

Judah he-Hasid

Curt Leviant, Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature; A Treasury of 2000 Years of Jewish Creativity, New York , 1969 (pages 378-388)

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The Book of the Pious (*Sefer Hasidim*) has come down to us in two versions: an early draft that is long and unmethodic, and a later, well-edited, brief compendium. Some scholars feel that *Sefer Hasidim* is a collective work, one of whose authors is Judah he-Hasid (the Pious) who died in 1217 and was one of the central figures of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry. Others contend that most of the work was written by him. The unified style and the prevalent personality of one man that mark the book seem to support the latter contention. Judah, about whom little information is available, worked on this volume all his life, adding thoughts in an unsystematic fashion; then, to his basic text were added both the writings of his father, Samuel, and those of his pupils.

Reflecting the thoughtways of medieval Jewry, the work is a blend of ethics—social justice, kindness and charity are always highlighted— and superstition. (“If a man has a bad dream or has seen demons and touches fire before telling it to anyone, no harm will come to him.”) A striking feature of the work is its wealth of folklore, its plentiful stories of sprites and devils. (The German-Christian demonology that had rooted itself in the Jewish thinking of the day demonstrates the close contact that Jews had with Christians.) Among the hundreds of items in *Sefer Hasidim*

are aphoristic statements about honoring parents, slander, business and community affairs, prayer, secular books; there are remarks about holiness, the welcoming of guests, purity, taxes, attitude toward gentiles, punishment of children, charity and modesty. Some of the remarks are prefaced by readable anecdotes and tales; others by stories about contemporary personalities.

Judah's purpose was to create a work that would teach the Hasidim the proper path; his book, therefore, is a mirror of the life and thought of German Jews in Judah's age, reflecting their economic, social and theological views, their ideals, their relationship with Christians, their personal habits and many folk beliefs. For instance, a seemingly incidental remark that sacred books may not be bound with the manuscripts of popular romances indicates that these supposedly forbidden "stories about kings and tournaments" were popular among Jews and that their use as binding material was widespread.

Judah the Pious, whose volume of practical ethics made an impact on Jews throughout the centuries and on subsequent writers of ethical tracts, also wrote a commentary on the Torah and on the cycle of prayers, and was editor of the travel notes of his fellow townsman, Petachia (see p. 358). A penchant for modesty prevented him from signing his works, all of which appeared anonymously.

THE BOOK OF THE PIOUS (SEFER HASIDIM)

Be not jealous of the man who is greater than thou and despise none who is smaller than thou.

If thou hast a guest, never speak to him about learned matters unless thou knowest he is able to partake in the conversation.

Never put to shame thy manservant or thy maidservant.

The man who is cruel to animals will have to answer for it on the Day of Judgment, and the very drivers will be punished for applying the spur too often.

Those who constantly fast are not in the good way. Scribes, teachers, and workmen are altogether forbidden to inflict penance upon themselves. If the Holy One, blessed be He, had any particular delight in much fasting, He would have commanded it to Israel; but He only asked of them that they should worship Him in humility.

If a man should ask: "Behold, I have money; shall I buy a Scroll of the Torah for it or shall I distribute it to the destitute poor?" Answer him with the words of Isaiah: "When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him, and hide not thyself from thine own flesh" [Isa. 58:7].

If a man sees a non-Jew committing a sin, let him protest against it if he has the power to do so; for behold, did not the Holy One, blessed be He, send the prophet Jonah to the people of Nineveh that they may do repentance?

The Holy One, blessed be He, executes the judgment of the oppressed, whether Jew or Christian, hence cheat not anybody.

If a man has a book in his hand he must not display his anger by pounding on it or by striking others with it. The teacher who is angry with his student must not hit him with it, nor should the student ward off blows with a book unless the blows are very dangerous.

There was once a student who stuttered and it took him quite a while before he managed to get a word out of his mouth, and when the others laughed at him he would become angry. His teacher, therefore, said to him: "Don't ask questions in their presence. Wait until they leave, or write down your difficulties on paper, and I'll answer you."

A man should not rear an orphan who carries tales for he will get no thanks for it, nor should a person tolerate a talebearer among his pupils, for there will never be any peace among them because of his tattling. Nor should one tolerate a male or female servant who tells tales.

