

THE RECOVERY OF MYTH: M. Y. BERDYCZEWSKI AND HASIDISM

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IN AN ESSAY on "The Possible Nature of a 'Mythology' to Come," Henry A. Murray suggests that myth may have an important role to play in clarifying the cultural crisis of western civilization in the middle of the Twentieth Century:

[Myth] may be most effective when it provides no more than what is necessary in the way of an historical and contemporary perspective—say, a description of relevant antecedent events, of the current crisis, and of the desired outcome—to give meaning, significance, and urgency to some individual or social endeavor. (1968, p. 337)

Murray believes that a myth which would function in this manner might be transmitted by means of what he calls "mythic works of art" (p. 351). He acknowledges, however, that none of the myths which have been created by the human imagination in the past can deal adequately with the current cultural crisis:

But, so far as I can see, there are no known mythic patterns which are appropriate to the magnitude and exigency of the confronting situation. (p.351)

Northrop Frye (1976) has explored further this notion of mythic works of art. In discussing the relationship between literature and myth, Frye maintains

that all of European fiction since around the Fifteenth Century has drawn upon conventionalized "formulaic units" of "plot-themes and motifs" (p. 36) created by the human imagination. These formulaic units are found in their purest forms in traditional folktales and myths. The reason that writers of fiction for the past five hundred years have had to draw upon these formulaic units is that, as Frye explains, the human imagination can devise "only so many effective ways of telling a story" (p. 9).

The problem facing the writer of fiction, Frye argues, has been how to adjust these formulaic units to the world outside of his imagination which he is trying to portray in his fiction. Each work of fiction can be placed on a continuum, with the tendency to emphasize the reality of the world outside of the imagination at one extreme, and the tendency to emphasize the formulaic units of the imagination at the other extreme. In fiction usually labeled "realistic," greater efforts have been made by the author to adjust the formulaic units to the world outside of the imagination. In fiction which is usually labeled "romantic," the formulaic units of the imagination are presented, as in myths and folktales, in a relatively pure form.

According to Frye's analysis, the process which Murray suggests, that a myth appropriate to a cultural crisis could possibly be expressed in mythic works of art, is actually not a new one. Indeed, Frye maintains that many times writers of romantic fiction make more explicit use of the formulaic units of the imagination found in myths in order to recover a myth from the past which would function as a new myth on which the culture of their own time could be based. Such writers often discover in the myths of the past a set of values which they believe to be superior to the currently accepted values of their culture. They therefore reconstruct the mythic world of the past in their works as a model for a revolutionary set of values which they believe to be more appropriate to the cultural needs of their time. It would thus appear that one could find in the romantic literature of the past examples of the type of mythic works of art which, as Murray has suggested, would provide "a description of relevant antecedent events, of the current crisis, and of the desired outcome."

A significant example of such mythic works of art can be found in the writings of the European Hebrew writer Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (1865-1921). Berdyczewski was acutely aware of the cultural and political crisis facing Eastern European Jewry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He summarized his position vis-à-vis that crisis in an essay titled "Sətira ubinyan" ("Destruction and Building") (1897).¹ In that essay, B

1. My analysis is based on the version of the essay in Bin Gorion (1966a, pp. 29-30).

declares that due to the external and internal pressures on the Jewish people of his time, it has arrived at a point where "two worlds meet: existence or non-existence" (p. 29). The choice before the Jewish people is, according to B, "to be the last Jews or the first Hebrews" (p. 29).

As a result of the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E., B explains, the heroic ancient Hebrew people lost its sovereign political status and was thereby transformed into the passive and culturally degenerate Jewish people. Whereas the Hebrews had lived a life in which they related "to the world and to life in a natural manner" (p. 30), as Jews they became slaves to the spirit. Their natural human drives were perverted by an excessive involvement with the spiritualized Judaism of the Rabbinic period. In B's terms, the *Jews*, as individual persons, were replaced by *Judaism*.

