

How to Read a Hasidic Text: A Quick Guide



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Learning how to read Hasidic texts is a challenging but rewarding enterprise. The following short outline is intended to help illustrate the process in a step-by-step manner.

1. Look It Up - As you read, look up the biblical verses cited throughout the text and read them in their original context. Whenever possible, do the same with the rabbinic passages or those from earlier kabbalistic sources. Try to locate the question or difficulty in the verse or story which becomes the point of departure for the homily. Then consider: How is the Hasidic teacher reinterpreting the plain-sense meaning of the passage, and to what extent does this teaching amplify preexisting elements already present?

2. Vocabulary - Hasidic books often use words and terms with specific definitions, and it's very easy to get lost! Don't despair. The limited vocabulary invoked by Hasidic thinkers to describe complex psychological processes and interior mystical experiences was inherited from medieval Kabbalah and philosophy. One of my teachers used to say, "Ideas ride on the back of words." We'll work together to develop a shared vocabulary for understanding these sources.

3. The Point - After you've read the text and are satisfied that you understand the basics of its language, think about the deeper ideas the author is trying to convey. Hasidic teachings always have a personal message meant to concretize abstract theology into spiritual practice. Similarly, what underlying question(s) is the author trying to answer? What are the tensions, contradictions,



or ambiguities of this message? The Hasidic authors stand on the shoulders of many generations of Jewish thinkers (philosophers, Kabbalists, Talmudists) who have continuously engaged with the existential and spiritual questions by reinterpreting earlier sources. Hasidic texts should be read as a part of this conversation.

4. The Context - Now reflect on the source in two ways: First, try to read the text on its own terms. How might this message have sounded to its original audience, and why might it have been an appropriate teaching for that time and place?

5. Personal Reflection - Second, step back for a moment and examine it once more from a personal perspective. What do you find meaningful in its words, and what do you find challenging or difficult? What are the rifts or divergences between our world and that of the original Hasidic homily? But also, how could the spiritual and ethical issues at the forefront of the text be relevant to your own journey, and how might this source speak to the central moral, social, and philosophical struggles of our day?

6. The Big Picture - Hasidism emerged from the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, but each Hasidic teacher since then has lent their own unique voice to its theological chorus. Consider how the teachings of different Hasidic teaching compare to and contrast with one another? Do they agree on all points of theology? Do they articulate the same vision of spiritual growth and mystical experience?

7. The Teacher - As you read more teachings from a particular teacher, think about how they relate to one another. Do the teachings of a Hasidic thinker return to certain themes again and again? And how do these written teachings relate to any stories you may have heard about this figure?

8. The Event - Remember that in most cases the written text was originally a homily delivered orally in Yiddish. Hearing these sermons was a special experience for the Hasidim, and these texts are only a transcribed echo of that original event. Be mindful of this original context!

9. Teach and Translate - Think you understand? Now it's time to take one (or both) of the challenging next steps. First, teach the text to someone else! Second, try translating it, first for yourself and then for someone who wouldn't be able to read it in the original Hebrew.

<p>וזהו המאמר נעשה אדם היה לכל הברואים, כי בשאר הברואים חוץ מהאדם, שאל השי"ת לכל בריאה בפרט אם ברצונה להיות נברא, וכדאיתא לדעתן נבראו לצביונם נבראו. (ר"ה יא) 'בגמ אבל בריאה אחת על חברתה לא שאל השי"ת, יען שאר הברואים אין להם בחירה ואין יכולים לקלקל ולהפסיד, ובבריאתם יהיה להם ריוח, ובטח יסכימו כל הברואים להיות נבראים, כי זכין לאדם שלא בפניו. אבל על בריאת האדם, שאל השי"ת לכל הברואים, יען שהאדם יש לו בחירה, ובקלקולו יכול לקלקל גם את שאר הברואים, אבל הסכימו כל הברואים על בריאת האדם וכולם נתנו מכחם להצורת אדם, כדאיתא בתיקונים (תיקון סט דף קטז:): ובהאר"י הק' ז"ל (לקוטי תורה פ' תשא ד"ה ועתה הורד עדיין)</p>	<p>Beit Yaakov, bereshit, no. 41</p> <p>The statement “let Us make the human being in our image” (Gen. 1:26) was spoken to all creations. When all creatures were formed, other than human beings, the blessed One asked each one individually for its consent to be created, as it says in the Talmud, “They were created willingly, with their form” (b. Rosh Hashanah 11a). But no creature was asked regarding the others, since they do not have free choice and thus cannot destroy or lay waste [to other species]. They will surely profit from the creation of other beings, and thus implicitly agree to their creation, since “one may be granted merit without explicit knowledge.” But when it came to humanity, the blessed One asked all other creatures if they should be formed because they have free will and can destroy all the rest of creation. They agreed, however, and all gave permission for the formation of humanity.</p>
<p>בראשית באורייתא שנקרא ראשית דרכו ברא קודשא בריך הוא עלמא נמצא כל דבר נברא על ידי התורה וכח הפועל בנפעל אם כן בכל דבר ובכל <u>במדבר</u> (העולמות כח התורה וכן האדם דכתיב זאת התורה אדם כאשר יתבאר והתורה (י"ט, י"ד) וקודשא בריך הוא חד נמצא בכל דבר הוא חיות הקב"ה</p>	<p>Me'or Einayim, Breishit 1</p> <p>With the beginning — with the Torah, which is called the beginning of his work (Prov. 8:22) — the Holy Blessed One created the world (Zohar 1:5a). We find that every thing was created by way of the Torah and the power of the actor is in that which is acted upon, in which case the power of the Torah is in each thing and in all the worlds, and also in the person as is written, This is the Torah: A person (Num. 19:14) as we will clarify. And the Torah and the Holy Blessed One are one (Zohar 1:24a), so we find in all things the life-force of the Holy Blessed One.</p>

