

MENACHEM MENDEL OF KOTZK

(From Wikipedia) Born to a non-Hasidic family in Poland (1787-1859), he became attracted to Hasidic philosophy in his youth. He was known for having acquired impressive Talmudic and Kabbalistic knowledge at an early age. He was a student of Reb Bunim of Peshischa, and upon the latter's death attracted many of his followers. He was well known for his incisive and down-to-earth philosophies, and sharp-witted sayings. He appears to have had little patience for false piety or stupidity.

From 1839 he lived in seclusion for the last twenty years of his life.

The Firmaments

A zaddik who was opposed to the rabbi of Kotzk sent him a message: “I am so great that I reach into the seventh firmament.” The rabbi of Kotzk sent back his answer: “I am so small that all the seven firmaments rest upon me.”

A Trustworthy Man

A disciple told this story: “Once when I was standing in the room of my master and teacher, the rabbi of Kotzk, I understood the meaning of what is written in Proverbs: ‘But a trustworthy man who can find? (Prov 20:6)’ This does not mean that you can find only one in a thousand. It means that a trustworthy man, that is to say a man who can really be trusted, cannot be found at all, for he is well hidden—you may stand right in front of him and yet you will not find him.”

In a Fur Coat

The rabbi of Kotzk once said of a famous rabbi: “That’s a zaddik in a fur coat.” His disciples asked him what he meant by this. “Well,” he explained, “one man buys himself a fur coat in winter, another buys kindling. What is the difference between them? The first wants to keep only himself warm, the second wants to give warmth to others too.”

To What Purpose Was Man Created?

Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk once asked his disciple Rabbi Yaakov of Radzimin: “Yaakov, to what purpose was man created?” He answered: “So that he might perfect his soul.”

“Yaakov,” said the zaddik, “is that what we learned from our teacher, Rabbi Bunam? No, indeed! Man was created so that he might lift up the Heavens.”

Man’s Advantage

This is what Rabbi Mendel said about the words in the Scriptures: “This is the law of the burnt-offering (Lev. 6:2)”:

“Why does God demand sacrifice of man and not of the angels? That of the angels would be purer than that of man could ever be. But what God desires is not the deed but the preparation. The holy angels cannot prepare themselves; they can only do the deed. Preparation is the task of man who is caught in the thicket of tremendous obstacles and must free himself. This is the advantage of the works of man.”

God’s Dwelling

“Where is the dwelling of God?”

This was the question with which the rabbi of Kotzk surprised a number of learned men who happened to be visiting him.

They laughed at him: “What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of his glory!”

Then he answered his own question: “God dwells wherever man lets him in.”

Upon Thy Heart

Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk said: “ ‘And these words which I command thee this day, shall be *upon* thy heart. (Deut. 6:6)’ The verse does not say: ‘*in* thy heart.’ For there are times when the heart is shut. But the words lie upon the heart, and when the heart opens in holy hours, they sink deep down into it.”

The Hunter

Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk told the story of the hunter whom the prophet Elijah met in the wilderness and asked why he was living there without the Torah and without the commandments. The hunter tried to defend himself.

“I never could find the gate that leads to the presence of God,” he said.

“You were certainly not born a hunter,” said Elijah. “So from whom did you learn to follow this calling?”

“My need taught me,” answered the hunter.

Then the prophet said: “And had your need been equally great because you had lost your way far from God, do you think it would have failed to show you the way to Him?”

Worry

A hasid told the rabbi of Kotzk about his poverty and troubles. “Don’t worry,” advised the rabbi. “Pray to God with all your heart, and the merciful Lord will have mercy upon you.”

“But I don’t know how to pray,” said the other.

Pity surged up in the rabbi of Kotzk as he looked at him. “Then,” he said, “you have indeed a great deal to worry about.”

Earnestness

The rabbi of Kotzk called to some of his hasidim: “What is all this talk of praying ‘earnestly’! What is the meaning of to pray ‘earnestly’?”

They did not understand what he had in mind.

“Is there anything at all,” he said, “that one ought not to do earnestly?”

No Break

Rabbi Mendel saw to it that his hasidim wore nothing around the neck while praying, for, he said, there must be no break between the heart and the brain.

Comparing One to Another

Someone once told Rabbi Mendel that a certain person was greater than another whom he also mentioned by name. Rabbi Mendel replied: "If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I, and you are you. But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I, and you are not you."

What Cannot Be Imitated

The rabbi of Kotzk said: "Everything in the world can be imitated except truth. For truth that is imitated is no longer truth."

The Sons

A man came to the rabbi of Kotzk and asked how he could make his sons devote themselves to the Torah. The rabbi answered: "If you really want them to do this, then you yourself must spend time over the Torah, and they will do as you do. Otherwise, they will not devote themselves to the Torah but will tell their sons to do it, and so it will go on. For it is written: 'Only take heed to thyself ... lest thou forget the things which thine eyes saw ...! Make them known unto thy children and thy children's children. (Deut. 4:9)' If you yourself forget the Torah, your sons will also forget it, only urging their sons to know it, and they too will forget the Torah and tell their sons that they should know it, and no one will ever know the Torah."

