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The Community of Me'ah She'arim  
and the  
Philosophy of Hasidism

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### Acknowledgments

While doing research for this paper in a small library in the new city, I and a young American Jew doing research next to me began a conversation. We were a little suprised to find out that we both came from California. But the suprises were yet to come for when we continued asking questions we found that we were both from Ventura California, both went to the same High school, and both graduated the same year. If this was not enough, for the past year he had lived in a small room of a housing unit in Me'ah She'arin. I not only found a friend, but a valuable contact who provided me some "inside" information on the Hasidic community. Not only did I glean what he knew, but he arranged for me a brief interview with one of the few English speaking Hasids in the community, a chap who had immigrated to Israel from London. I hereby thank my tall friend, nicknamed by the Hasids in Yiddish langlax (long needle) but commonly referred to as Sander Richman, for some unique information and insights.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Me'ah She'arin.....	4
History of Hasidism.....	7
Philosophy of Hasidism.....	8
Body of Literature.....	8
The Cabbala.....	8
Nature of God and Universe.....	9
The Non-existence of Evil.....	10
Man in Quest of God.....	11
Hitlahavut.....	12
Man's Task -- The Redemption of Divine Sparks.....	12
Additional Service to God.....	14
Humility.....	14
The Community.....	14
Conclusion.....	15
Footnotes.....	17
Bibliography.....	19

## Foreword

Originally this paper was to be a study of the Hasidic community of Me'ah She'arim to the north of the walled city of old Jerusalem. However, source material is very much lacking on this subject. Only bits of information about the community and its inhabitants can be found in various books. Interviews with members of the community too are difficult, one because of the language barrier since they speak a combination of Hebrew and German and two, they tend to shy away from strangers. Because of the lack of material, I decided to expand my research and include a little of the history of Hasidism and greater amounts of information on their religious philosophy which affects very much their outlook of themselves, their earthly task, and their social organization. However, I hope that someone will take up where I left off on the study of Me'ah She'arim. Future research can possibly be done on social organization, number and location of schools, synagogues, and ritual baths, and history and type of heated clashes with the government and the modern Israeli community. For possible information on all of the above, there are a few sources of which I lacked time to fully explore. Past issues of newspapers such as the Jerusalem Post may prove valuable. Possibly the Library of the Hebrew University will have past issues. Professors of the Hebrew University too might have done some research on the area or may know where to find information. Lastly, it might prove worthwhile to get hold of Rabbi Gotthold who works, I believe, at the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jerusalem. I understand that he has led tours through the area. One problem with this individual is that he is very busy and thus very hard to contact.

Whatever feeling an individual may have toward the Hasid, there is much to admire about him. The Hasid is a loyal individualist. He is loyal to himself, to his beliefs, to his family, and his community. He knows that his beard, side-curls, and dress are looked upon by many as being rather funny. But he has reasons for looking the way he does and so ignores the stares. He holds fanatically" to a particular philosophy, but he does so because he considers these beliefs as truth and so holds to them with devotion. And to his family he is a loyal individualist. The Hasidic community tends to be a close-knit one. The parents are willing to come to blows with the government to see that their children are brought up in a healthy environment, with ~~gogood religious~~ education and a devotion to parents, community, and God. And the effort seems to have been worthwhile. Unlike other religious sects, and social groupings around the world where the communities numbers are dwindling because the children are leaving for the outside world, the Hasidic community is growing. And the community seems to be a healthy one as seen by the almost complete absence of juvenile delinquency.

In a world for the most part that is wandering aimlessly with little by way of truths, beliefs or traditions to anchor itself to, the Hasid is an anomaly. He has ~~as~~ beliefs to stand upon, a community behind him to give support, and a sacred goal to which to strive.

