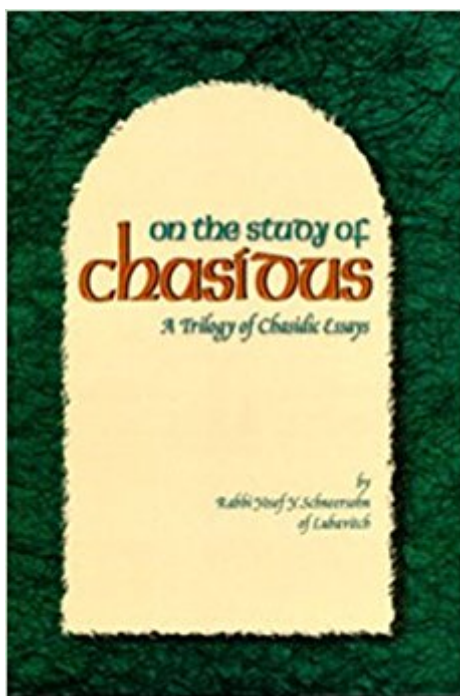


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On The Study Of Chasidus: A Trilogy Of Chasidic Essays



Synopsis

A Trilogy of Chasidic Essays, Some Aspects of Chabad Chasidism, on the Teachings of Chasidus, on Learning Chasidus. Eastern European Jewry in the eighteenth century had not yet recovered from the ravages of the pogroms of 1648-1649. The people were depressed spiritually and impoverished materially. Ignorance and despondency (the latter caused by the former) deadened the spirit of the people; they had no life in this world and could expect little better in the hereafter. Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov embarked on the ambitious program of elevating the spirit of the Jews, teaching them, encouraging them to serve G-d with sincerity and joy, emphasizing the homely virtues of the simple folk. His efforts met with conspicuous success. Countless thousands turned to him and Chasidus - as his new movement was called - for spiritual sustenance. It was no less than a major renaissance of the Jewish spirit. As might be expected, opponents were not lacking. Opposition concentrated primarily in Lithuania, the center of Talmudic scholarship. Chasidus was accused of attempting to supplant Torah learning as the sine qua non of Judaism. Memory of radical movements threatening the very existence of Judaism rendered any departure from the norm highly suspect. Not until the time of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who synthesized Chasidic fervor and worship with Lithuanian rationality and learning, could the movement make any significant inroads in the camp of the mitnagdim, the opponents of Chasidus. The Alter Rebbe's intellectual school of Chasidus was called Chabad. "The Baal Shem Tov demonstrated that everyone can serve G-d; the Alter Rebbe taught how everyone can serve G-d," describes their relative contributions. While the Chasidic movement suffered a terrible blow - as did all the Jewish people - during the Second World War, it has shown remarkable vitality and viability, striking firm and productive roots on every continent. Interest in it, then, is not historical alone or theoretical, but immediate to any serious student of Judaism. Chasidus, including Chabad, has been the subject of a great many studies in several languages. However, few of the sources were ever translated into English, and for the formidable subject matter, coupled with the specific definitions and connotations of Chabad terminology deter many potential students from exploring this field of study. This essay discusses the general nature and contribution of Chabad. It is introductory in nature, and addresses itself primarily to the basic character of Chasidus, and its place within a worship focused on the total service of G-d.

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