This perversion of the natural drives of the people has led, B maintains, to the current division of the people into three camps:

We are torn to pieces. The one extreme forsakes the house of Israel and moves on to the alien world, offers up to it the creativeness of its soul and spirit, and gives up to it its best energies; the other extreme, the pious group, still dwells in its dark alleys, observing and keeping what it has been commanded. The enlightened ones, those who steer the middle course, are two faced: semi-occidental in their life and thought, and Jews in their synagogues. The vital forces are dissipated, and the nation is falling into ruins. (p. 30)²

Faced with the alternative extremes of the spiritualized life of Rabbinic Judaism and the more natural life of the gentiles, the assimilationists have chosen the latter, the traditional Jews have chosen the former, and the *Mas-kilim* (followers of the *Haskalah*, or Enlightenment, Movement) have attempted to strike a compromise between the two extremes.

B suggests, however, that none of these groups provides a viable alternative to the impending cultural death of the Jewish people. A cultural renaissance can come about, he believes, only by means of a transvaluation of those values (*šinnuy ha'arakim*) upon which Jewish culture has been based since the Rabbinic period. Only through such a radical rejection of Rabbinic Judaism, B argues, will the Jewish people rediscover the sense which the ancient Hebrews had of being connected with all of nature and life:

The entire world, life in its full meaning, the many desires, the will and inclinations of the heart—all of this touches us and our souls as it does every human being to the extent he is human. (p. 30)

2. The English translation of this passage is by Simon Halkin (1970, pp. 93–94).

The choice is up to the people: either to acquiesce in the death of the Jewish people, or to create a new Hebrew people which will liberate itself from the shackles of the Rabbinic tradition.³

In his essays, B tended to turn to the culture of the ancient Hebrews as a model for the kind of natural values that would have to replace the unnatural values of Rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, at the turn of the century, he believed that he had found a model for these natural values in one relatively recent Jewish movement, Hasidism, which had arisen among Eastern European Jewry during the latter part of the Eighteenth Century.⁴ In 1900, B published a collection of essays and stories titled *Sefer ḥasidim* (*Book of Hasidim*), in which he enthusiastically presented Hasidism to his readers as a positive historical model for cultural renaissance.

In the introductory essay of the collection, "Nišmat ḥasidim" ("The Soul of Hasidim") (pp. 5–20),⁵ B explains his positive appreciation of Hasidism. He writes that as a youth he had rejected the Hasidism in which he had been raised, because he perceived that in its attempt to attain spiritual purification, it was opposed to life. He embraced, instead, the ideology of the Haskalah, which emphasized involvement in the physical world in opposition to the spiritual demands of Hasidism. Eventually, however, he came to realize that at least in the early period of Hasidism, the purpose of the spiritual demands was not to *oppose* life, but rather to enable people to attain the spiritual heights which the fullest involvement in life can offer. He writes that this new realization has moved him to a nostalgic re-evaluation of Hasidism:

Therefore, I look longingly to the beautiful period of the days of Hasidism, for in that exalted period I find life lived from the depths of the heart, poetic and lofty life. I see in it for the first time a life of Life. (p. 11)

3. Aliza Klausner-Eshkol (1954) has studied the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche's writings on B's analysis of the Jewish cultural crisis of his time.

4. See Fishman (1969, p. 159). During the last decade of the Nineteenth Century and the first decade of the Twentieth Century, B participated with other European Jewish writers in a literary movement which challenged the opposition of the Haskalah to Hasidism. In what have come to be called Neo-Hasidic essays and stories Berdyczewski, Simon Dubnow, Shmuel Abba Horodetzky, Martin Buber, Hillel Zeitlin, Isaac Leib Peretz, Yehudah Steinberg, and others presented Hasidism to their readers as a source of values for contemporary Jewish culture. Around the year 1910, B abandoned his Neo-Hasidic position, for he decided that Hasidism did not provide an adequate solution to the Jewish cultural dilemmas of his time (see Werses, 1971, p. 112).

