

Attitudes in Hasidic teaching toward learning disabilities and individuals with low intelligence levels

Dina Levine

Both Hasidic stories and expository teachings are instructive in understanding the attitudes characteristic of Hasidic thought toward individuals with learning disabilities and inferior intelligence, whose illiteracy and ignorance had pushed them to the margins of Jewish society. Stories about the Ba'al Shem Tov highlight his innovative educational approach toward those who, due to their deficiencies, were unable to reach levels that the learned, elite class had set as ideals of Jewish society. The Ba'al Shem Tov and the movement of religious and social reform that gradually took form in his wake gave social and moral affirmation to those with limitations, as individuals who could serve G-d with honor, with purity of intention and sincerity of heart.

The alternate approach practiced by the Baal Shem Tov and Hasidic leaders after him engendered a profound change in understanding the soul of the "other", and showed new ways to strength the self-image and social standing of those with mental limitations. The approach they developed can guide teachers and parents in the effort to strengthen each student and each child as a human being through trust, recognition of innate strengths, limited as they may be, encouraging the child with love and unlimited patience. These Hasidic masters emphasized the intrinsic connection between every individual and G-d, regardless of one's ability to read, write, or understand the holy words.

In terms of learning deficiencies, people have not changed. The characteristics of the disabled that appear in Hasidic stories correspond to the technical concepts used in modern educational research. Every failure in the process of learning to read and write, then as now, is a time-bomb that can easily lead to the development of negative emotions, anger at lack of success, low self-esteem, helplessness, fear, and despair. By emphasizing the spiritual strengths of every Jew, Hasidic teaching was a source of empowerment for all, and for those with learning disabilities in particular, contributing to their personal well-being and developing their abilities to the greatest possible extent. This paper examines Hasidic stories and teachings that illustrate some aspects of this alternate approach to disabled individuals.