A New Hasidism: Roots

Study Guide for a Nine-Session Adult Education Class

**Session** **One**

*A New Hasidism: Roots* is a collection of writings from across the twentieth century by authors who sought to convey the teachings and values of Hasidism to Jews (and others) living outside the Hasidic community and no longer guided by its strictly traditional way of life.

This offers a very different view of Hasidism that that held by most contemporary North American Jews. A first class might well be devoted to “clearing the air” regarding these views, discussing what Hasidism is.

Open by gaining and listing student’s impressions of Hasidism. What is the source of these impressions? Discuss.

Then go to the list of key Hasidic teachings in the volume’s introduction. Discuss, illustrate, bring into contemporary application.

Compare lists. Note dissonance. Ask for explanations.

Suggest changes in Hasidism’s history. The movement began in the 18th century Ukraine, a place and an era when traditional forms of Jewish life could be taken for granted. Most Jews lived by halakhah, in a broad sense. But the forms felt empty, spiritually deadening, to many people. (Does anyone identify with that feeling?) It set out to revive the spiritual inner life of Judaism. (What do we mean by “spiritual” and “inner life?”)

But times changed. Once modernity began, Jews turned away from that way of living. Hasidism felt it had to defend the forms themselves. That made it much more rigid and set it in opposition to modernity, especially regarding education.

Then came immigration. Most American Jews today are descendants of the great migration of 1881-1924. Our ancestors chose to leave Eastern Europe. That meant a willingness to change, to raise their families in a place where Jewish tradition did not rule their lives. The Hasidim of today are almost all survivors of those who stayed behind and thus lived through the Holocaust.

How does that affect their worldview?

Conclude by returning to the list of values in the introduction. If we believe in these, how do we pass them on to modern Jews? That is why the authors we will read sought to re-create a *New Hasidism* for the modern era.

**Session Two: Martin Buber**

Biographical introduction. (Prepare with internet resources, supplement with introductory essay and “My Way to Hasidism.”)

There Buber tells his personal story. Talk about using your personal life-story as a tool of teaching. The plusses and minuses of such an approach. (Might there be teachers in the group with views on this?)

Base most of lesson on “The Life of the Hasidim.” As you treat each of the four concepts, select some of your own favorite evocative passages to be read aloud and discussed in class.

Think about these as “values of Judaism.” Is this a different list than we might usually find? On that basis, discuss how Buber’s Hasidism is an attempt to re-shape Jewish priorities.

Might we need such a re-shaping today? Think about this as a Judaism that goes beyond loyalty as the key demand of Jewish life. In the old world it was loyalty to halakhah, to the forms of Jewish living. What are the loyalty demands of today? (Peoplehood, Jewish survival, Israel, denominations, etc.) Note the politicization of Jewish life.

How is this vision of an **interiorization** of Judaism different from all of those? Could it work? Will it attract people, especially youth, seekers? What are its dangers? How do we achieve proper balance?

**Session Three: Hillel Zeitlin, part 1**

Biographical introduction, from book.

Focus of class is the Yavneh writings. Zeitlin is trying to create a new Hasidism, called Yavneh, for Jews in Poland in the 1920’s. In these three documents he lays it out.

Read aloud first part of “What Is Yavneh?” What are the essential values here? Why do you think he chose the name Yavneh for his movement? Discuss.

Read selections from “What Does Yavneh Want?” Focus especially on the questions of how the new Hasidism is to differ from the old.

Read the Fourteen Points, or key selections from them, one at a time. Note the influence of Socialism on Zeitlin’s Hasidic vision. Can these two value systems be combined? (You might say that Materialism is their common enemy. Discuss!)

Imagine you were creating a similar movement for today. How many of your “Fourteen Points” would be the same? How would they differ?

**Session Four: Hillel Zeitlin, part 2**

Here the focus is on “The Fundaments of Hasidism.” Use the first three sections (“Being and Nothingness,” “Tzimtzum,’’ and “The Power of the Maker within the Made” as your essential texts.

Here use a close-reading method. Pick some key paragraphs from each and open up for discussion. This is the core teaching of Hasidism as a form of Jewish mysticism. (For the teacher, some background on Jewish mysticism will be especially helpful here. Recommended is A. Green, *EHYEH: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*.)

How do these mystical ideas change the Jewish view of God and the relationship between God, world, and person? Are these views attractive to you? Why or why not?