Miracles

The rabbi of Kotzk was told of a wonder-worker who was versed in the secret art of making a robot. "That is unimportant," he said. "But does he know the secret art of making a hasid?"

Different Customs

A hasid of the rabbi of Kotzk and a hasid of the rabbi of Tchernobil were discussing their ways of doing things.

The disciple of the rabbi of Tchernobil said: "We stay awake all night between Thursday and Friday, on Friday we give alms in proportion to what we have, and on the sabbath we recite the entire Book of Psalms."

"And we," said the man from Kotzk, "stay awake every night as long as we can; we give alms whenever we run across a poor man and happen to have money in our pockets, and we do not say the psalms it took David seventy years of hard work to make, all in a row, but according to the needs of the hour."

Thou Shalt Not Steal

Rabbi Yehiel Meir of Gostynin had gone to his teacher in Kotzk for the Feast of Weeks. When he came home, his father-in-law asked him: "Well, did your people over there receive the Torah differently than anywhere else?"

"Certainly!" said his son-in-law.

"What do you mean?" asked the other.

"Well, to give you an instance," said Rabbi Yehiel. "How do you here interpret 'thou shalt not steal'?"

"That we shall not steal from our fellow men," answered his father-in-law. "That's perfectly clear."

"We don't need to be told that any more," said Rabbi Yehiel. "In Kotzk this is interpreted to mean: You shall not steal from yourself."

The Difference

While the quarrel between the hasidim of Kotzk and those of Radoshitz was in full swing, Rabbi Yisakhar Baer of Radoshitz once said to a hasid from Kotzk: "What your teacher believes in is: 'If you can't get over it, you must get under it,' but what I believe in is: 'If you can't get over it, you must get over it anyway.'"

Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger, the disciple and friend of the rabbi of Kotzk, formulated the difference in another way when a hasid of the rabbi of Radoshitz visited him after his master's death. "The world thinks," said he, "that there was hatred and quarreling between Kotzk and Radoshitz. That is a grave mistake. There was only one difference of opinion: in Kotzk they aimed to bring the heart of the Jews closer to their Father in Heaven; in Radoshitz they aimed to bring our Father in Heaven closer to the heart of the Jews."

Those Who Cannot Pray

On the eve of the Day of Atonement the rabbi of Kotzk said to one of his hasidim: "Hersh, you shall pray for the Jews who cannot pray, for the Jews in fields and woods, for those who are here and for those who are not here, and not only for the living, but also for the dead. For I tell you the walls are swarming with souls!"

Why Write a Book?

Rabbi Mendel's hasidim asked him why he did not write a book. For a while he was silent, then he answered:

"Well, let's say I have written a book. Now who is going to buy it? Our own people will buy it. But when do our people get to read a book, since all through the week they are absorbed in earning their livelihood? They will get to read it on a sabbath. And when will they get to it on a sabbath? First they have to take the ritual bath, then they must learn and pray, and then comes the sabbath meal. But after the sabbath meal is over, they have time to read. Well, suppose one of them stretches out on the sofa, takes the book, and opens it. But he is full and he feels drowsy, so he falls asleep and the book slips to the floor. Now tell me, why should I write a book?"

No Glasses

As he grew older, the rabbi of Kotzk suffered pain in his eyes. He was advised to wear glasses for reading, but he refused: "I do not want to get a wall between my eyes and the holy Torah."

The Sacred Goat

Rabbi Yitzhak of Vorki was one of the very few who were admitted to Rabbi Mendel during the period when he kept away from the world. Once he visited Kotzk after a long absence, knocked, entered Rabbi Mendel's room and said in greeting: "Peace be with you, Rabbi."

"Why do you say rabbi to me," grumbled the rabbi of Kotzk. "I am no rabbi! Don't you recognize me! I'm the goat! I'm the sacred goat. Don't you remember the story?"

"An old Jew once lost his snuffbox made of horn, on his way to the House of Study. He wailed: 'Just as if the dreadful exile weren't enough, this must happen to me! Oh me, oh my, I've lost my snuffbox made of horn!' And then he came upon the sacred goat. The sacred goat was pacing the earth, and the tips of his black horns touched the stars. When he heard the old Jew lamenting, he leaned down to him, and said: 'Cut a piece from my horns, whatever you need to make a new snuffbox.' The old Jew did this, made a new snuffbox, and filled it with tobacco. Then he went to the House of Study and offered everyone a pinch. They snuffed and snuffed, and everyone who snuffed it cried: 'Oh, what wonderful tobacco! It must be because of the box. Oh, what a wonderful box! Wherever did you get it?' So the old man told them about the good sacred goat. And then one after the other they went out on the street and looked for the sacred goat. The sacred goat was pacing the earth and the tips of his black horns touched the stars. One after another they went up to him and begged permission to cut off a bit of his horns. Time after time the sacred goat leaned down to grant the request. Box after box was made and filled with tobacco. The fame of the boxes spread far and wide. At every step he took the sacred goat met someone who asked for a piece of his horns.

"Now the sacred goat still paces the earth—but he has no horns."