5. "Nišmat ḥasidim" was first published in 1899. Dan Almagor and Samuel Fishman (1970, p. 7) cite a letter which B wrote to David Frischmann in 1897, in which he mentioned that he had already written the essay in that year.

According to B, at a time when Jews appeared to be moving in two opposite directions, strict observance of the law or assimilation into universal humanity, Hasidism was able to provide a radical third alternative. It developed a kind of synthesis of these two extremes and gained a popular following among the people by infusing the old forms of the Jewish tradition with a new, revolutionary set of values. B describes the contrast between the traditional Jewish pietists and the new Hasidic man as follows:

In the midst of the people of the old group which preceded Hasidism, people sitting wrapped in their old prayer shawls, and on Minor Yom Kippur [a fast day observed the day before the New Moon] which occurred during the beautiful spring days crying over the "exile of the *šəkina*" ("presence of God"), or blackening their teeth in fasting for the sins they have sinned against God . . . and if we introduce into this world one of the first Hasidim, standing upright, with the spirit of life in him, a spirit which penetrates the world open before him in all its breadth and depth, then he will be like a king among troops, like a man with the wreath of God on his head among those who sit in darkness. The latter are afraid of desecrating the holy, while he even does profane actions with the purity of holiness. (p. 14)

In his relationship with the world, this new Hasidic man was able to discover a path to spiritual exaltation. By means of the three-fold experience of *hitlahavut* ("ecstasy"), *hitdabbəqut* ("cleaving to God"), and *qədušša* ("holiness"), the Hasid was able to transcend his sense of himself as a separate entity and to perceive that he, the world, and God are one, thereby purifying both himself and the world. Such a spiritual experience was best achieved by the Hasid when he would leave the city to re-establish the "thread which connects the human being with nature" (p. 17):

Not in masses of people, in a large community, will he fulfill his spiritual needs, but rather in complete isolation, there far from the noise of life and the mob, there where he dwells alone, there he finds himself, there he is what he really is . . . and this existence, which is dependent on 'eyn *sop* ("infinite God") and His spirit which unifies all, he feels within himself and from himself, from the life which is around him, from the inanimate and the vegetation, from the speech of the animals and the birds, and even the song of the trees and rivers. (pp. 17-18)⁶

6. B appears to have been attracted mainly to the Hasidic doctrine which Louis Jacobs (1973, p. 9) has characterized as "panentheism," according to which the apparent separateness of the world from God is an illusion, for in actuality "all is *in* God." This doctrine, which had its origins in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, was particularly stressed by the school of the

In comparing B's two essays, "Sətira ubinyan" and "Nišmat ḥasidim," we see that he viewed the Jewish cultural dilemmas of his period as similar to those of the period of the rise of Hasidism. In both periods, traditional Jewish teachings had severed Jews from a full involvement in all aspects of nature and life. As a result, the people in both periods were in danger of being split into two extreme camps: one which clung tenaciously to the overly spiritualized traditional teachings, and the other which abandoned Judaism in pursuit of nature and life. In "Nišmat ḥasidim," B claimed that in the Eighteenth Century, Hasidism provided a viable synthesis between these two extremes by teaching not that the spirit is opposed to life, as both groups had come to assume, but rather that one can achieve the highest spiritual experience by means of a fuller involvement in nature and life. He looked, therefore, to early Hasidism as a model for a Jewish cultural renaissance in his time which would achieve a true synthesis of the spiritual demands of traditional Jews and the assimilationist Jews' desire for nature and life.

