

The Prince, the Hermit, and the *Kohen*:¹ Stories from a Buddha-Tradition in the First Printed Hasidic Book

By Aryeh Wineman

Two decades after the death of the Baal Shem Tov ("the *Besht*"), the first Hasidic book appeared in print. That first printed Hasidic work was *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, a collection of homilies on the Torah's weekly portions by Ya'akov Yosef ha-Kohen of Polonnoye (d.1781 or 1782).² Alongside the expected standard rabbinic and kabbalistic texts, the library of the extensive collection of sources from which Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoye quoted in his homilies occasionally included also popular medieval narrative works. Examples include a few fables and parables from *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* ("The Prince and the Hermit"),³ which made their way into the preacher's initial collection of homilies. *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* is a medieval Hebrew translation (or adaptation) in rhymed prose (*maqama*) by the twelfth-century Barcelona translator and poet, Avraham ben Shmu'el ha-Levi Ibn Hasdai, of an earlier, Arabic work that no longer exists. That Arabic work, like Ibn Hasdai's Hebrew version, is viewed today as part of a cross-cultural body of narratives and dialogues attached to a rendition of the traditional legend of the Buddha's coming to reject the values of his father's court. Even though the realization of the basic tale's connection with the actual historical Buddha was long lost, the tale itself together with the stories connected with it became popular in medieval literature in many different languages.⁴

It is not clear to what degree Ibn Hasdai's work is a translation or an embellishment of his source, but many of the fables, parables, and sayings are found in parallel works in other languages similarly inspired by the Buddha-legend. The core story of *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* follows the general lines of the early life of Buddha in Buddhist tradition as found in the Pali Canon: While most of the king's advisors foretell that his infant son would grow up to be a king of kings, one advisor foresaw a different future for the prince, namely that he would be a holy man and an ascetic. As the infant was the king's only son and potential heir, the king does everything to prevent such an eventuality. He builds a palace for his son where he would know only pleasure and delight and would be sheltered from any awareness of suffering and distress in the world, a strategy that ultimately fails as the prince comes to witness disease and death, an awareness that, upon reflection, brings the prince to reject his royal life and role.

The legend as found in *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* does not follow Buddhist tradition to the point where the prince escapes from the palace to become an ascetic and ultimately discovers the secret of enlightenment. It consists rather of a series of conversations between the prince and the ascetic figure who becomes his spiritual influence. Within those conversations, the hermit relates many parables and fables to make a case for the futility of all desires, pleasures, and worldly pursuits, stories that bear consonance with the core story of the prince.

Many parables in medieval Jewish philosophical writings were drawn from Arabic sources, though it is recognized that some came to those sources from regions further east such as Persia and India.⁵ While it cannot be certain whether those fables have their roots in India or whether some may have been additions accumulated during the course of its earlier translations or renditions, the stories certainly reflect the temper of the Indian Buddhist legend of Buddha's youth which, in its basic aspects, is recounted in Ibn Hasdai's translation. While some of the stories are found today only in the Hebrew text,⁶ it is likely that they derived from Ibn Hasdai's Arabic source (and from the latter's earlier source or sources) and may have been included in other later texts in other languages, texts that did not survive.

Ibn Hasdai's work, which appeared in the early thirteenth century, was printed originally in Constantinople in 1518 and was followed by numerous reprintings including,

closer to our own time, A. M. Habermann's annotated and vocalized version.⁷ The names of the prince and the ascetic in this multilinguistic body of literature, often Josaphat and Barlaam or variants of those names, vary from language to language, and almost certainly Ibn Hasdai did not identify the prince as Buddha, just as the authors or translators of parallel works in other languages failed to grasp the real subject of the frame tale. Marco Polo, in his travels, was surprised to encounter what was to him a familiar story but one that he would never have thought to relate to Buddha.⁸ Ibn Hasdai was presumably drawn to this work both for the power of the central tale itself and for the moral and philosophical reflections on the futility of life's strivings and worldly attainments, a theme voiced in some significant strands in Jewish literature and thought in medieval Spain. As a striking example, note Moshe Ibn Ezra's poem, *ha-Hayyim ve-hamavvet*,⁹ and the same type of reflections on the nature of life is present also in other poems by Moshe Ibn Ezra and also in those by Yehuda haLevi in which the influence of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes can be felt. The theme of death is a frequent subject in medieval Hebrew poetry written in Spain.