The Community of Me'ah She'arim  
and the  
Philosophy of Hasidism

In the narrow streets of the old city, walking the wide tree-lined avenues of new Jerusalem, praying at the western wall of the temple mount or in the streets of their own old, isolated communities the Hasidic Jew is the most conspicuous element of the crowd. The men are dressed in black with long, thin coats (kapotes), and either wide brimmed, round domed black hats or round hats of fur used on Shabat or other religious occasions. The hair on their heads are short except for their long beards and side curls, which they wear in obedience to an Old Testament commandment. The women dress less conspicuously but still very conservatively with their blouses buttoned to the neck, sleeves reaching to the wrist and skirts well below the knees. Their cloths are not only black like the men's but are a wide range of usually bright colors. This is the dress of the eastern European ghettos of many years ago. The dress of the men are copies of costumes of long dead Polish noblemen. The Hasid's dress exemplifies his strong opposition to change in his way of life. Thus, as long before, they continue in their conservatism, maintaining traditions of dress, way of life, education and language. Their language itself is old being a combination of Hebrew and ~~modern~~ <sup>1</sup>German and called Yiddish. They exist by themselves being a law unto themselves, avoiding the corrupting influence of modern, Westernizing Israel with its movie theaters, changing moral standards and lack of interest in religion.

The Hasidic Jew is usually found in a tightly woven community of fellow believers of his particular form of Judaism, leading a secluded, ultra-orthodox life. Most of his life is centered around the community. Here he resides, buys his food, worships, and receives his education. Most of these Hasidic communities were once to be found in Eastern Europe and especially in Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary. But it was in these countries that they met their

doom. The majority of the Hasids were opposed to the Zionist movement for various reasons and did not encourage emigration to Eretz Israel. Only a few of the total number made the journey to Palestine. During the holocaust of World War II when Jews were systematically murdered, the Hasidic centers of Eastern Europe were annihilated. The majority of the Hasidim died therefore along with their leaders.

#### Me'ah She'arim

Several Hasidic communities were founded in Jerusalem. Among the earliest of the Hasidic communities and also one of the first communities to settle outside of the protective walls of the old city was Me'ah She'arim. The name Me'ah She'arim is derived from Genesis 26:12 where Isaac sowed his land and received in turn after the harvest, one hundred fold or measure: = 100 and = measure. This happened to be one of the particular passages being read in the synagogues on the day of the founding of the community. The selection of this name was a good one for the community has grown considerably because of the high birth rate among the Hasidic community and now their numbers are over a thousand.

The original 140 buildings of Me'ah She'arim were built so that the outermost buildings formed a surrounding wall still to be seen today. The windows facing outward were barred and were placed well above a man's height so as to make access difficult. At intervals were five gates with iron bar doors which were closed and locked in the evenings. Such precautions were necessary for at the time of the founding and for many years afterwards, buildings on the outside of the large city walls were in danger of attack by bandits. Evidently, law enforcement at this time was weak and covered local areas. The group of pious Jews that founded the community in 1874 thought the risk was better than living in the crowded conditions in the city. Later others followed these daring leaders and the community grew. 2 Eventually the community expanded so as to include the Hungarian houses to the north and the Warsaw houses to the West.

As in its early days, the center of the community is still the marketplace containing small stalls selling food, clothing, religious objects and various other needs of the people. This area is surrounded by dwellings, synagogues (in which the social and spiritual life of the community is centered), ritual baths, and houses of Torah study and all of these are connected by very narrow streets.

Me'ah She'arim and other Hasidic communities have become symbols of religious extremism. The people attempt to follow the law to the letter and seem to look down on all those who do not. This religious zealotry sometimes creates friction among the Hasid and less orthodox or non-religious Jews of surrounding Jerusalem. Bodies have been stolen from morgues so as to prevent autopsy. Automobiles and buses have been stoned because they were operating on the Sabbath. And woe to the person who walks the streets of Me'ah She'arim immodestly dressed for he or she is liable to be pelted with stones, probably not so much as to cause physical damage but enough so that the immoral person knows they are not wanted. But such infractions are usually the fault of the outsider because there are warnings posted such as the following sign in English and Hebrew above the street of the market place:

The JEWISH DAUGHTER  
The Torah obligates you  
To Dress With Modesty  
WE DO NOT TOLERATE  
PEOPLE PASSING  
THROUGH OUR STREETS  
IMMODESTLY DRESSED  
-Committee For Guarding Modesty-

Immodesty for a woman would include the wearing of shorts or slacks, wearing of dresses which are too short, sleeveless blouses or blouses that are not buttoned high enough.

