

NEO-HASIDIC CREDO

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PROLOGUE

Hasidism is a Judaism based on *hesed*, meaning love or compassion. It calls us to a love for God, for Torah or wise teachings, and for one another. All that we do in this world should be motivated by our pursuit of *hesed*. As *hesed* is an endlessly flowing love, a *hasid* is one who loves and gives generously, stretching beyond limits, suspending judgment of those who receive that love, and without thought of recompense or reward.

1. There is only One. All existence began as and forever remains a simple, undifferentiated whole. Because Y-H-W-H (the Hebrew term for “God,” really “is-was-will be”) is beyond time, the oneness that underlies reality has never changed. Our evolving, ever-changing cosmos, filled with an endless array of individual creatures and the absolute stasis of that singular Being are two faces of the same One. Our seeming existence as individuals, like all of physical reality, is the result of *tsimtsum*, a contraction or de-intensification of the presence of that One, so that our minds can encounter it and yet continue to regard ourselves as separate beings, in order to fulfill our worldly task. Daily life requires us to live as separate individuals and to recognize both the boundaries between self and other and the great opportunity for communion across those boundaries. In ultimate reality, however, that separate existence is mostly illusion. The call of *Shema‘ Yisra’el*, that “God is one” means that we are all one. Divine presence (*shekhinah*) underlies, surrounds, and fills all of existence. It is not limited to any particular place, nor is awareness of it limited to Jews or Judaism. Awareness of and encounter with this presence is the purpose of all religious life.
2. To be a *hasid* means to live in loving awareness of God’s presence in all that we encounter, and to act in response to it. Being part of the One calls upon us to love all that is. Our pursuit of *hesed* leads us to find sparks of divine light scattered everywhere, in every human being and throughout the world, but often hidden behind both real and illusory “shells.” Our task is to seek out and discover those sparks, even in the most unlikely places, in order to raise them up and re-join them to their Source. This work of redeeming the sparks and restoring wholeness, carried out on spiritual, physical, and social planes, fills the daily life of the true *hasid*. It brings joy to *shekhinah* and to us as we re-affirm the divine and cosmic unity. “God needs to be served in every way.” All of life is an opportunity for discovering and responding to the divine presence. The way we relate to every creature is a mirror of our devotion to our Creator, who lives in all of them, the single presence behind every mask.

3. That joyous service of Y-H-W-H is the purpose of human existence. The One delights in each creature, in every single distinctive form in which it is garbed. But we human beings occupy a unique role in the hierarchy of ever-evolving Creation, having the capacity for awareness of the larger picture and an inbuilt striving for meaning-making. We must shape that awareness so as to make us desire to serve, to fulfill our unique role as denizens of two worlds. We become most fully human as we stretch to realize the divine image in which we are created.

4. The essence of our religious life lies in the deep inward glance, a commitment to a vision of spiritual intensity and attachment to the One. Surface appearances do not suffice for us. This is true with regard to our encounter with humans, both ourselves and others. It applies also to our view of the world, as we seek the hidden One within the many. So too is it the key to our encounter with Torah and religious praxis. We are ever in search for their deeper layers of meaning, bringing us back to awareness of the single truth.

5. Outer deeds are important; the *mitsvot* are the forms into which we pour our devotion; they call out to us to be fulfilled. There is no Judaism without *ahavat ha-mitsvot*, a loving devotion to our forms of religious life. They are the tools our tradition gives us to achieve and maintain awareness. Each such *mitsvah* is to be seen as a great gift, an opportunity to stand in the divine presence in a unique way. At the same time, we need to recall that the *mitsvot* are means rather than ends in themselves. They are vessels to contain the divine light that floods the soul, concrete embodiments of the heart's inward quest. They also serve as paradigms for the rest of human actions. To live fully in God's presence is to do *everything* as though it were a *mitsvah*.

