi Jacob mocked at after his departure; but only after a few days, when rabbi Jacob met rabbi Meir of Peremyshliany, he was told “with fierce eyes” what was the true meaning of rabbi Israel’s words: “In earnest, the roofs should have been covered in tiles, that is the heart of the man who watches over the community: so troubled by the suffering of common people that in every moment is ready to crumble to pieces and yet it resists; but it happens that it is not made of tiles, but of tin”²².

Under his eccentricities and his apparent indifference, the Hasidim knew what was the real face of the *tzadik*: even when he seemed happy and detached, his glowing clothes were filled underneath with hay, he never ate in public, slept only three hours a night, didn’t speak too much, looked for quiet places far from the tumult. His attitude was sometimes arrogant and authoritarian, but it was studied: “Who dares to speak evil of me”, he used to say, “is guilty and cursed in this world and the other!”. But his inner soul was not known by anybody.

There is a famous story of his boots, well-known, as they were made of gold and silver and set in diamonds and other jewels. Legend tells that even the tsar of Russia became envious as he heard about this pair of boots which rabbi Israel did not hesitate to show any time he had the opportunity. Once, during a frosty night, rebbe Israel went out with his boots for the mess of the new world²³. He stayed in the snow for a long time, praying. When he turned home, the Hasidim noticed traces of blood in the place he had stayed in prayer. Looking at the boots as he was away, they were

Shelah, to mention only the most important examples - as the limbs and the chariot of the *Shekhinah* and as a result events related to their life apparently became related to the divine chariot, the *Merkavah*” (cf. M. Idel, *Hasidism between Ecstasy and Magic*, p. 187).

²² M. Buber, *Povestiri hasidice*, p. 178.

²³ This is about the *Rosh Hodesh* ceremony (beginning of the moon month), which is remembered only in some liturgical moments.

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bewildered: the boots had no soles! The ice had cut deep into rabbi's feet and they understood, as the legend goes, that all rabbi Israel's doings were "for the sake of Heaven and not for his own pleasure"²⁴.

The grandson of Baal Shem Tov, rabbi Nacham of Bratzlav, occupies too the leading figure in such stories, as he had developed from his early years a true "technique" in order to camouflage his spiritual aspirations: "he used to keep his life secret to other people; he was said to have made all kinds of tricks in order to hide his fasting, and when he was walking the streets, he played all sorts of merry pranks, jokes and tricks, so that nobody suspected that the boy was craving for God"²⁵. He became famous in the history of Hasidism because of his stories which were very much enjoyed by his apprentices and which are, to our days, a proof of his genius.

There is in his life a crucial event: an epic journey to the Holy Land. At least some strange episodes of the *tzadik's* behaviour don't relate to any kind of reason²⁶. So, when he reached Istanbul he started to behave like he were another man: "he wandered like a good-for-nothing, walked barefooted, without belt or hat, his clothes turned inside out showing their lining and, and indulging in all kinds childish pranks. He went trough the marketplace like those urchins who run and gesticulate and snicker among the merchants; he threw himself into make-believe fights, just like a boy playing war against Frenchmen (during those times Napoleon was fighting his campaign in Egypt n.n.), using real war tactics".

He kept on with this strange behaviour even in front of rebbe Zeev, a venerable *tzadik* of Istanbul, who kept him as a respected guest during his stay. He laughed to his host in the face, saying: "On Shabbat, while rabbi Zeev was praying on the *bimah* as behooves a saintly man, rabbi Nachman was serenely partaking of his meal. Just as he pretended to be asleep when rabbi Zeev, surrounded by his followers, sat down at the table singing". He barely spoke all kinds of imagined things, and he used to shout in anger or arrogance at the people who used to come to Zeev from far away. Consequently, he started to be taken for a vagrant "who didn't come from anywhere and didn't go anywhere", a clown, a crazy man or an impostor, or anything but a rabbi or a *tzadik*.

²⁴ Yisroel Friedman, *The Golden Dynasty. The Lives and Times of the Rizhnier Rebbes*, 1997, p. 22.

²⁵ M. Buber, *Povestirile rabinului Nahman*, Hasefer, București, 1998, p. 29.