The work's basic tale is found in *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir, sha'arim* 4-8. In that tale, the prince's father, fearful that his son might grow up to be an ascetic and holy man, made all efforts to provide for his son an isolated and protected world of luxury and sensual delight, shielding him from all awareness of life's vicissitudes including disease, aging, and death. His strategy was foiled, however, due in part to the counterstrategy of the ascetic, himself a former prince who, posing as a gem merchant, finds a way to connect with the prince and subtly bring him to an awareness of the more distressful aspects of human experience. Under the influence of the subversive hermit, who placed himself at risk of persecution by the king of that state, the prince outgrows his naïve innocence and comes to question and reject the values of his father's court such as power, pleasure, and wealth, in favor of a deeper, contemplative and ascetic path. The hermit later left the scene to save his life, as the prince's father had banished such ascetics from his kingdom and even assigned them to be burned alive as an example to others who might be drawn to their world-view and their path in life.

The versions of this tradition, found in many different languages and cultures, tend to color the teaching of the ascetic in a way acceptable in terms of the prevailing religious ideology. In European versions, as in the Coptic version, for example, the ascetic is a Christian monk.¹⁰ It is reasonable to speculate that at an earlier point in the migration of the stories beyond the orbit of India, the world-view voiced in the work came to be formulated in terms of more acceptable and conformist concepts and practices, a reformulation that would have made the work more accessible also to Jewish readers where the ascetic's way of life is explained in terms of rather normative Jewish values of *'avodat ha'elohim* (worship), Torah study, and *mitsvot*. The more radical Buddhist sense of Enlightenment and Nirvana acquired a theistic cultural and religious form as immortality in the World-to-Come (*'olam haba*).

In the first printed Hasidic text, *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*,¹¹ a work that both influenced the spread of eighteenth-century Hasidism and incited marked hostility toward the pietistic movement, Ya'akov Yosef ha-Kohen of Polonnoye quoted two stories directly from *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*.¹² It also included an additional story quoted from Bayha Ibn Pekuda's *Hovot halevavot* ("The Duties of the Heart"), one that however is also found in *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*. The Hasidic preacher, who was obviously unaware that the medieval work from which he quoted goes back to the tradition centered around Buddha, grasped the fables as an integral part of the network of canonical Jewish sacred texts, including the Talmud, which are interwoven and illuminate one another as though all emanating from a single root in Jewish traditional literature and teaching.

The Dogs, the Corpse, and the Man

Within the course of their conversations as recounted in *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*, the prince asks his teacher why it is that the pious and ascetics are hated, and more pointedly: Why is it that his own father, the king, drives such people away, expelling them, and even burning them alive? The hermit proceeded to explain such hatred by means of a parable of dogs that are attacking a dead animal, each one seizing whatever it can obtain from the corpse, and fighting among themselves for the remains of the animal. While the dogs are attacking the animal corpse, they notice a man in the distance on his way to work. Though that person has no interest in the dead animal, the dogs nevertheless assume that the man is coming to take the corpse away from them, depriving them of what has value in their eyes. A *nevelah*, a sick animal that died and is then attacked by other animals—something that would evoke a sense of disgust—serves as symbol and comment upon worldly desires and strivings. The ascetic teacher utilizes this parable to convey to the prince why it is that people who worship idols and eat the “bread of nerves,” feel such hatred for “people of religion.”¹³ E. A. Wallis Budge pointed out that this particular parable is found today only in the Hebrew work and translation and not in any other extant versions of the Buddha-tale and traditions in European or Near Eastern languages,¹⁴ although, as suggested above, it is likely that many versions of this tradition have been lost over time.

The Polonnoye preacher, in one of his homilies, confronted the seeming paradox in that logically the wicked should be jealous of the pious, whereas in reality the wicked are known for their hostility toward the devout. Since that hatred is illogical and hence stands in need of explanation, the preacher utilized this parable from *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*.¹⁵