In addition to the essay "Nišmat ḥasidim," B expressed his position on Hasidism as a model for cultural renaissance in a story titled "Šəney 'olamot" ("Two Worlds"), which he also included in the collection *Seper ḥasidim* (pp. 23–27). This story is a rewritten version of the first story in *Šibḥey habe'št* (*Praises of the Baal Shem Tov*) (1815), the earliest published collection of Hasidic stories.⁷ In the original version of the story it is told that before Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, was born, his father Eliezer was taken captive and sold into slavery in a gentile land. During the period of his captivity, Eliezer maintained his identity as a pious Jew and eventually rose to the rank of adviser to the king of the land. According to the story, on the merit of his observance of the Jewish tradition in captivity, Heaven enabled him to return home, and his wife gave birth in their old age to Israel Baal Shem Tov.

One can discern in this Hasidic story a relatively pure form of a plot structure which Frye suggests is quite common in myths, folktales, and

Maggid of Mezhirech, as Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer (1968) has pointed out. In the essay "Nišmat ḥasidim" B quotes a number of times from the writings of the *Ḥabad* school of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyady, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezhirech.

7. "Šəney 'olamot" was first published in 1899. Two later versions of this story by B, both titled "Bə'eres rəhoqa" ("In a Faraway Land"), can be found in Bin Gorion (1967, pp. 307–308) and Bin Gorion (1966b, p. 306). An English translation of the latter version is in Bin Gorion (1976, II, pp. 925–927). Shmuel Werses (1971, p. 114) has made the observation that these later versions reflect B's developing commitment to render the Hasidic text in a more literal manner than he had in *Seper ḥasidim*. For the original Hasidic version of the story see Horodetzky (1947, pp. 39–41). An English translation of the original Hasidic version of the story is in Ben-Amos and Mintz (1970, pp. 7–11).

romantic fiction (1976, p. 129). This plot structure is based on the plot-themes of descent and ascent. According to Frye, in the plot-theme of descent, the hero descends to a lower world in which his identity becomes confused and his actions restricted. In the plot-theme of ascent, the hero rediscovers his true identity, his freedom is restored, and he ascends from the lower world back to the world from whence he had descended. In the first story in *Šibhey habe'št*, Eliezer is taken captive from the Jewish world and is forced to descend to the "lower world" of the gentiles, where his identity as a pious Jew is in grave danger. Eventually, he ascends from that lower world and returns to the Jewish world, where his freedom to live the life of a pious Jew is once again unrestricted. His heroism consists in his ability to maintain his true identity as a pious Jew in a gentile world, where other lesser Jews would be tempted to abandon their identities and assimilate.

This plot structure is quite an appropriate one for a story about the father of the founder of Hasidism, for it reflects the plot structure of the central myth on Hasidism on which, as Yosef Dan has noted (1975, p. 56), numerous Hasidic stories are based: the descent of the *šaddiq* (the spiritual leader of the Hasidic community) for the purpose of ascent (*yərīda šorek 'aliyya*). As the hero of the Hasidic story, the *šaddiq* descends from his spiritual heights in order, in terms of Lurianic Kabbalah, to redeem the sparks of holiness trapped in the evil shells and to raise those sparks to their source in the divine light. In so doing, the *šaddiq* contributes to the process of *tiqqun 'olam*, or restoration of the unity of the cosmos.⁸ The story of Eliezer teaches that only a person who is able to descend to the lower world of the gentiles and maintain his identity as a pious Jew is worthy to be the father of the Baal Shem Tov, the prototype of the *šaddiq*, who is obligated to descend into the realm of evil to raise the sparks of holiness and restore the unity of the cosmos.

"Šəney 'olamot," B's rewritten version of this story, follows closely the mythic plot structure of the Hasidic story on which it is based. It thus belongs properly to Frye's category of "romantic fiction." However, just as the plot-themes of descent and ascent in the original version of the story allude to the myth of the *šaddiq*, so B uses these same plot-themes to allude to a myth of his own creation.

