Joy and Humility in the Path Toward God: the Transcendence of the Ego in Martin Buber's Tales of the Hasidim and the Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux

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JOY AND HUMILITY IN THE PATH TOWARD GOD:
THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE EGO IN MARTIN BUBER’S
TALES OF THE HASIDIM AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF ST. THERESÉ OF LISIEUX
by
Corrine Marzinelli

In the search for spiritual salvation, the individual must confront the problem of the ego. There must be an initial desire of the self in order to motivate the religious person to seek an awareness of the sacred. Yet it is the assertion of the ego which can obscure or prevent the individual from total abandonment to the divine. The ego is necessary to achieve the goal, but if the ultimate goal involves the denial of the ego, how does one reconcile these contradictions in the path toward God?

In examining two very different religious movements, it is evident that both the Jews of Martin Buber’s Tales of the Hasidim and St. Therese of late nineteenth-century French Catholicism, found a way to transcend the self in reaching toward Heaven. While there are certain similarities between the fervor of the Hasidim and the faith of St. Therese, there also exist conflicting ideas about the implications of human suffering. However, both movements share an amazing zeal, a joy in the sanctification of simple acts, a patient strength and, above all, a true humility that brings with it freedom from disappointment and sorrow and the entrance into the realm of the holy.

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If one is in need of a single, individual model of transcending the earthly and mundane to attain salvation, St. Therese of Lisieux, who came to be known as the “Little Flower of Jesus,” serves as a perfect example. In her autobiography, The Story of a Soul, Therese meditates upon the complexities of the Catholic faith and recalls the events of her life as a Carmelite nun. Though she is often cherished for her quaint, childlike obedience, Therese was a woman who struggled to understand the meaning of her strange, sheltered life. She writes with passion, wit and curiosity, beginning her autobiography with a question: “I often ask myself why God had preference, why all souls did not receive an equal measure of grace” (Taylor 16). Therese uses a charming metaphor to explain this phenomenon and one that will continue to appear in her writings: “I understand that every flower created by Him is beautiful, that the brilliance of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not lessen the sweet simplicity of the daisy... And so it is in the world of souls, Our Lord’s living garden” (Taylor 16).

This is not literary sugariness, but the actual belief of Therese that a soul should be as a flower in God’s garden, naturally humble and unresisting to His love. She also longed to be as a “little child” before God, with the trusting innocence children possess. In fact,
the experiences of her childhood were fundamental in forming Therese’s spiritual identity, and she recollects her early years with lucidity and emotion.

Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin was born to Louis and Zélie Martin in Alençon, France on January 2, 1873 (Gaucher 7). The youngest in a family of five girls, the bright, vivacious Therese became the center of her sister’s affections, though she was especially close to her mother. When Zélie Martin died of cancer in 1877, the family moved from Alençon to Lisieux and in their grief drew even closer together (Gaucher 26). Left without a mother at the age of four, the once-precocious little girl became shy and introverted. When her older sisters, Marie and Pauline, entered the Carmelite convent in Lisieux, Therese felt alone and betrayed. Yet she recalls that in her anguish she experienced a kind of calling: “I felt the Carmel was the desert where God wished me to hide ... nor was it a childish dream, but the certainty of a Divine Call. This impression, which I cannot describe, left me with a feeling of great inward peace” (Gaucher 44).

Therese kept this secret vocation within her as she began her studies at a Catholic girls’ institution. While she did extremely well in academics, she could not adjust socially because of her acutely sensitive nature. Her physical condition was fragile as well, for when Therese was ten she fell seriously ill with an unusual sickness that plagued her with nervous disorders, fever, delirium and hallucinations. After several weeks, her health had declined so drastically, any recovery was considered impossible (Gaucher 46). It is at this point that Therese has her second revelatory experience. In her pain, she turns to the statue of the Blessed Virgin beside her bed to beg for mercy: “Suddenly the statue seemed to come to life and grow beautiful ... The expression of our Lady’s face was ineffably sweet, tender and compassionate but what touched me to the very depths of my soul was her gracious smile. Then all my pain vanished ...” (Taylor 51).

In that vision, her need for a mother, one who would never leave her or die, had been fulfilled at last and her future as a nun was determined.

It was not long before Therese joined her sisters in the convent. After a pilgrimage to Rome and endless prayer and pleading with the Mother Superior, Therese was allowed to enter the Carmel when she was merely fifteen. While the world of the Carmelites was closed and disciplined, Therese found refuge in its austerity. The young girl was anxious to take her vows, but it was revealed to her through prayer that she might be too anxious: “It was brought home to me that my too eager desire to take my vows was mingled with much self love; as I belonged to Our Lord and was His little plaything to console and to please Him, it was for me to do His will, not for Him to do mine” (Taylor 118).