In the homilist's rendition, the dogs understand the man's presence in one of two ways: Either the man is seeking to take the corpse from the dogs—as explained by the hermit in the earlier source—or in seeing the dogs' seizing the corpse, the man detests the dogs. In either case, the dogs respond by attacking the man. The choice of a corpse to represent worldly desires is in itself a very poignant comment on the nature of material desires and strivings, and those pursuing material desires are, by implication, likened to dogs whose drives suggest subhuman values. Those who are occupied with the pursuit of worldly delights then react with hatred toward the pious who have different values, and the pursuits of the devout serve as commentary on the strivings of others who associate higher delights, spiritual and heavenly in nature, with what is bitter rather than sweet. Many people would intuitively associate “sitting and studying in the World-to-Come with crowns upon their heads”¹⁶ with darkness rather than light. The real darkness, though, is their very inability to experience delight in Torah study and prayer. That evaluation echoes Maimonides' analysis of illness as involving a distorted sense of taste: What is bitter seems sweet to the ill, while that which is sweet tastes bitter to them.¹⁷

The Polonnoye preacher also returned to this parable in connection with the Plague of Darkness (Exod. 10:21-23). Going beyond earlier suggestions that the darkness in that plague was not merely the absence of light but was substantive in nature,¹⁸ the homilist understood that plague as other than an objective, physical darkness. He went so far as to maintain, somewhat paradoxically, that the plague was itself light, even though the light was experienced by many as darkness. For the wicked, as for the dogs in the parable, *'oneg* (delight) becomes—through a reordering of the word's letters—*'nega'* (plague, affliction), with the result that what would otherwise be experienced as light, sweetness, and heavenly is felt instead to be bitter, dark, and intolerable by those unattuned to the light.

King for a Year

Elsewhere in the *Toldot*,¹⁹ Ya'akov Yosef quoted a parable from Bahya Ibn Pekudah's *Hovot halevavot* ("Duties of the Heart," *Sha'ar 'avodat Elohim*), a parable however which is also found in *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*, *sha'ar* 13. Bahya, writing in the eleventh century, included many parables in his classic work without indicating their source but which are thought to be taken from the teachings and lore of the Sufis²⁰ who would have had access to this story prior to Ibn Hasdai's translation.

The parable tells of a practice, observed in a state in India, that upon noting a good-natured and innocent foreigner, the people of the state would appoint him to be king over them. Then after a year they would banish him from the palace and from the state, driving him out barefoot and naked without any sustenance or possessions whatsoever. One such foreigner who was appointed and honored as king, however, was suspicious of his situation, and so he befriended an official and inquired of him concerning the customs of the place. The official complied only after the stranger, now king, took an oath not to reveal what the official would disclose to him of their practice. That friend then advised him to store up for himself gold and silver elsewhere so that he might have recourse to it following his year as king when he will be deposed and driven out from the palace. In relating the story to the young prince, the hermit views the role of the kings' friend in the parable as similar to his own role in conveying the realization that in life we are all such "kings for a year" after which we must leave this world, taking nothing with us.

The Polonnoye homilist explained, by analogy, that the nature of life in this world resembles such a kingdom in which each person, at a certain point in time, is suddenly sent away empty-handed. Ya'akov Yosef explicated the parable to convey that whatever we acquire in this world is not ours, and we leave this world much like the king who is expelled at the end of his year-long reign. Only what one stores up for himself in the World-to-Come is really his.

The preacher quotes or refers to this parable a number of times in the *Toldot* including homilies #3, 4, and 10 on the Torah portion, *Shoftim*. The third homily on that Torah portion connects the parable with a Talmudic passage concerning Monabaz, a first-century king of Adiabene and a convert to Judaism, who used for the needs of people during years of famine all the money that had been stored up by his fathers. He countered criticism by his family in explaining that his fathers stored up money for this world while, in his charitable deeds, he stored riches for the World-to-Come.²¹ Spelling out the parable's implications more precisely,²² Ya'akov Yosef explained that when death strikes a mortal, either one has belongings of a spiritual nature or he leaves life totally empty-handed. The preacher understands the Torah's regulation that the people select a king *mikerev ahekha* ("from among your brethren," Deut. 17:15) in the sense of the person's knowing the ways of the locality—in this case his being aware that we are but kings for a year and consequently all pride and arrogance are utterly senseless, as in the grave a person lacks all status and position. The preacher refers to the same parable also in the fourth homily on *Shoftim* together with the comment that "this world is only for the immediate hour, in contrast with the World-to-Come which is a permanent inheritance." The real value of any kind of reward or blessing given in this world—the homilist states—is only to enable one to be able to strive to acquire a portion in the World-to-Come.²³

In the tenth homily on *Shoftim* in the *Toldot* a much fuller version of the parable is found. "...It is the way of the world that one wants to make this world into something permanent.... If one knows the true custom of the place, however, he will make himself a stranger in this world all his days and seek to acquire the World-to-Come which alone is lasting..."²⁴ And the foreigner is the person who does not grasp the local custom and fails to realize that each of us is like the person who will be king but for a year after which one leaves this world with empty hands.