B alludes to his myth by reinterpreting the three situations in which Eliezer finds himself during the plot-themes of descent and ascent in the original version: his situation before his descent, his situation in the lower world of the gentiles, and his situation after he has ascended to the world from which he

8. A fuller exposition of Lurianic Kabbalah and its influence on Hasidic teachings can be found in Scholem (1946, ch. 7, 9).

had been taken captive. A careful reading of B's version reveals that in portraying these three situations, B alludes to three alternative types of Jewish identity which form the basis of his myth.

The description of Eliezer before he descends clearly suggests that he has the identity of a pious traditional Jew, who is careful to fulfill his obligations to his God, as well as to his fellow human being. As the description proceeds, the reader begins to realize that in contrast to the positive portrayal of Eliezer in the original version of the story, B raises serious doubts about the character of Eliezer. The main flaw in Eliezer's character lies in his inability to grasp the realities of human existence. He lives with his wife "far from the city dwellers in a small inn" (p. 23). His home is described as being filled with "peace and tranquility" (p. 23). However, the narrator points out, in the world outside of Eliezer's home there is no peace. In the ships which sail on the river near Eliezer's home two types of people travel: "sheep-people" and "wolf-people" (p. 23). Eliezer and his wife are completely unaware that human existence consists of a constant struggle between wolf-like aggressive people and sheep-like passive people. Significantly, the only member of their household who is aware of this dichotomy of human existence is a gentile servant whose status is based on a dichotomy: he is described as "half-slave and half-free" (p. 23). It is this servant who must brave the dangers of the outside world to accompany the guests of the inn as they travel on the road leading to and from the inn.

Eliezer's illusion of peace and tranquility is disturbed only by his realization that the *šəkina* is in exile. His method of dealing with this problem is that of ascetic mourning:

And at midnight, at the time when the whole world rests from the vexations of the day, he goes up onto the roof, rolls in the dust, and cries over the exile of the *šəkina*. (p. 23)

We know from B's essay "Nišmat ḥasidim" how negatively he viewed this identity of the ascetic traditional Jews, whom he described as

people sitting wrapped in their old prayer shawls, and on Minor Yom Kippur which occurred during the beautiful spring days crying over the "exile of the *šəkina*," or blackening their teeth in fasting for the sins they have sinned against God.

In the context of the story, this ascetic mourning is also portrayed negatively in that it has no effect on the exile of the *šəkina* or the Jewish people. On the contrary, it puts Eliezer in a vulnerable position analogous to that of passive

sheep among aggressive wolves: he is kidnapped by gentile robbers and is forced into slavery in a foreign land. Even his God is powerless to help him: He is portrayed as passively roaring like a lion, "Woe to the children who have been exiled" (p. 24).

Eliezer's second situation, as a high minister in the court of the king, is portrayed more positively. Eliezer preserves certain aspects of his identity as a traditional Jew, especially in his observance of the Sabbath and dietary laws. However, he has abandoned his ascetic practices and has ceased to relate passively to the world. He uses his political power to make important contributions to his newly adopted land. In the words of the narrator:

And God is with him. In everything he does he succeeds. And the land is blessed because of him—all of the enemies which rise against it are defeated—quiet, without fear, and fruitful. (p. 25)

Instead of living in an illusion of tranquility, Eliezer has now come to learn how to create tranquility by becoming actively involved in the real world.

This portrayal of Eliezer in his second situation alludes to the identity of the Maskil who, while attempting to maintain his ties to the Jewish tradition, has begun to involve himself in the gentile European cultures and to make significant contributions to those cultures. Since the portrayal of Eliezer's character in this second situation is a more positive one than that of Eliezer in his first situation, the reader might infer that B prefers the Maskilic identity over that of the piously ascetic traditional Jew. Eliezer, however, is not completely satisfied with his new identity. His mourning over the exile of the *šəḳina* has been transformed into mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem, as well as a longing to return to his wife and home. Furthermore, he is still faced with a dichotomy, which is symbolized by his clothing: "under his purple garment he wears sackcloth" (p. 25). Eliezer suffers from a dual identity: outwardly he appears to identify as a member of the upper classes of the land, yet within himself he remains a Jew living in exile. We can recall B's condemnation of this dual identity of the Maskilim in his essay "Sətira uḅinyan":

The enlightened ones, those who steer the middle course, are two faced: semi-occidental in their life and thought, and Jews in their synagogues.