ואתה מחיה את כולם וצמצם כביכול עד מדרגות התחתונות והושם חלק אלו"ה ממעל תוך חשכת החומר כי כל עיקר כוונה היא שיתעלו מדרגות התחתונות למעלה ולהיות יתרון האור מן החושך. והוא ענין ירידת יוסף למצרים מדרגות התחתונות מצר י"ם שעל ידי זה יתוסף תענוג כדכתיב ויתרון האור שיש יתרון תענוג כשהעלה מן החשך ולכן בראשית נקרא יוסף מלשון תוספות וזה ירא יעקב כי יש שבר לשון שבירה (מ"ב, א' שהם נובלות חכמה של מעלה תורה מה שנפל ונשבר כל מה דנחיה מדרגיה יקרא שבירה במצרים במצר י"ם שראה שם נובלות התורה שנפלה שם שצריכה להתברר ולעלות. ואמר רדו שמה להעלות ונחית להביא אל חיות השרש ועצמי וזהו ענין וימת יוסף כי מה שירדה התורה עד סוף המדריגה נקרא מיתה דנחית מדרגיה קרי ביה וימת ויחנטו אותו שהתורה נקרא עץ החיים ובאילן אזלין בתר חנטה ר"ל אף שירד לסוף המדריגה נחנט ויושם בארון כמאמרם ז"ל לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחים בארון אפילו הנובלת יש להם עליה להיות בארון כמו הלוחות שהיא התורה העצמית. ונחזור לענין כיון שבכל דבר הוא התורה המחיה הדבר ההוא אין להביט בכל דבר אל גשמיותה כי אם אל פנימית הדבר בסוד החכם עיניו בראשו ואמר בזוהר וכי באן עיני דבר נש אלא חכימא מסתכל מאן דקיימא על רישא ר"ל בכל דבר מביט אל ראשית הדבר ההוא: מאין נשתלשלה ומי שרשה של הדבר ההוא

And you give life to them all (Nehemiah 9:6), you contract, as if it were possible, down to the lowest levels; and a portion of Divinity from above is placed within the darkness of materiality. For the whole essence of the intention is so that the lowest levels can rise above and have the advantage of light over darkness (Ecclesiastes 2:13). And this is the meaning of Joseph's descent to Egypt, the lowest levels, "the ocean strait;" for through this enjoyment is increased as is written, the advantage of light, that enjoyment advances when it is lifted over darkness, and therefore he is called Joseph, connoting addition [*tosefet*]. And that is [the meaning of the verse (Gen. 42:1)] when Jacob saw that there was grain [*shever*] – connoting breakage [*shvirah*], which are the degenerations of Heavenly Wisdom, Torah that has fallen and broken; all that descends from its level is called "broken." In Egypt, in the ocean strait: for he saw there degenerations of Torah that fell there and needed to be clarified and elevated. And he said, Go down there (Gen. 42:2) to elevate and descend to bring [them] to the life-force of the root and the self. And that is the meaning of Joseph died (Gen. 50:26), for the fact that the Torah descended until the final level is called "death," for whatever descends from its level is called "death" (Zohar 3:135b). And they embalmed him (Gen. 50:26): for the Torah is called "Tree of Life," and with trees we go according to the ripening of fruit, which is to say even though he descended to the final level he bore fruit. And he was put in a coffin (Gen. 50:26), as in the statement [of our Sages] of Blessed Memory, "The Tablets and the Broken Tablets were placed in the ark" (Bava Batra 14b): even the degenerations have elevation to be in the ark just like the Tablets, which are the Torah itself. And we will return to the matter at hand: since in every thing it is the Torah that gives that thing life, one should not look at any thing in its materiality, only at the internality of the thing in the secret of The wise person has his eyes in his head (Ecclesiastes 2:14); and in

	<p>the Zohar they said, “And where else should a person’s eyes be? Rather, a wise person gazes to see who stands above his head” (<u>Zohar 3:187a</u>), which is to say that in every thing he should gaze toward the beginning of that thing: from where it evolved and who is that thing’s root.</p>
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