

A Thought on the Split Between the Kotzker and the Izhbitzer

Although the true origin of the 1839 split between the teacher R. Menachem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotzk and the disciple R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz remains hidden within the concealment of history, it is possible to discern certain threads of thought that separate the two. This is not to claim a true grasp of the split, but rather an attempt to tease out certain cracks that appear within the worldviews of these two individuals. As R. Leibele Eiger- a student of R. Menachem Mendel who left Kotzk along with R. Mordechai Yosef- said: anyone who claims to know the true reason for the split, truly does not know.

One of the animating features of the Kotzker's worldview was a radical quest for the origin. A belief that the individual can, and must uncover the true origin of their behaviors and affective stance towards the world. This call towards the origin demanded a radical quest for authenticity in which the multilayered motivations behind volitional action were investigated with rigorous exactitude. Once found, each layer of motivation was to be analyzed unflinchingly in order to ascertain whether the behavior was true or not. Truth in this sense does not mean veracity, but rather authenticity. To be authentic is to be clear of unconscious motivations that more often than not bespeak the all-too-human drive towards self-interest and self-aggrandizement. Armed with the radical belief that the individual can and must reach a point of pure-action unencumbered by the various drives and impulses that pollute human experience, the Kotzker demanded an unflinching self-introspection in the hopes of uncovering the "true kernel of subjectivity", or a "single action that is done truly for the sake of Heaven".

The Mei Shiloach of Izhbitz, on the other hand, seems to have doubted the possibility of retrieving the origin. Pure self-hood unencumbered by the vicissitudes of the unconscious drives was not the spiritual telos for R. Mordechai Yosef. Whether or not this Kotzkian dream of pure self-hood was simply seen as an untenable goal, or other than the goal of spiritual life will be discussed at a future point. For our sake, it is enough to assume that pure subjectivity cleansed of any self-interest was seen as an impossibility. In the place of the Kotzkian drive towards the origin, the Mei Shiloach disclosed a new path of subjective understanding. The task was not to uncover and eliminate the unconscious drives that animate our everyday experiences; but rather to confront them and come to terms with them. At the core of the self, instead of discovering the origin, R. Mordechai Yosef seems to have found the irreducible

kernel of the unconscious, the naval of the dream, where all attempts at self-introspection are retroactively revealed to have been driven by the deepening sea of the unconscious whose waves announce nothing but the ultimate futility of (self)knowledge. The secret for the Mei Shiloach rests within what he saw as the true source of our unconscious drives and desires, namely a power greater than the self.