The transcendence of the dichotomies which Eliezer faced as a traditional Jew and as a Maskil is achieved only in the identity of his son, Israel, who is born to Eliezer when he is liberated from the land of his captivity and returns home. In transcending all dichotomies, Israel arrives at the true experience of

peace and tranquility which had eluded his father Eliezer as a traditional Jew and as a Maskil. The narrator's description of Israel's way of relating to the world closely resembles B's description in "Nišmat ḥasidim" of the Hasid standing alone in nature sensing his oneness with the world and with God, although in this passage B's narrator speaks more of Israel's sense of a life-force than of the spirit of God:

Within the simple life he dwells, and in the purity of wholeness he lives. In everything around him, in everything, in everything he hears as if life is speaking, as if it is expressing itself powerfully. In the heaven above, as well as the earth below, in the silence of the mountains and the waves of the river, even there in the depths of his heart, he hears the sound of life and its reverberation. (p. 26)

We can now see that the Hasidic myth of the descent and ascent of the *ṣaddiq* embodied in the first story in *Šibḥey ḥabe'šit* has been reworked by B into a myth of modern Jewish history. Such a myth is meant to function in the manner which Murray suggests, as "a description of relevant antecedent events, of the current crisis, and of the desired outcome." The story of the descent of Eliezer in the original version to the threatening world of the gentiles is transformed by B into the story of the transition of the modern Jew from the perverted values of traditional Judaism to the inadequate compromise solution of the Haskalah. It is this transition which has led to the cultural crisis in which Jews find themselves at the turn of the century. The desired outcome of this crisis would be the birth of a Neo-Hasidic generation which would transcend the dichotomies of traditional Judaism and the Haskalah and achieve a sense of oneness with the world.

In the final passage of the story, as Eliezer is about to die, his thoughts and feelings are described as follows:

A kind of sad restfulness fills the heart of the old man who is going to eternity when he sees the *two worlds* touch [or kiss] each other. . . . He knows that this little son of his will rise to greatness and will surely be a lamp for Israel; yet now, when he is still young, he will be abandoned and alone. Suddenly, his lips whisper, "My son, behold I see that you will light my lamp; remember that God is with you." (p. 17)

The "two worlds" about which Eliezer thinks can be interpreted as the two worlds of Eliezer's finite existence on earth and his eternal existence in heaven. The image of the two worlds touching, or kissing, at the moment of death is drawn by B from the Rabbinic tradition.⁹

9. See Jastrow (1950, p. 941).

We know, however, from B's reference to "two worlds" in his essay "Sətira ubinyan," that the image of "two worlds" had another, related set of associations for him. In the essay, the two worlds referred to are "existence or non-existence," the new Hebrew people or the old Jewish people. These two worlds are radically opposed to each other: the old world of the Jewish people must be destroyed, so that on its ruins will be built the new world of the Hebrew people. In the story, however, the transition is a more harmonious one. In Eliezer's mind the two worlds touch, or kiss: Eliezer, symbol of traditional and Maskilic Jews, calmly accepts and affirms the validity of the new Hasidic identity of his son Israel.

B's hope is that just as in the Eighteenth Century Hasidism was able to convince large numbers of traditional Jews to adopt its revolutionary set of cultural values, so might traditional Jews and Maskilim find in the values and world-view of Hasidism a basis for a cultural renaissance at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. When they do, B's myth of modern Jewish history will have reached its conclusion. The Jewish people will have then transcended the dichotomies of its perverted identities and returned to the ancient Hebrew people's harmonious relationship with nature and with life.

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