The Hasids clash with the government over several issues as well. Most Hasids are against military service, which is mandatory in most cases. There does exist an exemption for young men in school. The Hasids claim that their studying never ends and so they are exempt from military service. The government lets it go at



that. In education the Hasids also claim to be exempt from the norm or rather they demand it. Hasidic children have not public education normally. They do receive education of a religious nature in independent schools however. Their religious orthodoxy is also seen in the political world. A small group of Hasidic Jews belong to the Neturei Karta which is a religious party. This small group interestingly enough, do not recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish state for they feel that God has ordained that the Jew should suffer under foreign rule until the coming of the Messiah. Israel independence day to them is a day of mourning and a day of fasting. Further, they refuse to pray at the western wall since its liberation, they pay no taxes, refuse to register for military service, and do not vote. It must be stressed again that these beliefs are owned by a very small minority of the Hasidic Jew. On the other hand, the hopes and hopes of the majority of the Hasidic Jew in Me'ah She'arim is simple. They wish to be left alone to manage the affairs of their daily lives, and to bring up their children as they see fit. They want outside influences to be kept at a minimum for they feel that most of the elements of the Israeli society at large is a threat to their religious beliefs, their social traditions, and their familial cohesion.

A look at the Hasidic community of Me'ah She'arim gives us an interesting view of the Hasid but a rather blurry one. He seems no doubt, to be a rather strange fellow; he may seem rather narrow-minded, antisocial, and somewhat stuck in the mud of tradition. And all of these observations may very well be true but to all peculiar elements in the make-up of people, there are usually a set of peculiar influences that have shaped the individual. A better understanding of the Hasid may be gained by looking a bit into the history of Hasidism and its religious philosophy. The religious philosophy is particularly an important one for a religious person of any faith has a set of beliefs concerning what the world is all about, what God is all about, and what man is all about which influences

the believer's actions and what things he values to a very great extent. The rest of rest of the paper, therefore, will be devoted to the history of the movement and to its most important religious beliefs.

### History of Hasidism

Hasidism is a popular religious movement founded about 1740 by Baal Shem Tov "The Master of the Good Name" in the southern Poland. It is characterized by a pattern of communal life, ecstasy in worship, mass enthusiasm, and charismatic leadership. The man and the movement arose during a time of persecution among the Jews of Poland and Rumania for the most part. The Jewish masses were living in a state of impoverishment and despair. They needed new hope and a revitalized faith. Many found it in Baal Shem Tov who offered a new religious concept, a new religious expression, and a new method of serving God. These new elements resulted from Baal Shem Tov looking at the masses around him and seeing that the type of Judaism then manifest was not a Judaism that was a part of the everyday lives of the majority of the Jewish population. It was a Judaism of learning, discussions, and commentaries on the Talmud - a Judaism that was for but a few who had the background, free time, and money for a good education. What was needed was a Judaism that would become a living factor to the masses. The concepts introduced by Baal Shem Tov did this by emphasizing love of God, kindness, good deeds, and the holiness of everyday tasks. These concepts cut across intellectual and class barriers. Thus "the simple and the wise, the learned and the ignorant" as well as the rich and poor and the good and wicked, "will have unequal opportunity to serve God with dignity and devotion."<sup>3</sup> Thus result, new values emerged among the masses: equality of man before God, appreciation of life itself, and the pleasure that is to be had in seeking and serving God.<sup>4</sup> Between the late 1700's and the early 1800's, Hasidism grew geographically and grew in numbers. Soon it spread throughout Eastern Europe. Different local centers developed, each with different teachings and interpretations, and each having different charismatic

leadership. As a result, there was a good deal of diversion in Hasidic thought and way and way of life. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of Hasidism stopped and shut itself in. In the twentieth century these isolated Hasidic communities were illiminated due to Hitler's "solution" to the "Jewish proble" and only a minority of the Hasids survived.

### Philosophy of Hasidism

#### Body of Literature

There is not in Hasidism a compiled body of literature that can be labeled "the scriptures of Hasidism". As the adherants to Hasidism grew, so did the number of writers. The examination of these writings show many elements that Hasidic masters had in common and from these are drawn the main beliefs and characteristics of the movement. Not all of these beliefs would be held to by all Hasidim. There would be a variety of differences of opinion and emphasis but for the most part their beliefs in regards to God, the universe, and man's place in it are very similar. One reason for the similarity in writings of the Hasidic masters is due to their common ancestry in Baal Shem Tov. But even the ideas popularized by Baal Shem Tov are not his own. Rather they come from an earlier source common to all the religious leaders. Baal Shem Tov, though the father of Hasidism is not really the father of Hasidic philosophy. His role in the movement was to bring the ideas to the people.