The Light Seen in the Night

In his sixth homily on the Torah portion *Shemot* in *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, the preacher included a story quoted from *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*, *sha'ar* 16, which the ascetic teacher tells to warn his pupil that one must be very careful about speaking with the king about the false nature of his life and beliefs. In the source, one night when the king, who put his trust in idols, could not fall asleep, he walked with his wise and understanding deputy during the night to survey what the people of the kingdom are doing. They came to *sha'ar ha-ashpot* ("the Gate of Garbage"), a huge heap of dung and garbage, and find there a bright light coming from a hole and residence resembling a cave. They notice there two poor, ugly persons, dressed in rags like beggars, singing joyfully with musical instruments, showing intimate affection to one another and referring to one another in the manner of royalty. Observing the scene, the king is utterly amazed at the couple's unbelievable joy even in their wretched situation.

Asked to explain the enigmatic scene, the deputy speaks of his fear that he and the king will attain that kind of joy though others will see them just as the king and his deputy see this couple—as a pitiful picture of persons living with an illusion of light and joy even when their life resembles a garbage heap. Even though the king is living a life of power and physical pleasure, his life and the world of his court more truly resemble a heap of dung and garbage—an analogy that the king, due to his own arrogance, is unable to grasp.

The deputy, who is a parallel figure to the prince's ascetic teacher in the larger frame story, carefully tells his king of another king who had falsely judged a man to be executed, and the man slated to be killed then warns the king that on the following day the king will be in his hands just as he is now in the hands of the king to do with him as he chooses. And the man speaks to him also of King David, who comes across a royal grave at Ziklag.²⁵ The dead king buried there tells David that though he had conquered many lands and brought them to a state of ruin and had possessed a thousand princesses, he now lies in a bed of dust and ashes, and the dead king expresses his wish that *zman* (the workings of time and fate) not mock David as it had mocked him. What emerges is the distinct sense that the king's glory is but a self-delusion that will burst, insofar as what he experiences as glory more truly resembles a heap of dung and garbage.

The deputy carefully and cautiously answers the king's questions by pointing out to him that "men of faith and asceticism" know the truth about life and have come to understand that ultimately everything lacks value except righteousness and satisfaction with one's lot in life. It is therefore the path of wisdom to cast off all desires and lusts and cease striving always for more, to discard the "garments of envy," and to serve God in love. And he adds the cautionary note that anyone who harms others must then live with fear of those he has harmed.

The deputy goes on to tell his king the story of another ruler who, one hot day, went hunting and ordered the lad carrying his weapons to invite whomever is around to join him in lunch. The lad found only one shepherd some distance away. That shepherd, however, refused the invitation, explaining that he can't eat because another, greater than the king, has invited him: God has called him to fast. When the king proceeded to suggest that the shepherd eat with him that day and fast on the following day, the shepherd agreed on condition that the king could guarantee that the shepherd will live to see the morrow. Embarrassed, the king had to admit that he is unable to make such a guarantee, and the shepherd went on his way.

The deputy took that opportunity to speak with the king concerning the kingdom that, unlike this world, is limitless and lasting joy, light, repose, security, and health. When the king voiced curiosity as to why the deputy had never before approached this subject in conversation with him, the deputy answered that a person has to arrive at

understanding through one's own mind and humility. One can find the World-to-Come, the deputy continues to explain, neither through money nor journeys nor things that are necessary for this world, but rather through one's words and one's heart. Realizing that only those truer treasures can bring true and lasting delight, the king sought the keys to those treasures. That world—the deputy then assures him—is open to all who seek it, but one must first detest the world that is its very antithesis. Under the impact of the continued teaching of his deputy, the king altered his ways, and the deputy influenced him further in the direction of awakening.