It was that longing, that egoistic desire necessary to motivate the individual to seek something beyond the immediate and material, that Therese found to be self-centered. Therese wanted to be Christ’s bride too much; if she asserted herself, she could not surrender passively and become His “victim of love.” So she allowed herself to be carried away by an overwhelming and almost romantic love for Christ.

Therese continually struggled with the flaws in her character, and desperately tried to overcome such bad habits as falling asleep during her morning prayers. She had tremendous difficulty in accepting her personal failings and sought various ways to humble herself. Eventually Therese discovered a method of coping with the trouble of
her imperfections: “For me to become great is impossible. I must bear with myself and my many imperfections; but I will seek out a means of getting to Heaven by a little way — very short and very straight, a little way that is wholly new” (Taylor 136).

Therese learned to practice simplicity and clarity in living. Her daily chores were done with a joy she could not express; even the smallest task became a gift to the Divine. Freed from reluctance, work was no longer toil. Therese discovered a path beyond the ego; acts of faith should not be exacted like penance, but freely given as becomes a servant of God.

In 1897, Therese contracted tuberculosis of the lungs and began a slow, painful descent toward death. Therese was able to bear the physical suffering, for she had always wished to suffer for Christ, like the early Christian martyrs. It was the despair which invaded her heart, what St. John of the Cross called the “dark night of the soul,” that afflicted Therese with constant torment. She did not fear the flames of Hell, but something worse: the abyss of nothingness. She speaks of her terror: “When my heart, weary of the surrounding darkness, tries to find some rest in the thought of a life to come, my anguish increases” (Taylor 141).

This trial of faith ended shortly before Therese’s death. The despair had been a transforming process; though her belief had been deprived of its certainty and security for a time, the challenge to her principles both deepened her devotion and uplifted her spirit. Reunited with Jesus, she needed no one else, for he filled the roles of parent, husband, child, and friend. At the end, Therese let go of all her desires, her concerns and her anxieties, and simply abandoned herself to Love. Through the practice of self-denial, there was no longer any obstruction to her union with God: “Dear Mother, it seems to me that at present there is nothing to impede my upward flight, for I no longer have any desire save to love Him till I die. I am free; I fear nothing now” (Taylor 142).

As Martin Buber stated in the introduction to his Tales of the Hasidim, the stories tell of the “reality of the experience of fervent souls,” and preserve the intensity of the first six generations of the Hasidic movement in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe (Buber 52). The stories of these “fervent souls” reveal an awe in their relationship with God, above and eternal, as well as the importance of ritual in daily life. In comparing the Hasidim with the theology of St. Therese, one finds that Buber’s Hasidim strove toward the divine through study, prayer and charity, with an emphasis on sincerity of faith and the unique role of the zaddik in the religious community.

The study of Biblical and Talmudic texts was an integral part of the Hasid’s life, and the reputed scholar was highly esteemed. This intellectual aspect does not have the same importance in the writings of Therese. In fact, there appeared to be an opposition to higher education, both religious and secular, in French Catholicism. It was thought that too much knowledge, particularly on the part of women, was dangerous to one’s piety and humility. The Hasidim were well aware of the danger of the scholarly to become self-centered, more concerned with assimilating facts and words than with
discovering beauty in the simple. Many of Buber’s tales address this problem, particularly the one which tells of the Baal Shem Tov’s grandson, Moshe Hayyim Efraim, who became such a scholar that he “began to deviate somewhat from the Hasidic way of life.” On one of their walks they met a man from another city and the subject of a fellow citizen arose:

‘He is a great scholar,’ said the man.
‘I envy him his scholarship,’ said the Baal Shem Tov.
‘But what am I to do? I have no time to study because I have to serve my Maker.’ From that hour on, Efraim returned to the Hasidic way with all his strength. (Buber 65)

The Baal Shem Tov used his subtle wit to explain to his dear grandson that too much learning can lead the pious Jew away from devotion.

For the religious Jew, life is structured by the law of the Torah, but the movement of Hasidism wished to infuse the traditional commandments with an intense rapture. Human existence is celebrated by the Jews with ceremonies; rituals involving birth, marriage and death, that give daily life a sense of awe. A small act, such as washing one’s hands or eating a meal, is rendered sacred through prayer. This emphasis on the consecration of simple actions bears a close resemblance to the “little way” of St. Therese, as both reject grand gestures of faith for humility of behavior.

Yet there is a difficulty in such meticulous worship. The ultimate goal is to live the holy life, not merely to perform endless rituals without thought or spirit. One must strive to “be Torah,” as Rabbi Leib expressed: “A man should see to it that all his actions are a Torah and that he himself becomes so entirely a Torah that one can learn from his habits and his motions and his motionless clinging to God, that he has become like Heaven itself . . .” (Buber 117).