#### The Cabbala

Much of the beliefs of Hasidism were drawn from a collection of mystical writings called the Cabbala ( ). Much of the writings originated is a mystery. Some say they date from the thirteenth century; others say they date before Christ and some even find evidence of them in the teachings of the ancient Chaldeans, Persians, Hindus, and Babylonians. The Talmud and Mishnah also contain bits of it. No doubt the writings come from many eras and some are probably of considerable

able age. It was by the thirteenth century however, that they emerged as a unified body of literature. <sup>5</sup> Like Hasidism, Cabbala

Like Hasidism later, Cabbala sought and seeks not to win by way of the mind through logic, but through the heart by excitement, joy, and ecstasy. Man's fulfillment was not to be found through excessive intellectualism but through the emotions. However, Caballa also sought to confront various questions. It sought to deal with the mystery of creation, the nature of God, and the purpose of man's existence - three basic questions whose answers are basic ingredients of most religions. Being more precise, it attempted to reconcile the apparent contradiction between a universe which is made of matter and a God which is Spirit, and between a God who is perfect, infinite, eternal, and just and a universe with its inhabitants which is imperfect, temporal, finite, and morally insufficient. Hasidism grew out of the earth of Caballa. It contained many of the same ingredients, introduced some new ideas and emphasized others. Hasidism sought to answer these basic questions as well as others and to internalize the answers into the mind of the individual and the soul of the community.

#### Nature of God and the Universe

The nature of God and the universe are almost synonymous in Hasidic thought for in reality there is nothing but God. If the world and the universe were separate from God, this would mean God has limitations and God has no limitations. <sup>6</sup>

How can world be, seeing that God is?  
Seeing that God is infinite, how can there be anything outside him?  
Seeing that he is eternal, how can time endure? <sup>7</sup>  
Seeing that he is perfect, how could imperfection arise?

The answer is that all things are God.

All things that exist including thought, time, and even sin are emanations of God. God at the beginning of time "withdrew from Himself into Himself" in order to leave primordial space. Into this space left by God, the finite world

emerged after a long process of emanations from God. The universe then may be considered the garment of God, emerging from him like a "snail whose shell is formed of itself".<sup>8</sup> Or to make it clearer perhaps, all existence is like an onion; the outer skin is our universe, cracked and peeling. This outer layer looks imperfect but in actuality it has this appearance only because it is the outer shell of a perfect, infinite being. We see it as imperfect only because of our limited insight and intelligence. The Cabbala explains God and the universe this way:

God contracted himself into the world, because he who was the unity free from all duality and relations, would let relation emerge; because he would be known, loved, willed, because from his original oneness in which thought and object are one he would let the otherness emanate, which strives toward unity. So the spheres emanating from Him, the spheres of differentiation, creation, formation and action, the worlds of ideas and powers, of form, of matter; the kingdoms of genius, spirit, of soul, of life; so was formed in the all, whose place God is and whose centre is He.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, all things are pervaded by divine presence and so all things are divine and holy. Nothing is common or profane; nothing is devoid of God. Even in every human thought God is present. In actuality there is no reality in things created. Man sees things as objects only because he can not see its divine vitality. As before creation, there was nothing apart from God, so it is now. There is no existence apart from his existence. It follows then that all things fit into a plan or system. There is nothing random in the universe. No leaf falls where it does by chance but only because it was arranged so by divine plan and divine wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

#### The Non-existence of Evil

What about evil then? If all things are in actuality God, then is not God evil and evil God? To the Masid, there is no evil. We see things as imperfect because they are only the outermost realms of God.