In *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoye made mention of this story in the sixth homily on the Torah portion *Shemot*²⁶ though the story as presented there differs significantly from what is found in *Sefer ben ha-melekh vehanazir*. We read, for example, that the king was walking at night with his officials to observe whether or not his subjects have heeded his prohibition against kindling a candle at night. Noting a bright light some distance away, the king drew near to find a garbage site, with a table and bench all made of garbage, and utensils of silver and gold upon the table. The king and his officials were able to see there a man and his wife in a very joyous mood; the officials laughed at them, but the king responded that others might similarly laugh at the king himself and his royal party.

It is possible that in preparing this homily the preacher did not have the text of *Sefer ben-hamelekh vehanazir* before him and relied upon his memory, allowing for a rendition that deviated from the written story in a way to lend itself to allusions connecting it to classical Jewish sources. The preacher recreated the story in a way that it connects with the regulation of examining leaven to the light of a candle with the first sign of dawn on the fourteen of *Nisan*, just preceding the *Pesah* ("Passover") festival.²⁷ He connected it also with the motif of David awakening in the middle of the night to study Torah,²⁸ explaining "midnight" (*hatsot*) as life's midpoint at which David awakened from his metaphorical sleep, his immersion in the delights of this world, before he proceeded to "saddle his materiality" (*hamoro*).²⁹ Ya'akov Yosef connected his rendition of the story also to the life-cycle and its fluctuations in a way to reflect the motivations of Torah students at different stages in their lives and offered an involved exposition of the story, one that winds its way through a series of passages and concepts from both Halakhic texts and the Zohar.

Having in mind the association of *Mitsrayim* (Egypt) with the Plague of Darkness and, further, with moral and spiritual darkness, the homilist had the king prohibit the kindling of light. The king, representing the Evil Inclination, had forbidden the kindling of light so that people would not "examine their leaven" (make certain that all leaven is removed from the house in approaching the *Pesah* festival when leaven is prohibited), lest one realize that all the delights of this world are, in reality, on a par with garbage.³⁰ The decree sought, in this way, to guarantee the continuation of the unexamined life, as Socrates would say. That message would certainly echo the temper of *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* as a whole and of that collection's basic frame tale in which the prince's father went to tremendous efforts to spare his son any awareness of suffering, affliction, and futility in life.

As the homily continues, the preacher found in the story a key illustration of the darkness that fell over *Mitsrayim* at the same time that the Israelites had light.³¹ Ya'akov Yosef interpreted the meaning of the light that the Israelites knew during that plague as an allusion to the Israelites' realization that this world can be likened to garbage insofar as strivings in this world are subject to an inherent futility as "no one dies having fulfilled even half of his desires."³² In this connection, the preacher went on to convey the importance of *histapkut* (satiety), which he defined as finding joy in what one has in life rather than one's desiring and seeking what one does not have.³³

What Drew the Hasidic Preacher to that Medieval Text?

The temper represented in *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* with its negative view of life and of this world echoes in a rather pervasive sense in *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*. Even after Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoye abandoned older ascetic practices at the insistence of the *Baal Shem Tov*,³⁴ he evidently held, at least partly, to an essentially ascetic world-view with roots in post-Lurianic Kabbalah but voiced also in earlier works such as Bahya's *Hovot halevavot*.

In his reading of the biblical Exodus tradition, the preacher of Polonnoye tended to identify the land of *Mitsrayim* with this world (*'olam hazeh*) with its apparent delights and deceiving expectations.³⁵ He interpreted the Israelites' coming to the land of Egypt in the Torah narrative as their "coming into this lowly world,"³⁶ reading it, in effect, as a parable of the soul's descent to this material world with its enticements as he understood the darkness of *Mitsrayim* as a comment upon the nature of this world.³⁷ Furthermore, he claimed that the Evil Inclination rules this world³⁸ in which the wicked choose worldly desires and lusts, whereas the righteous strive only to acquire the goods of the World-to-Come.³⁹

The Polonnoye preacher grasped Matter and Form as mutually antithetical: Whereas the former is associated with physical satisfaction and pleasures, the latter is associated with Torah study and prayer. When the one increases, the other inevitably lessens; when either Matter or Form finds satisfaction, the other is weakened and suffers.⁴⁰ "Matter comes from the side of the *kelipah*" (the demonic Shell that emerges within the process of Emanation) and is referred to also as idolatry (*'avodah zarah*), whereas the soul, coming from the Side of Holiness, longs for things of holiness.⁴¹