It is written in the Bible [Job 22:23 and 11:14]: "If thou return to the Almighty, thou shalt be built up, if thou *put away unrighteousness far from thy tents.*" If this is true, why then is it necessary to repeat: "If iniquity be in thy hand put it far away, and *let not unrighteousness dwell in thy tents.*" It is merely that the Bible wishes to teach us that the teacher shall not say: "I'll let this mean student remain in order that I may make a better person of him, for he can learn from my good example." It will be of no avail! It is more probable that he will teach the other children in the house to do wrong.

When a person teaches children—some of whom are more brilliant than the others—and sees that it is disadvantageous for all of them to study together inasmuch as the brilliant children need a teacher for themselves alone, he should not keep quiet. He ought to say to the parents, even if he loses by making the division: "These children need a separate teacher; and these, a separate teacher."

[Prov. 22:6]: "Train up a child in the way he should go." If you see a child making progress in Bible, but not in Talmud, do not push him by teaching him Talmud, and if he understands Talmud, do not push him by teaching him Bible. Train him in the things which he knows.

There is a kind of humility which inherits Gehenna, and causes the heirs of the humble to inherit a burning fire in Gehenna. In what manner is it? If a man sees that his children, relatives, or pupils are of bad behavior, and it lies within his power to correct them, by reprimanding or by beating them, but he says to himself: "I shall rather be agreeable to them and not reprimand or beat them," he causes them to inherit Gehenna. For they will corrupt their way, and will even do mischief to their father and their mother, so that they will despise them, and curse the day wherein they were born.

It is in connection with such a case that it is written: "He that spareth the rod hateth his son." [Prov. 13:24]. It is also said that he who smites his grown-up son transgresses the injunction: "Put not a stumbling block before the blind." [Lev. 19:14]. But a son that is accustomed to reproofs

of instruction and is beaten while small, will not resent it if his father beats him when he is grown up. It is also written: "Unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord" [Ps. 27:13]; there are some dots on the word *Unless*, for David said: "Peradventure I caused my sons to sin, and am not able to make amends by repenting"; for it is written: "And his father had not grieved him all his life in saying: Why hast thou done so?" [I Kings 1:6].

There is another kind of humility which likewise brings a man down to Gehenna. For instance, a man sits in a court of justice, and knows that the judges are in error; or a private man knows that the court is in error, but says: "How shall I go and put them to shame?" or a man knows that the judges are not well versed in law, while he is well versed, and when they say to him: "Sit with us that we may not go astray," he replies: "I shall not take a seat, for ye are well versed." It is obvious that if they go astray, the sin is to be attached to him.

Another instance is, when a man hears that the congregation speak falsely, and he says: "Who am I that I should speak before them?" Behold, it is written: "And in thy majesty prosper, ride on, in behalf of truth and humility of righteousness"; [Ps. 45:5]; from this we infer that there is a kind of humility which is not righteousness, as the above and similar cases show. It is also said: "An untutored priest should not say the benedictions in the presence of scholars."

There is a kind of charity which is pernicious. In what manner is it? One who gives alms to adulterers or to a glutton or a drunkard. For it is written: "She shall not fall into harlotry" [Lev. 19:29]; and thou mayest read, "She shall not cause to fall into harlotry"; "Thou shalt not commit adultery." [Ex. 20:14]; and thou mayest read, "Thou shalt not cause to commit adultery"; "Thou shalt not murder" [Ex. 20:13]; and it may be read: "Thou shalt not cause to murder." He who supplies weapons of destruction to murderers is regarded as if he himself had committed murder. For it is written: "He hath also prepared for him the weapons of death" [Ps. 7:14]: He who gives food to robbers is like their accomplice.

Similarly, he who gives alms to adulterers is regarded as though he had aided them and brought them together, for they take the money that is given to them, and offer it as a hire to harlots. It is also said that a man should give no alms at all rather than give it publicly. In a similar sense it is also said that if a man who cannot pay his debts gives alms, it is obvious that his charity is robbery.

There is a kind of piety which is bad. For instance, a man whose hands are unclean sees a holy book fall into the fire, and says: "It is better that it should be burned," and does not touch the book. Another instance has also been cited: a man sees a woman drown in the river, and says: "It is better that she should drown than that I should touch her."