**Session Five: Abraham Joshua Heschel, part 1**

Base discussion on the introduction. Follow the list of the five ways in which Heschel’s thought was influenced by Hasidism. Ask for students to expand upon each of these, drawing on their own thought and experience

1. The emphasis on wonder.
2. Witnessing rather than proving religious truth.
3. The role of charismatic religious figures
4. Compassion and joy as key spiritual; virtues.
5. God’s need for human action.

**Session Six: Abraham Joshua Heschel, part 2**

Devote this session to “Pikuah Neshamah – To save a soul,” a very famous early Heschel essay.

Read p. 1 paragraph beginning “The very existence of a Jew” and p. 2, “To live as a Jew.” What kind of Judaism is Heschel suggesting in these two paragraphs? How different is it from Judaism as you experience it? How do we move toward Heschel’s Judaism?

This essay was first published in 1949, shortly after the Holocaust? How do you see the Holocaust’s mark on this essay by a recent survivor? Discuss whether the essay would need to be updated if applied to today. In what areas?

**Session Seven: Zalman Schachter-Shalomi**

Reading these selections from Reb Zalman gives us a chance to deal with the question of spiritual leadership in the neo-Hasidic setting. Can there be a Hasidism, even of the “neo” variety, without a *rebbe*? And can we post-modern would-be *Hasidim* either find or allow ourselves to submit to such a figure?

Compare Schachter-Shalomi’s view on this in his early “Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism” piece with what he says in the “Fourth Turning (especially the section on “Guidance),” written some fifty years later. The first was written while he still considered himself to be a Hasid of the Lubavitcher rebbe. By the time of the “Fourth Turning” essay, he himself was already the central spiritual teacher of the Jewish Renewal movement.

Discussion: How do you feel about this question of seeking out a spiritual guide? What is your own experience with it? Why is it so difficult for us? What are issues of both trust and independence that it raises? How do questions of democracy and egalitarianism play into this conversation?

To what extent does the contemporary rabbi serve as a *rebbe*? Should rabbis be more or less open to seeking out this role?

**Session Eight: Arthur Green**

The first two essays were published many years ago, and call for empowerment radical liberation from older forms of religious thought and practice.

But here we first see Green as revolutionary turned reinterpreter. Consider the ways in which he draws upon the mybolic language of Jewish mysticism, but combines this traditional vocabulary with a very different kind of religious ethos that is still very much grounded in the emphasis on dissent (cf. Heschel), *hiddush* and creativity, and the non-dualism of Hasidism

Then think about the extent to which these pieces anticipate the mystical devotional life and the seeker-friendly Judaism that Green has sought to articulate throughout his later theological writings

And, pose the question: to what degree does this type of spirituality, which so much reflects the 1960s youth and couner-culture movements, resonate with contemporary seekers?

The third essay, “Where Are We Going?”, was a talk delivered some thirty years later. What are the consistent themes that link these youthful essays with Green’s later work? What are some of the differences – i.e. do these three selections, when read together, reveal any substantial changes in his Neo-Hasidic project?

**Session Nine: Shlomo Carlebach**

“The Torah of the Nine Months” is a complicated, somewhat rambling teaching. But its central message can easily be distilled into a few key points.

Read Nehemia Polen’s introduction, and a few key paragraphs on pp. XX-XX.

Ask each student to consider (probably without sharing with the group) the nature of his or her own “Torah of the Nine Months” – i.e., what is his or her life’s task, a unique challenge that leads to finding one’s place in the world.

Then, pose a few questions such as the following to the group:

1. Does Carlebach’s message, that trial-and-error, and even a momentary spirit of brokenness, lead to personal growth, resonate in our contemporary twenty-first century world?
2. How do we set out to find our place in the world?
3. And how do we find the courage to begin again after stumbling?
4. So much of the message of Hasidism – and Neo-Hasidism – is about cultivating a sense of joy and optimism. Carlebach’s teaching attempts to offer a way of honestly confronting the forces of uncertainty (the murky shadows of the post-Holocaust world and the self), without relinquishing any of this commitment to joy and optimism. Is he successful?

This meeting should diverge from the standard classroom format. Make it more of a “Farbrengen” or neo-Hasidic celebration than a regular class meeting. Elements suggested for this:

A setting around a table, set with some light refreshments, rather than a classroom set-up.

Storytelling. Find some favorite Hasidic stories, preferably some told by Reb Shlomo or Reb Zalman. These can be found online or in various printed collections.

Music. Many recordings of Reb Shlomo’s niggunim (melodies) can be found via the web. Play some as background music throughout the session, but also pick one or twso for the group to learn, providing words and teaching the tune. A good Hasidic farbrengen is an interspersing of stories, music, and fellowship. Enjoy!