By the very nature of desire and the impossibility of satiety, Ya'akov Yosef conveyed in his homilies that the more wealth one has the poorer he is, for the wealth of this world provides no satisfaction or sense of satiety;⁴² and only in things of the spirit can satiety be found.⁴³ The tenor of much that is found in the *Toldot* would identify with the stance of the *nazir*, the hermit, or ascetic teacher and his teachings in *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*.⁴⁴

But while many passages of the *Toldot* indicate a deeply ascetic nature akin to the tenor of *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*, other passages in the *Toldot* point to a contrasting mindset, and the reader might locate a drama in the tension between these two attitudes both within the *Toldot* and within the mind of the homilist himself.

One reads that enjoying physical delights including eating in connection with the observance of the Seventh Day is one aspect of an unbounded inheritance, the antithesis of *Mitsrayim*.⁴⁵ And furthermore, the homilist pointed out that "it is impossible for the soul, being spiritual, to perform any *mitsvah* (holy or commanded act) without the physical limbs (of the body)."⁴⁶ "All the activity of the soul in Torah and *mitsvoth* is accomplished through the instruments of the body..."⁴⁷ As in Torah study and prayer, similarly in matters of eating and drinking and even sexual intercourse one can be engaged with either of two motivations: either that of satisfying personal desires or that of fulfilling a holy intent in enabling oneself to acquire the strength necessary to serve God.⁴⁸

In some passages in the *Toldot*, the sharp polarity of Matter and Form gives way to a paradoxical relationship between the two in which a person transforms Matter into Form.⁴⁹ Duality is further transcended in the homilist's turning to the Lurianic concept of the elevation of hidden, divine Sparks, locating such Sparks within everything including material and physical actions. In the process, physical pursuits serve as paths of holy purpose,⁵⁰ and spirituality is expressed and present even in all the material aspects of life.

Contrasting with the tone of so many statements that bear consonance with that of the stories quoted from *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*, the preacher also emphasized the very opposite: namely that the material and spiritual are not two distinctly separate areas.

"Even during that third of each day that the Torah-student devotes to trade and worldly activity, he engages in Torah with the thought to bind together the material with the spiritual." And in this same vein the preacher explained that even as one engages in worldly matters and is attentive to the needs of the body, he is engaging in Torah.⁵¹ Contrasting with the view that perceived the six weekdays of work as devoid of any real value in themselves, the homilist stressed that within each day there is a hidden goodness that derives from the Light of the Seventh Day.⁵²

The Polonnoye preacher stated that "the soul that is in man ascends and, with trepidation, seeks to leave (the body), but it sees the Holy One, blessed be He (within everything), for "all the world is filled with His Presence," and (so) it returns (to the body). The reason both for the will to leave and for its returning (to the body) is that everything has a longing for its Root: accordingly the spirit of man wishes to ascend to God who gave it, but upon perceiving God in all the world...(it remains)."⁵³ And in the future when the Evil Inclination will be annulled, this world too will then be called the world of the Holy One, blessed be He."⁵⁴

Ya'akov Yosef's attraction to *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* and to the tenor of that work is a vantage point for ascertaining the preacher's deeply ascetic, pessimistic, and dualistic view of this world which, however, coexisted in the mind of the preacher with a significantly more positive sense of the world transcending that ascetic and dualistic world-view. As a Jewish poet living in the more urbane cultural milieu of medieval Spain, Avraham Ibn Hasdai could find an esthetic attraction to themes depicting life and the world in decidedly negative terms. Though psychologically drawn to that same vein of thought, the Hasidic preacher, in contrast, was also challenged by a sense of the world and life as inherently meaningful insofar as they are inseparable from the divine Presence and from the very real possibility of hallowing life. That drama within the mind of the eighteenth-century Hasidic preacher, Ya'akov Yosef ha-Kohen of Polonnoye, is viewed perhaps in clearer light against the background of his relationship to stories from *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*.

Surveying the larger landscape and background, another drama also comes into view, one in which stories from a tradition relating to the Buddha reach an eighteenth-century Hasidic preacher and author. The presence of such stories from a tradition focusing upon a central figure in Eastern religion both in medieval Hebrew literature and also in what is perhaps *the* classic eighteenth-century Hasidic homily text is certainly an intriguing detail of intercultural history. That drama testifies to connections between Indian tradition and Jewish literary creativity in a world lacking any semblance of global communication. Though in all likelihood, neither Ibn Hasdai nor Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoye had no awareness whatsoever of Gautama Siddharta and of the teaching and tradition that centered around him as Buddha; tales from that tradition crossed the cultural divide and spoke both to a Hebrew poet in twelfth-century Spain and to a Hasidic preacher in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe.