There is also false piety. For instance: a man brings out a Scroll of the Law into the public thoroughfare on the Sabbath on account of a fire; or when a man says: "How shall I save a man's life and profane the Sabbath?" Another instance is: a question about declaring a thing forbidden or lawful is referred to a man who knows that he is well versed in the Law, though there are others like him in the city, and he says: "Address the question to others"; behold, his meekness may lead to sin: peradventure if he had given his decision, he would have forbidden that which others had declared lawful.

There is sometimes a righteous judge that perishes in his righteousness. For instance: he sees two litigants, one being a swindler, and the other a simpleton; the swindler knows how to plead, but the simpleton, who does not know how to plead, is right; concerning him it is written: "Open thy mouth for the dumb." [Prov. 31:8]. Likewise, if he knows that the verdict is unjust, one of the litigants having hired false witnesses, he should not say: "Let the sin be attached to the witnesses."

A favor sometimes turns out to be harmful, and is regarded as an evil for its author and his offspring. In what manner is it? For instance: a man causes that sinners and they that lead others astray should dwell in the city, it is evident that he and his offspring will stumble over them, and they will do mischief to his offspring. It is in connection with such a case that it is written: "And he did that which is not good among his people." [Ezekiel 18:18]. (Another explanation: *And he did that which is not good among his people* refers to him who disgraces his family; he is punished, because he sinned by inflicting shame and injury upon his people). Another instance: he who does a good deed in order to be honored and to praise himself thereby.

Be a man's piety ever so great, he can make no claim to recompense at God's hands, were his life to last even for thousands of years; there is none, no, not the least of the benefits conferred on him by God which he could repay. Therefore let no one serve his Creator merely because he hopes for Paradise, but out of pure love for Him and His commandment. Let man in his solitary hours feel the same repugnant shame of evil to the sight of God, as he would to commit it in the sight of men, and let him lay down life freely for Him; for if we do not so, we are of less account in the scale than hireling soldiers who go into battle at the words of command. That our soul may become perfected in righteousness, needs must that we bear griefs and agonies; and never should it cross our minds for an instant to shrink from boldly declaiming that we are Jews.

Mislead no one through thy actions designedly, be he Jew or not-Jew; be not disputatious and quarrelsome with people, whatever be their faith. Be honorable in thy business dealings; do not say that such or such a price

has been offered thee for thy wares when the thing is not true, and not behave as though thou hadst a desire to sell what thou hast, when there is no serious thought of doing so in thy mind: such things are unworthy of an Israelite.

If one, be he Jew or not-Jew, comes to borrow money from thee, and thou wilt not because of doubt of repayment, say not that thou hast no money.

If a contract be made between Jews and not-Jews, binding to mutual observance and performance, the first man must fulfil it even if the last fail to perform that to which they are bound. If a Jew attempt to kill a not-Jew, and the latter only wishes to defend himself, but not in return to kill, we are bound to help him in his self-defense.

Injustice must be done to none, whether he belong to our religion or to another. On the worldly possessions of those who oppress the workman, who buy stolen goods, and keep articles decorated with heathen symbols or figures in their household furniture, rests no blessing. They or their children will surely lose all they have.

In thy intercourse with not-Jews, be careful to be as wholly sincere as in that with Jews: needst not that thou obtrude on him who is no Jew, argument as to his religious errors, and thou wouldst do better to live on charity, than to abscond with money not thine, to the disgrace of the Jewish faith and name. If one not-Jew seek council of thee, tell him where he will find a true man and not one deceiver in the place whither he repairth . . .

If an assassin take refuge with thee, give him no protection, even though he be a Jew; if one who bears a heavy burden on his shoulders meet thee on a narrow and difficult path, make way for him, even though he be no Jew. If one not a Jew observe the precepts of the natural [Noachian] moral law, restore to him whatsoever he may have lost, hold him in higher honor than the Israelite who neglects the truth given him by God. For the rest, in most places Jews are not unlike Christians in their morals and usages.

