

HASIDIC PRAYER BY RABBI LOUIS JACOBS 1973

THE HASIDIC PRAYER BOOK AND PRAYER HOUSE

The substitution of the Lurianic Prayer Book for the traditional one is a constant cause of offence to the Mitnageddim. The complaint appears in practically all the anti-Hasidic documents.⁷ The Mitnageddim were prepared to tolerate the use of the Lurianic rite for the few mature Kabbalists. In the anti-Hasidic proclamation issued at Brody in Galicia in 1772 an express exception was made for the Kabbalists in the *siebel* (conventicle) in the *klaus* of Brody. But for the immature, argued the Mitnageddim, it was strictly forbidden both to set up such conventicles and to use the Lurianic Prayer Book. For the light it throws on the whole polemic the Brody proclamation (written in Yiddish) must be quoted in part:⁸

These people [the Hasidim] who create new customs for themselves build for themselves high places⁹ so as to be apart from the holy community. They form separate *minyanim*¹⁰ and do not pray with the rest of the community in the synagogues and houses of learning set aside for public use. They depart from the coinage of prayer, coined by the great Codifiers responsible for the order of prayer in these lands. And these same people taunt and insult the angels of God [the rabbis]. They allow the correct time for the recitation of the Shema and the Prayers to go by. Especially, do they change the version of the Prayer Book to one that is not in use in these lands. This Prayer Book [the Ashkenazi] has been instituted by the great scholars of old so that it is forbidden to turn aside from it either to the right or the left. Nowadays, one finds these wicked men, sinners with their bodies, of incomparable wickedness. They cast off the yoke, forsaking eternal life only to indulge all day in song. They form themselves into groups and sects. They despise the Oral Law in general and declare that they study only the Kabbalah. They use in their prayers the Prayer Book of the man of God, the holy *Ari*, of blessed memory, and, without doubt, they are guilty of lopping off the branches. . . .¹¹ Therefore, the above-mentioned holy community issues a great and terrible anathema . . . that from this day onwards God forbid that any change should be made from the Ashkenazi version of the Prayer Book in any synagogue or in any of the *minyanim* which are allowed in private houses by the laws of our community. It goes without saying that no one must have the temerity to use the Prayer Book of the godly *Ari*, his memory for the life of the world to come, or of any of the other Kabbalists into whose secret counsel the souls of these wicked men have not been admitted. God forbid, too, that any man should use in his prayers any other Prayer Book than that of the Ashkenazim, which we have by tradition from the scholars of old, with the exception of the remnant called by God, who pray in the first *siebel* at the side of the *klaus* in our community. It is clear beyond doubt that the men who have set aside that place for their prayers are full of the revealed learning, the Talmud and the Codes, and they have made progress, too, and have acquired fame in the secret learning of the Kabbalah. These have used the Prayer Book of the *Ari*, of blessed memory, for many a long year, and they followed their custom in the presence of the rabbis of old, the famous great scholars of our community, who did not prevent them from following their custom because it was known that from their youth they studied, in the main, Talmud and Codes. And they were outstanding in piety, knowing their Master and having the correct intentions [*kavvanos*]. These famous men referred to are permitted to pray, as is their custom, out of the Prayer Book of the holy man of God, the *Ari*, may his memory be for a blessing, but no one else is allowed so to do. Outside that *siebel*, God forbid that any *minyans* should alter even one letter of the Ashkenazi version of the Prayer Book. They should have nothing at all to do with the secret wisdom. Nor should they follow any of the Sephardi customs, only the customs of this land. God forbid that we should change any of the customs of our fathers. Furthermore, our concession [to the men of the *siebel*] only applies to men of thirty years and over. But God forbid that any under the age of thirty should attach themselves to the above-mentioned *siebel*. . . .

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Because of their opposition to the ideas of the general community and their adoption of the special Prayer Book, the Hasidim were forced to congregate in their small *siebels*. This was a constant offence mentioned in the trenchant diatribes of the Mitnageddim, as we have seen.¹⁵ Eventually, the Hasidim made a virtue of necessity. To this day the Hasidim, on the whole, prefer prayer in the homely and informal *siebel* to prayer in a large synagogue. A further reason for the later use of the *siebel* was that the Hasidim of a particular dynasty would be found in small groups in many of the larger towns and, not being able to afford to purchase a large synagogue, which in any event would be too large for their needs, preferred to hire a small room where like-minded folk could worship together.¹⁶ In the 'court' of the Zaddik a large synagogue was far from being an unusual feature.

Although the traditional preference is for prayer to be recited in the large synagogue of the town and is opposed to worship in small conventicles, the Hasidim were able to point to a Responsum by the famous sixteenth-century legal authority R. David Ibn Abi Zimra in which the importance of like-minded persons worshipping together overrides the advantages of worship in a large congregation.¹⁷ This responsum deals with a group which separated itself from the general community to pray, together with their teacher, in a synagogue of their own. The Hasidim were able to use the fortuitous references to the 'teacher' and adapt these to the Hasidic Zaddik. The responsum has such an uncanny resemblance to the particular needs of the Hasidim that, were it not for its undoubted authenticity, one would imagine it to have been invented by a contemporary Hasid.

The Responsum in question declares:

We read in the Talmud that one should not rise to offer prayer when one has been joking or in a frivolous state of mind or gossiping or quarrelling or in a bad temper. We read further that R. Hanina would refuse to pray on a day on which he had lost his temper. We read further that no man should offer his prayers unless his mind is serene. We read further that Samuel would not pray in a house in which there was beer because the smell of the beer would disturb him and prevent him from concentrating on his prayers. From all this you can learn that a man should offer his prayers neither in a place in which his thoughts are disturbed nor at a time when his powers of concentration are set at naught. Consequently, if an individual or a number of persons are in a state of enmity or bad temper or hatred or contention with the community, their prayers are unacceptable and it is forbidden for them to pray there [in the synagogue of the community] since his [the individual worshipper at loggerheads with the community] thoughts are disturbed and he is unable to concentrate on his prayers. It applies all the more if they [the members of the community] are always in the habit of vexing him to his face and all the more if the cause of the vexation concerns the leaders of the congregation. Were I not afraid I would go so far as to say that it is better for a man to recite his prayers in private than to pray together with people with whom he cannot get on. There is another reason, too, why a man should only pray in a place which his heart desires. The reason for this is that when a man gazes at someone with whom he is on friendly terms his soul is awakened to concentrate adequately, his mind is enlarged and his heart is gladdened. The spirit of the Lord can then rest upon him, as prophecy declares. In the books of wisdom it is further declared that when a man has his teacher in mind and directs his heart to him then his soul becomes bound to the soul of his teacher and some of the flow of grace that belongs to the teacher rests upon the disciple. The disciple then acquires an additional soul, which they [the Kabbalists] call 'the mystery of impregnation while both master and disciple are alive'. This is referred to in the verse, 'But thine eyes shall see thy teacher' [Isa. 30: 20] and this is the meaning of, 'That they may stand there with thee . . . and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them' [Num. 11: 17]. And so our holy master [R. Judah the Prince] used to pray that if he could only have seen the face of his teacher he would have reached a most elevated stage. All the more if the teacher has the same intention so that one calls to the other, this one to give, the other to receive. It is for this reason that R. Jose said that a man does not have the merit of learning the Torah from everyone. On the basis of this the rabbis permit a man to go away to study the Torah even if his father forbids him to go, so that by going he disobeys his father. For a man does not have the merit of learning the Torah from everyone. This very reason applies to a teacher or one who pleases him, his soul is awakened to an elevated degree of concentration and an additional spirit from on high rests upon him. This matter is attested to by the intellect.