

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



A Radical Rebbe

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Truth Springs from the Earth: The Teachings of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk by Morris M. Faierstein (Pickwick Publications, 2018)

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk (1787–1859) is one of the most interesting and challenging figures of Hasidism in the nineteenth century. His search for truth and battles against falsehood and spiritual compromise are the subject of many legends. Though he was irascible and demanding, he inspired the loyalty of disciples who went on to become the dominant leaders of Hasidism in Poland from the middle of the nineteenth century until the destruction of Polish Jewry in the Holocaust.

R. Menahem Mendel left no surviving writings. His descendants and disciples moved away from the radicalism of his teachings and adopted more conventional and conservative theological positions. As a result, there was little incentive to preserve and publish his teachings. It was only his close disciple, Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (1800–1854), who left Kotsk over issues of temperament and personality, who continued Menahem Mendel's radical theological traditions. This departure also precipitated the depression that lasted the last twenty years of Rabbi Menahem Mendel's life.

Most of the publications about Rabbi Menahem Mendel fall into the categories of fiction or hagiography, with some blending of the two categories. (The so-called "Friday Night Incident" story is the best-known example of this phenomenon.) The most important scholarly study of Rabbi Menahem Mendel and his teachings is *Kotsk: The Struggle for Integrity*, by Prof. Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory. Unfortunately, it remains untranslated from its original Yiddish and thus is inaccessible to most readers.

The goal of my work is twofold. First, to present a biographical study of R. Menahem Mendel that is based on historical research, instead of repeating myths and stories without regard to their historical veracity. Secondly, to collect, translate, and analyze those teachings and sayings by or about R. Menahem Mendel that are consistent with what we know about his life and teachings, and are also accessible for a broader audience to learn about this fascinating figure.

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TORAH FROM JTS



Tazria-Metzora 5778

תזריע מצרע תשע"ח



It Passes and We Stay

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director, Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, JTS

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period—
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay—

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly
encroached
Upon a Sacrament.

—Emily Dickinson

The double parashiyot of Tazria and Metzora are devoted in their entirety to the Biblical notion of *tumah*, usually translated as "impurity." In them, we learn three of the major sources of *tumah*: childbirth (Lev. 12); a condition known as *tzara'at*, which can manifest on skin, clothing, or the walls of one's house (Lev. 13–14); and bodily secretions (Lev. 15). The two other primary sources of *tumah* are touching or carrying the carcasses of certain animals (Lev. 11) and contact with a human corpse (Num. 19).

But what is the essential nature of *tumah*, and what does it have to do with Emily Dickinson's poem? The great Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859) offers an especially beautiful reading.

The Kotzker's teaching is based on a Talmudic passage, from the beginning of masekhet Ta'anit (2a), identifying three phenomena which God attends to "personally," without resort to an intermediary:

Rabbi Yohanan said: Three keys remain in the Holy Blessed One's own hand, and have not been entrusted to any messenger, namely, the key of rain, the key of childbirth, and the key of the revival of the dead . . .

Seizing upon this notion, the Kotzker says that at the moment when a woman is giving birth, God is present in an intensified, heightened way—in the Kotzker’s language, “higher holiness rests there.” He continues:

But afterwards, when the infant emerges into the atmosphere of the world, automatically the Shekhinah and incumbent holiness withdraw. And therefore, in this place, *tumah* “is born.” Because everywhere where there is a withdrawal of holiness, *tumah* is born in its place, as in the *tumah* associated with death, which arises for the same reason. (*Ohel Torah*, Parashat Tazria)

Here, the forms of *tumah* associated with human birth and death are a spiritual condition arising in the aftermath of a particularly intense encounter with the Divine. Note that this is not a state of unusual distance from God (and certainly not a complete absence of God, as no place is devoid of the Divine); rather, it’s an experience of *relative* distance, a reduction to “normal” levels of holiness and Godliness. *Tumah* is the psycho-spiritual let-down after a heightened experience of holiness, which in turn creates a vulnerability—perhaps to negativity or sin, or disaffection or doubt.

This magnificent reading points well beyond literal birth and death and the biblical category of *tumah*. Liminal moments of many kinds are often accompanied by an intensified experience of God’s presence, or a heightened sense of vitality and meaning. This is true whether the moment is predominantly joyful or sad (as births and deaths often are), or—like most profound, transformative changes—a combination of joy, sadness, excitement, anxiety, and gratitude. The intensity of such moments inevitably fades, creating a kind of grief that leaves us vulnerable.

We may be vulnerable to disillusionment, demoralization, or cynicism. Perhaps we’ll never experience that closeness to God again; perhaps it wasn’t even real. We may feel a loss of vitality, even a collapse of meaning. We may feel foolish for having believed. Or our vague sense of disappointment might manifest as retrenchment or fear. *What if the transformative moment I felt was only momentary, and proves unsustainable? Perhaps nothing really changes at all.* Things may feel too alien, or not different enough, or not different in the ways we’d hoped. Or the return of (or increase in) our quotidian responsibilities may feel like an affront to the holy: *a moment ago I witnessed someone’s first or last breath, I witnessed the sacredness and preciousness of life, how can I now just go back to work?*

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The narrative of the Exodus from Egypt is a prime example. The Hasidic masters understood the exile in Egypt to be an experience of *tumah*—not necessarily sin *per se*, but lifelessness, hopelessness, a culture of death and sameness. Our redemption from Egypt was an act of *tehiyat hemetim*, the raising of the dead, one of the three “keys” that the Talmud said God reserves for God’s self. “Then Adonai took us out of Mitzrayim. Not by an angel. Nor by a seraph. Nor by a messenger. Rather, the Holy Blessed One, God’s self, in God’s glory,” our Haggadah reads. But the sense of the immediacy of God’s presence fades. Immediately after they cross the sea, they grumble and complain—resentful, anxious, unsure—“Is Adonai among us or not” (Exod. 17:7). *Tumah* manifests again.

What are the consequences of this loss, this *tumah*? Among other things, when the Tabernacle or Temple stood, one who was *tamei* (impure) could not enter the holy precincts, until he or she was again purified. Perhaps this debarment was an external manifestation of the internal state: the exclusion from the Temple representing the loss of prior closeness with the Divine. Or perhaps there was a risk that in the wake of the immediacy of God’s presence at a moment such as childbirth, even the holiness of the Temple service would pale in comparison.

Today, *tumah* has no practical consequence, but the Kotzker’s insight serves as both warning and comfort for the life of the spirit.

The warning: the Kotzker’s understanding of “impurity” doesn’t entail immorality, but it does involve a vulnerability to error and sin. So in the let-down after intense moments, we would do well to be extra careful. We might be inclined to be self-indulgent, to shake off religious constraints, to succumb to laziness or carelessness. Alternatively, we might seek to recapture the lost “thrill” through behavior that is morally or physically dangerous.

The comfort: this kind of *tumah* isn’t something to be avoided at all costs, and it’s not a sign that something is wrong. On the contrary, the particular contexts the Kotzker singles out—giving birth and contact with a corpse—are instances of *tumah* arising inevitably from a life of mitzvot. So too, vague disappoint or malaise are a natural part of the life of the spirit—hard to bear, but normal. May we be blessed from time to time with the immediacy of God’s presence—with that light that “exists in Spring.” And when “it passes and we stay,” may we bear the resultant “quality of loss” with renewed commitment.

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