Notes

¹ *Kohen*, Hebrew for "priest," member of a priestly family.

² First printed in Korets, 1780.

³ Citations to *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* by Avraham ben Shmu'el ha-Levi Ibn Hasdai in this essay refer to the number of the chapter (*sha'ar*) as found in all extant editions.

⁴ In *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. xx, 271ff., 288), Edward Thomas mentioned von Le Coq's discovery of a Manichaean recension in Turfay, reported in Prosper Alfarc, *La vie chretienne du Bouddha* (J.A., Sept-Oct., 1917), and serving as the bridge between earlier Indian Sanskrit sources

and the Arabic versions as well as translations and adaptations in Greek, Latin, and other languages. Similarly, Charles Allen in *The Search for the Buddha* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002), p. 26, presumes that the original source was a popular Sanskrit biography of Gautama Buddha that made its way to the West via a Manichaean translation. Also Isamu Taniguchi in his article, "Story of Barlaam and Josaphat as Crucible of International Communication," *The Journal of Human Sciences*, University of St. Andrew, 21:2: 45, notes the role of the Manichaean version preceding the Arabic non-Christianized version that was current in Baghdad in the eighth century. That study claims that the original Arabic version, now lost, was followed by four other Arabic versions as well as by the Hebrew version (by Ibn Hasdai) and a Christianized Georgian version, *The Balavariani*, which was translated into Greek (probably by the Georgian monk, Euthymios of Athos, in the eleventh century), followed by a Latin translation. The names of the prince and his ascetic teacher were altered from language to language to become Barlaam and Ioasaph, and the identity of the prince as Guatoma Buddha was completely lost. A Coptic version is the subject of a study by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge (*Barrlam and Yewaswf—Being the Ethiopic Version of a Christianized Recension of the Buddhist Legend of the Buddha and the Bodhisattwa*, *The Ethiopic text edited for the first time with an English translation and introduction*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1923). See David Marshall Lang's translation of the Georgian work, *The Balavariani: A Tale from the Christian East* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), which, the translator posits, is the source of the later Greek translation. G. R. Woodward and H. Mattingly prepared an English translation of the Greek text that was published as *St. John Damascene: Barlaam and Ioasaph* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), as part of the Loeb Classical Library. M. Steinschneider (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 91) identified Ibn Hasdai's *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir* as a Hebrew version of the same tale that spread to various literatures in the medieval world in many different languages, forms, and adaptations.

⁵ Joseph Dan, *Hasippur ha'ivri bimei habeinayim—'iyunim betoldotav / The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), p. 143. In the same work, Dan discusses the phenomenon of stories of Indian origin within various medieval Hebrew writings, as those story elements traveled through Persian and Arabic culture (*ibid.*, pp. 29-30).

⁶ Budge, *Barrlam and Yewaswf*, xcix.

⁷ A. M. Habermann, *Ben ha melekh vehanazir* (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot Lesifrut, 1950).

⁸ Budge, *Barrlam and Yewaswf*, xxix.

⁹ Hayim Schirman, *Hashirah ha'ivrit besefarad uveprovans* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1954), I, pp. 401-404.

¹⁰ Budge, *Barrlam and Yewaswf*, xii. The prince and the hermit came to be revered as Christian saints and were formally canonized by the Papacy in the sixteenth century (*ibid.*, xxvii).

¹¹ The pagination of citations to *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* in this study refer to the 1972 edition (Jerusalem: Agudat Bet Wi'alipali), 2 vols. and is followed by the name of the Torah portion and number of the homily within the portion.

¹² Gedaliah Nigal, *Manhig va-'edah --de'ot umeshalim bereshit hahasidut 'al pi kitve R' Ya'akov Yosef miPolna'ah* (Jerusalem, 1962), p. 144.

¹³ *Sefer ben hamelekh vehanazir*, sha'ar 23.

¹⁴ Budge, *Barrlam and Yewaswf*, xcvi.

¹⁵ *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* I, p. 149 (Bo, fifth homily).