6. Our human task begins with the uplifting and transforming of our spiritual and emotional selves to become ever more perfect vehicles for God's service. This requires us to demand much of ourselves, setting a high bar for our spiritual aspirations, including the life of prayer. This process begins with the key devotional pair of love and awe, which together lead us to our sense of the holy. But it also means treating ourselves with kindness, accepting our own human limitations. Care for both body and spirit, our own and others', as God's handiwork, is also a vital part of our worldly task. Regarding the body, there is much correction needed of a prior imbalance in Judaism.

7. The deeper look at reality should put us at odds with the superficial values of the consumerist and overly self-centered society amid which we live. Being, unlike our Hasidic ancestors, citizens of a free society, we can and must take a critical stance toward all that we regard as dehumanizing or degrading in our general culture. Care for each person, including both Jew and non-Jew, as a unique image of God and as our fellow-limb on the single Adamic body or Tree of Life, is the first way we express our love of God. It is in this that we are tested, both as individuals and societies. We envision a Jewish community that speaks out with a strong moral voice. We offer special devotion to the great moral challenge of our age, that of preserving our planet as a livable and verdant home for future generations.

8. The above principles all flow directly from an expansive Hasidic reading of Torah, classical Jewish teachings. We live in an abiding and covenanted love relationship to Torah. That means the text, “written Torah,” and the whole of the oral tradition, including our own interpretive voices. All of these point us to the cosmic and wordless Torah that lies within and beyond them. We know that our people has mined endless veins of wisdom and holiness from within the Torah text, and we continue in that path, adding new methods of interpretation to the old. The whole process of renewal through constant reinterpretation is sacred to us.

9. We are Jews. We have a special love for our people, past, present, and future, a love that only increases our love for all of humanity, indeed for all of God’s creatures. We bear within us the pain of Jewish suffering and the joy of Jewish rebirth. We consider the ingathering of exiles and the renewal of Jewish life that has taken place in the Land of Israel to be among the great miracles of our era. We fully and joyously embrace the emergence of a free and proud Jewish people in the Holy Land, and at the same time celebrate a rich and creative Jewish existence wherever Jews live. We Jews exist in order to bear witness to our truth. As bearers of a great spiritual legacy, we survive and carry our traditions forward as embodiments of divine *hesed*.

10. Our world suffers from a great imbalance of energy between the typically “male” and “female” energies. Neo-Hasidism needs to be shaped by the voices of women alongside men, as full participants in every aspect of its emergence. We welcome devotion to the one God through the channels of *shekhinah* and *binah*, Y-H-W-H as saving and protecting Mother, even as we know that all metaphors and symbols point to the elusive One that lies both within and beyond them.

11. Hasidism at its best and worst is built around the figure of the *tsaddik*, a charismatic holy man blessed by God and capable of transmitting divine blessing. We too recognize that there are gifted spiritual teachers in our world and we thank God for their presence and our ability to learn from them. But we live in an age that is rightly suspicious of such figures, having seen charisma used in sometimes dangerous ways. We therefore underscore the Hasidic teaching that each person has his/her own path to walk and sparks of light to discover. We encourage spiritual independence and responsibility.

12. Hasidism, like Judaism itself, believes in community. The sense of *hevrayyah* or fellowship among followers of a particular path is one of the greatest tools it offers for spiritual growth. Cultivating spiritual friendships and communities that allow one to work through personal struggles and the obstacles each person finds in the path, as well as developing an ear to listen well to the struggles of others, is one of the great gifts to be learned from the Hasidic tradition.

13. We are heirs to one of the world’s great spiritual traditions. We recognize that Torah is our people’s unique language for expressing an ancient and universal truth. For many centuries, persecution and hatred made it the legacy of Jews alone. While its exclusively inward-looking focus gave it great depth, in our age it needs to breathe deeply the air of freedom, broadening its focus and addressing the great issues that confront all humanity.

As we join with other seekers in the quest for that universal truth, we remain committed to preserving our ancient language and way of life in full richness, limited only by ethical challenges. We believe that we have much to offer in a spiritual conversation that transcends all borders, as we have much to learn from others. We enter into that conversation happily, coming together with others who admit in collective humility that none of our languages embodies truth in its fullness.