The Hasid must be careful to guard against religious pretension, for it is “not necessary to weep too loudly.” It is easy to become carried away by the gesture, rather than the intent, for as Rabbi Barukh stated: “... a single true gesture, even if it be only that of a small toe, is enough” (Buber 97).

Therese likewise concerned herself with purity of faith and sought to cleanse her soul by unnoticed acts of charity and silent humiliations. In Hasidism, there must be an inherent goodness in the soul, as the self must put aside intellectual pursuits and unnecessary displays of devotion in the presence of God, like the saying of Rabbi Pinhas: “I should rather be devout than clever, but rather than both devout and clever, I should like to be good” (Buber 131).

One of the definite contrasts between St. Therese and Buber’s Hasidim is the role of the zaddik in the interaction of the community. When reading Therese’s autobiography, one senses that though Therese cared deeply for the other sisters, she spent most of her short life alone and in solitude. The Bishop of Lisieux provided guidance only from a distance, and most of the nuns rarely saw him. For the Hasidim, living in a Hasidic
community is essential to preserving their Jewishness. Each individual is important, but together, they are a part of something greater than themselves. The zaddik is their spiritual leader who provides direction in all aspects of life. The zaddik can also receive support and insight from his own followers, for it is a mutually giving relationship, like man and God. While many consider the God of the Chosen People to be inaccessible and easily provoked, the Hasidim view their God in need — needing to be sought, worshipped and loved. In the tale of Rabbi Barukh and his little grandson, the zaddik explains that God is often disappointed in man: “God says: ‘I hide, but no one wants to seek me’” (Buber 97).

The Hasidim seek an intimacy with the Divine, much as Therese wished to become one with Christ in her love for Him. As the “Little Flower” desired to give herself as an offering to God, the rabbi of Rizhyn said: “Only he who brings himself to the Lord as an offering may be called a man” (Buber 52).

The Hasidim do not allow the self to interfere in their worship. God is not regarded as above man, but everywhere around him at every moment, and like Therese, the Hasid overcomes the ego through a spiritual immersion: “Man should go into God, so that God may surround him and become his place” (Buber 128).

One conflict of the Hasidim that Therese did not have to confront was the problem of outside, worldly influences, which could corrupt the purest soul with greed and pride. Buber’s Hasidim counter the evil with good: “What is needed is not to strike straight at Evil but to withdraw to the sources of divine power, and from there to circle around Evil, bend it and transform it into its opposite” (Buber 115).

The destructive force of evil is rendered powerless by man’s creativity. The tales express the need for man to react assertively against evil, not merely to resist, like Therese in her passivity, but to challenge oppression. The assertion of human goodness becomes a selfless act.

For Therese and the Hasidim, the concept and the implications of suffering are strikingly different. Therese saw her own physical deterioration as a purification of her spirit, and believed that it somehow might bring her closer to the physical reality of Jesus. The event of the Crucifixion, a central concept to the doctrine of Christianity, not only emphasizes the glory of the Resurrection, but also that those who endure great torment are dearer to Christ. With the idea of original sin, there is the need for man to cleanse himself.

For the Hasidim, suffering is not essential for salvation, or even an acceptable possibility. They do not deny the joy in earthly pleasures, for God created the earth and it is good. In instructing his students, the Baal Shem Tov said: “... that man should try to attain to three loves: the love of God, the love of Israel, and the love of Torah — it is not necessary to mortify the flesh” (Buber 168).

And yet there still remains the question of whether or not suffering shall bring the Messiah. There is a quiet desperation in these tales, as if the Hasidim, in their longing, might perhaps prefer suffering to waiting, as the rabbi of Sadagora expressed: “When suffering is about to reach its peak, Israel cries out to God, saying it can bear it no longer, and God is merciful and hears them; He relieves the suffering and postpones redemption” (Buber 72).
Above all, the outstanding quality of both the Hasidim and St. Therese is charity. When one has climbed to the highest rung of knowledge and piety and realized one’s own smallness in the ineffable presence of God, it is then possible to have true compassion. Therese prayed to take on the sins of every sinner on earth, not in order to receive God’s special grace, but because she loved humanity. The Baal Shem Tov once revealed his great love for each human being: “The lowest of the low is dearer to me than your only son is to you” (Buber 72).

It was through extraordinary generosity, perseverance of faith, and an ultimate happiness in living that St. Therese of Lisieux and Martin Buber’s Hasidim were able to transcend the selfishness of the ego, continuing in the path toward God, but asking for nothing in return. And though one may never discover the answer to the question of personal salvation, it is as important to feel the presence of the Divine in the journey of the spirit; or as Abraham Joshua Heschel said so beautifully: “He who chooses a life of utmost striving for the utmost stake, the vital, matchless state of God, feels at times as though the spirit of God rested upon his eyelids — close to his eyes and yet never seen” (Dresner 4).

WORKS CITED