If any one offer thee an amulet, alleging it to be useful in helping to favor or wealth, carry it not, but place thy undivided confidence in God alone. If, when thy plans fail, thou wouldst seek any other Lord than the Eternal thy God, it would be apostasy. If thou canst possibly support thyself with the little thou hast, take not aught from another in order that thou mayest be rich; for few of those who take from others have any happiness in life.

No blessing rests on the money of people who clip coin, make a practice of usury, use false weights and measures, and are in general not honest in business; their children and their friends' friends lose their homes at last and have to beg their bread. But many a one falls into poverty because he has looked down upon poor people or has repulsed them with harsh words.

If one is able to work, I give him nothing, nothing. It is better to spend on poor people than to lavish in keeping useless foolish things, as birds or other such trifles.

To him who is merciful and good to men, God is merciful and good: the pitiless man is like the cattle of the field which are indifferent to the suffering of their kind. There are three sorts of people for whom we ought to feel especial pain and sympathy: a reasonable, prudent creature subjected to a crazy fool; a good man who has to take orders from a bad; and a noble being dependent upon one of vulgar nature. There are three to whom we should sternly close our hearts: a cruel person who does pitiless wrong and vile things; the fool who rushes on ruin in spite of warning; and the ingrate. Ingratitude is the blackest of faults; it is not to be endured even towards the dumb creatures whom we use.

Worthy of punishment is he, too, who heaps excessive burdens on the carrying beast, beats and tortures it, twitches a cat by its ears to hurt it, or plunges his spurs too deep into a horse's flank. A sick or breeding beast ought to be tenderly dealt with; if a not dangerous dog runs into thy house, hunt him out with a small whip that hurts not, but see that thou strike him not with a heavy stick or pour boiling water over him, or jam him in the doors, or madden him by any ill-usage. Even worse hath he to answer for, who deals harshly with servingman or woman. If the people are good, yet thou needest money, part with them not to any cruel person who will chastise them with inhuman severity.

Hear not calumny willingly; seek rather to admonish and restrain him who complains bitterly to thee of the doings of another. When thou speakest concerning one, tell the good thou knowest of him; but do not so in presence of his enemies, for they would make it opportunity to vent themselves concerning his faults.

Praise not one rich man in presence of another rich man; one author in presence of another author, and as a rule, never one man of any business in presence of another whose business is the same; only thou mayest freely give all glory to a God-fearing man in presence of another who fears his God.

Make not reply in high-pitched self-asserting tones, but with moderate and sweet, and when thou findest thyself among people who have nothing better to do than to jeer and gibe, leave them as soon and as quickly as thou canst; for mockery leads to want of respect for one's self and others, and that is the high road to an unchaste life. Insist not upon having explanations by word of mouth with one who, as you ought to know, will turn a deaf ear to thy side of the question, or who is likely to become embittered and vengeful owing to such talk.

If a rich man and a poor man be sick, and thou seest all the world going to see the rich man, go thou to the poor one, even though he be ignorant and unlettered. But when thou hast to choose between supplying the needs

of a learned man, or counseling the susceptibilities of a poor man, the first case is of the greater urgency; and if it should be that the scholar is also devout and God-fearing, but the poor man not so, then disregard the poor man's feelings altogether, if need be, to mark thy respect for learned piety. Be intimate and work with rather an uneducated man of generous soul than a learned one closefisted.

If thou art in debt, pay thy debts before thou givest alms. If thou requirest one to join with thee in fellowship of study, and knowest of a worthy, reserved and modest disciple of the schools of whom others in reckless high spirits are wont to make mockery, choose and take him to thee, that one who is undeservedly set down may be lifted up to his right place. Make no sign of visible disgust when thou meetest people afflicted with loathsome visible disease; for they are God's creatures, remember, and healthy as well as sick are all alike dependent upon Him.

Say not, "I will avenge that wrong." Place thy trust in God; He will keep thee. If any one hath deceived thee by false weights, stolen from thee, borne false witness against thee, be not so misguided as to avenge thyself by doing the like. When insult is poured on thee, be thou unmoved, and never permit thy pupils, or those of thy household, to assail with injurious words or blows, when they meet him, one who is doing injury to thee. Expel all envy, all hatred from thy breast; if a fund be making up, and thy name be put down for more than thy possessions warrant, so that richer men pay less than they strictly should, breed not quarrel and mortification for thyself and others by remonstrance and reproach; hold thy peace and busy thyself more than ever with the study of divine things. When thy wife makes thy life heavy for thee, and hatred for her threatens to take possession of thee, then implore the Lord not to give thee another wife, but to turn that one's heart once more back to thee in love.