²⁶ E. Wiesel, *Souls on fire: portraits and legends of Hasidic Masters*, pp. 197-198.

Was there any justification for this sort of behaviour? Why was any tension between the height of the inner life and the exterior indifference? Why did rabbi Israel need a way of life so ostentatious and foolish, and why did rabbi Nahman have to cover his identity under very strange appearances?

As he was asked, rabbi Rizhin gave the following explanation regarding his eccentric behaviour: “The Baal Shem Tov gave to our patriarch, the Great Maggid, a precious jewel, the path of true Chassidus. The Maggid hid it in the fortress of Torah and prayer, but the thieves from Above, Satan and his cohorts, broke into the fortress to destroy the gem. My grandfather, rabbi Avraam „the Angel”, polished it and built it into a fortress of holiness and purity, by means of fasting and mortification. But the thieves insisted. That’s why my father (rabbi Shalom Shachna) put forward a new fighting strategy and locked the jewel in a rubbish bin of pride, glory and ostentation. This hiding place proved much safer, for the thieves didn’t think that a precious jewel might be found in there”²⁷. The devil attack the meek, said the *tzadik*, the one that are in synagogues, in places of study or in humble houses, but does not think of the right ones who could hide behind expensive clothes and impressive palaces, as he thinks that those are corrupt for good.

The same happened with rabbi Nachman, whose behaviour was not void of reason but, as he would have later confess, he meant to bewilder Satan who wanted to thwart his plan to get to the Holy Land, as his grandfather Baal Shem Tov had done previously²⁸.

The foolishness showed by rabbi Nachman, the eccentric behaviour of rabbi Israel, as well as the strange doings of the other rebbe have to be first appreciated in order to be understood. Their place is in the context of a movement as the Hasidism and of the *tzadik* doctrine developed inside it; they appear as examples of deep mystical acts of wisdom, which get to be totally reversed in a world which cannot discern, as it follows its own set of rules and prejudices which were considered as infallible. But this incapacity of the human reason to understand some facts and doings which are interpreted now as signs of foolishness, said rabbi Nachman, will later prove itself to be to blame and fool, and this is what the unique and only spiritual change of the messianic epoch is all about.

²⁷ Yitzchok Dorfman, *The Magid of Mezritch*, Targum Press Inc., 1989, p. 84.

²⁸ Dora Litani, *Viața și faptele lui Baal Shem Tov în legende culese și repovestite*, Typo Studio, Iaffo, p. 14.

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In one of his stories, which we present at the end, rabi Nahman of Bratzlav suggests in a troubling way, and in the same time makes a description of himself, the dramatic destiny of these servants of God who know no moment of rest:

“Once upon the time there was a king who knew that the next harvest would be cursed. Whosoever would eat from it would go mad. And so he ordered an enormous granary built and stored there all that remained from the last crop. He entrusted the key to his friend and this is what he told him: “When my subjects and their king will have been struck with madness, you alone will have the right to enter the storehouse and eat uncontaminated food. Thus you’ll escape the malediction. But in exchange, your mission will be to cover the earth, going from country to country, from town to town, from one street to the other, from man to man and you will shout, you will shout with all your might: Good people, don’t forget! What is at stake is your life, the aim of our existence! Don’t forget, don’t forget!”²⁹.

IV. Conclusions

The *tzadik*, a person and also an institution of Hasidism, stimulates his followers to discover the divine essence behind of the usual things and worldly materiality. His behaviour is often unusual and includes inexplicable acts, attitudes and sayings which only at a first sight are without a goal, but in fact they possess a mystical explanation and a powerful magical influence for community’ spiritual welfare. The *tzadikim* perceived their eccentric manifestations as real connections between material and divine worlds. They don’t conceive their acts as having only a pedagogical or moral dimension but an existential value for their community.

The described conduite is perceived in Hasidic tradition as a method for attaining spiritual self-fulfilment and it gives an alternative for intellectual study of Torah replacing it with ecstatic prayer. This way of living confirms for Hasidim that the wisdom which nurtures the *tzadik*’s mystic vision is over human capacity of intelligibility and it originates from a divine inspiration.

²⁹ E. Wiesel, *Souls on fire: portraits and legends of Hasidic Masters*, p. 202.