

INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of the Torah comes the terrible prophecy, “I will surely hide My face on that day.”¹ In English, the double form *haster astir* is translated, “I will surely hide.” Literally, *haster astir* may be rendered, “The hiding I will hide.”

The founder of Hasidism, the legendary miracle-worker, Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (1698 or 1700—1760) explained the verse by way of parable: Children are playing hide-and-seek. One child hides; his companions are to find him. The child waits and waits, but no one ever comes looking for his hiding place. So, said the holy Ba’al Shem Tov, in the very midst of the hiddenness—the so-called “eclipse of God”—the divine presence cries to be sought out. The enormity of the tragedy consists in the fact that God’s hiding itself is concealed from us. *Haster astir*.

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A spiritual descendant of the Ba’al Shem Tov, Rabbi Shemariah Noah Schneersohn of Bobroisk (1846—1926), one of the last great expositors of HaBaD, a

form of intellectual Hasidism, grapples with the problem of evil. His dilemma takes the form of a comment on the Passover Haggadah:

“We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt.” It was explained in the *Fruit of the Tree of Life* (a kabbalistic work by Rabbi Hayyim Vital): We, sons of the Lesser Countenance (*Z’eir Anpin*), were slaves unto Pharaoh, letters *ha’oreph* (the neck), whose level is the neck of the Greater Countenance (*Arikh Anpin*). Therefore, Pharaoh ruled over Israel, because his root was the Surrounding (*Makif*), where “the darkness and the light are alike (to You).”² As it says, “If you would sin, what would you affect in Him, and if your crimes be multiplied, what would you do to Him? If you would be righteous, what would you give Him?”³

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Darkness covers the land. A web of evil spreads from village to village, from *shtetl* to *shtetl*. Sons of the Lesser Countenance, where light is yet perceptible

from darkness; where it truly makes a difference whether one is righteous or wicked, come under the yoke of the Greater Countenance. Territories are annexed into the “kingdom of night,” to use the term of one contemporary author. Village after village is swallowed by the jaws of evil. These are not regions of earth, but of the soul of mankind; not geographical locations, but coordinates on the kabbalistic map.

The apocalypse is not a war between the “Sons of Light” and the “Sons of Darkness,” as in the Dead Sea Scroll, but rather between the sons who distinguish between light and darkness, and the sons who are beyond light and darkness. One day, the talmudists of Lithuania, the hasidim of Rumania, and the kabbalists of the Balkans, had been living in a universe where the demarcation between good and evil was distinct. The next day, they awoke to find themselves in a universe where the differences had disappeared. A nation nurtured on the Torah, who believed that morality actually counts for something, were suddenly ruled over by a people raised on the pagan prophet Nietzsche’s vision “beyond good and evil.” A world of innocence was confronted with a world of cynicism. The face of the child countenanced the face of the adult.