Let no one be troubled in mind or take up wrong ideas because of the prosperity of wicked people or of such as hold parents in little honor; their end is bad. The reason why good men have an ill lot in life is, lest men should fancy that the good man can only then be good when the world goes well with him. If a congregation has bad men at its head, that is a punishment for not valuing as they should the good men among them. The children of noble, righteous converts to the faith are to be preferred for the marriage tie to children of Jews of nature or conduct not so high.

The ancients of our nation composed works and sent them forth without their names; they disclaimed to seek recompensing delight for their labor in this lower earthly life. And if there be any one who of pure vanity is minded to perpetuate the memory of himself in some work, very surely he will miss his aim. There was once a rich man, who would build a beautiful synagogue at his own charge alone, and suffered not the congregation to contribute to the pious work, because he would that the memorial should

be of him and his posterity alone. But ere he died his children all were dead.

If a father knows his married daughter to be busy and occupied with her husband's affairs, let him not suggest or order her to attend to his own, unless the husband allow of it, postponing his own interests for a while. If a mother hath enjoined some action on her son, and the father come suddenly and say: "Who gave orders that this thing should be done?" let not the son say that it was the mother. For if it should hap that the father in rage should vent an angry curse against his wife, the fault would be laid at the door of the son rather than his own.

If a son see an opportunity for some transaction of profit, let him rather miss the chance than rouse his sleeping father, unless he is well assured that the father would be more vexed because the gain was sacrificed than because his sleep was broken. He who spends substance in supporting other than parents and relations will reap nothing but ingratitude, while his property will fall to those of his own blood at last. If a father treats one son well, another ill, it is the latter who is very likely to succeed to his possessions. Let one who hath never known parents, but only elder brothers, render the respect and honor due to father and mother unto these.

Parents may not hinder a son's marriage that he may continue to work for them; let him take a wife and remain with them still. If he can find no wife at the place where his parents live, and these be aged and need his care, let him not leave that city: and if, taking a wife, he can no longer care for such helpless father and mother, let him remain unwedded. If he can pay for the support and care of his parents, then he hath a right to seek wife and settle elsewhere, only let him see to it that they are not such as are repugnant to the parents' feelings. If his choice hath fallen on a worthy girl of honorable parentage, but his father or mother wish to force him to take one not worthy, because her relatives offer money, he needs herein by no means yield to his parents' wishes, for their proceeding is blameworthy.

Parents must by no means, on no account whatever, strike a grown-up son, curse him, or so move him to wrath that he forget himself and with whom he is dealing. If children are hopelessly divided in feeling, a father does well if he arrange all things concerning his possessions while he lives, and place property and children alike, if they be minors, with all legal form under guardianship and trust.

Let not a quite young man take to wife one who hath reached forty years; let no girl be married against her will to an elderly man or one whom she cannot love. It is a thing highly to be disapproved that elderly men should dye gray hairs black to deceive young girls as to their years.

In most cases bad parents beget bad children. If parents have no scruples about false coin and false weights, the sons are apt to commit the same

crimes. If we see about us so many uneducated and ignorant, but descendants of people of high instruction, this is the fault of parents whom worldly interest hath led to form connections with unlearned persons. There was a man who lived a poor and hard life, to whom a wealthy woman was offered in marriage; he refused her, for her brothers were unworthy and he dreaded lest his children by her might be the same. So far as legal duty goes, a man indeed need not abstain from wedding a wife so connected, just as he may repudiate his wife for reasons that seem trifling and inadequate; but many things are permitted by the law, the doing of which may lay upon a man the rendering of a heavy account some day or other.

On the day of the last judgment those who are of kindred virtue and merit will find themselves in final companionship with each other. The father then ceases to mourn and grieve over the son that had left him; for the joys of Paradise and the rapturous delight felt in meeting the radiance of God's countenance will send into oblivion all the anguish of the earthly life.