¹⁶ Bavli Berakhot 17a; Maimonides, *Mishne torah*, *Hilkhhot teshuvah*, 8.2.

¹⁷ Maimonides, *Shemoneh perakim*, ch. 3.

¹⁸ Nahmanides on Exod. 10:23; Sforino on Exod. 10:21.

¹⁹ *Toldot* II, 715 (*Vayelekh*, fifth homily).

²⁰ Lawrence V. Berman in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971) 15:487.

²¹ Bavli Baba Batra 11a.

²² *Toldot* II, p. 655 (*Shoftim*, third homily).

²³ *Toldot* II, p. 657 (*Shoftim*, fourth homily).

²⁴ *Toldot* II, p. 675 (*Shoftim*, tenth homily).

²⁵ If the story went back to Indian origins, this association with David at Ziklag, not integral to the story, would obviously have been an addition to an earlier version of the tale.

²⁶ *Toldot* I, p. 137 (*Shemot*, sixth homily).

²⁷ Bavli Pesahim, 2a.

²⁸ Bavli Berakhot 3b.

²⁹ The word *hamor* (ass), referring to the animal on which Abraham rode on his way to bind Isaac (Gen. 22:3) is interpreted in *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* and frequently in later Hasidic texts as an allusion to *homer* (matter, materiality).

³⁰ *Toldot*, I, p. 139 (*Shemot*, sixth homily).

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Midrash Kohelet rabbah*, 1.13, a midrashic statement frequently quoted in certain parts of the *Toldot*.

³³ *Toldot* I, p. 140 (*Shemot*, sixth homily).

³⁴ Note the letter to Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoye from the Baal Shem Tov quoted in Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik—the Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), pp. 50-53; Sh. Horodetsky, *Sefer shivhei habesht* (Tel Aviv: 1947), p. 62; Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, trans, and eds., *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 63-65; Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism—A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 115. Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century—A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p. 174, defines the Besht's message as a "rejection of asceticisms" that represented a turn from the mode of the older pietism that preceded the Baal Shem Tov.

³⁵ Note *Toldot* I, p. 136 (*Shemot*, sixth homily).

³⁶ *Toldot* I, p. 133 (*Shemot*, second homily).

³⁷ Ya'akov Yosef's identification of *Mitsrayim* with this world recalls the gnostic Christian tradition of a much earlier period that appears in the Hymn-Pearl from the *Acts of Thomas*, in which the hero receives the task of going down to Egypt to bring up the Pearl from there (Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 113.

³⁸ *Toldot* I, p. 150 (*Bo*, eighth homily).

³⁹ *Toldot*, I, p. 407 (*Behar*, first homily).

⁴⁰ *Toldot* I, pp. 149-150 (*Bo*, seventh homily).

⁴¹ *Toldot* I, p. 411 (*Behar*, fourth homily).

⁴² *Toldot* II, p. 649 (on *Re'eh*, fourth homily).

⁴³ *Toldot* I, p. 425 (*Behar*, thirteenth homily).

⁴⁴ Ya'akov Yosef brought in one of his homilies an even more powerful anecdote and parable, in the same spirit, quoted from *Sefer even-habohan* by Kolonymus ben Kolonymus, in which a person requiring a cure for his arrogance is shown a toilet so that

he might realize that what he experienced as delightful foods and the like all turns into excrement. (*Toldot I*, pp. 393-394, *Emor*, eleventh homily.)

⁴⁵ *Toldot I*, p. 141 (*Va'era*, first homily).

⁴⁶ *Toldot I*, p. 135 (*Shemot*, fourth homily).

⁴⁷ *Toldot I*, p. 421 (*Behar*, twelfth homily).

⁴⁸ *Toldot I*, p. 386 (*Emor*, sixth homily).

⁴⁹ *Toldot I*, p. 408 (*Behar*, first homily).

⁵⁰ *Toldot I*, p. 150 (*Bo*, eighth homily), also I, 385 (*Emor*, sixth homily).

⁵¹ *Toldot I*, p. 412 (*Behar*, seventh homily).

⁵² *Toldot I*, p. 424 (*Behar*, thirteenth homily).

⁵³ *Toldot II*, p. 648 (*Re'eh*, fourth homily).

⁵⁴ *Toldot II*, p. 648 (*Re'eh*, fourth homily).