The indwelling Glory embraces all worlds, all creation, good and evil. And it is the true unity. How can it then bear in itself the opposites of good and evil? But in truth there is no opposite, for the evil is the thrown of the good.<sup>11</sup>

## Man in Quest of God

As evident by the many religions of the many peoples and ages of this world, man is in the quest for God. In Hasidic belief, How does man find God? The best answer can be found in a parable attributed to Baal Shem Tov. Picture if you will, a mighty king in a mighty palace. The palace has many halls which are filled with gold, silver, and precious stones. Many of the king's servants find more interest in gathering up these treasures than passing these by to gaze at the splendor of the kings. Thus, they never see the countenance of the mighty King. A few servants however, are more wise. They pass by these other distractions and continue on to the king. Upon reaching him, they discover that the jewels, silver, gold, the halls and even the palace are but an illusion created by the king's magical powers. In this same way, God hides himself in the cosmos and these outer worlds. When men realize this, they realize that all is in essence God and so there is in reality no barrier between man and God except the one we create.

12

What is the next step then? If there is no true barrier between man and God, then what keeps us from God. Man's attitude is that barrier. Such attitudes are sorrow and melancholy. But if all things are God, then sorrow does not have true existence. If all things are pervaded by God and are God, then there is no cause for despair or dependency or sorrow or melancholy. Happiness is the true path toward God. Baal Shem Tov believed that whatever filled the soul with happiness and satisfaction was a true path toward God. Sorrow, withdrawal, self-mortification, and sorrow are hinderances to finding God. God can be sought only through love and happiness. Negative emotions or attitudes will only hinder.

13

## Hitlahavut

This leads us to the Hasidic concept of Hitlahavut ( ) or burning enthusiasm. With unflinching adoration for God, Man can overcome the finite world and

cleave to God. Hitlahavut is 'the inflaming', the ardor of ecstasy. It is the goblet of grace and the eternal key." <sup>14</sup> Hitlahavut is the path to God, the key to the meaning of life, the true communion with God, and is the end goal, the attainment. Further, Hitlahavut is above everything else: commands, law, and sin. It is the root of all teachings and commands. <sup>15</sup> With Hitlahavut, time shrinks and the moment only lives, The chains of this world are shaken off and one can then be in union with God and when one is in this state, he is in holiness. <sup>16</sup> It is for this reason that laughter, song, and dance are important ingredients in the life of the Hasid. Laughter, song and dance are the highest forms of worship for they are of the primary paths to Hitlahavut and so to God. <sup>17</sup>

#### Man's Task - The Redemption of Divine Sparks

And what is man's task in the divine plan? Much of man's task is wrapped up in the concept of divine sparks or nitsozet ( ) and their redemption. Holy sparks originated when God built and destroyed worlds in the creation of the universe. These holy sparks which are now far from God need to be brought back into union with him. This then is man's task, to redeem the fallen sparks, to bring them from the lower realms back to the Godhead.

This is the way of redemption: that all souls which have sprung from the primeval soul and have sunk and become scattered in all creatures at the time of the original darkening of the world or through the guilt of the ages should conclude their wanderings and return, home purified. <sup>18</sup>

God could have redeemed them himself but he wished for man to have a place in redemption.

Where is the location of the holy spark? They are to be found in all things; there is no thing without them imprisoned within. They are to be found in springs, walled-up caves, rocks, plants, animals. Even in each individual there are holy sparks clinging and waiting. They make themselves evident to us in disturbing thoughts while we are praying. All of these sparks are exiled all over the world and they long to be lifted up from lower existence to higher; from rock, to plant,

to animal, the speaking being.

How does man redeem these sparks of souls? It is done through the hollowing of the everyday and not through any rites or rituals. Everyday actions done with truth and meaning is way to worship God and to bring all things back to him in the end. Because of this, there is unfathomable value placed on human action -- on intentional (kavana) human action. <sup>19</sup> Buber claims that this is the messianic redemption of the world. It is to be performed by ordinary men and not through extraordinary acts by and extraordinary individual. <sup>20</sup> Others believe that they can help in the redemption of the world until the time of the coming one, the <sup>21</sup> Messiah.

Because all intentional actions are sacred, a good Jew is gooding everything-- thinking, drinking, eating, working, shopping and all other actions. To the Hasid there is no reason to fast or to do harm to the body for one who eats with devotion <sup>22</sup> redeems the holy sparks imprisoned in the food and so fulfills his obligation. Further, the good Jew uses all things with devotion. Around each man, in each individuals sphere of activity, there are things he is called to redeem. All things about him and all his possessions gain importance whether it be animals, walls, fields, food or tools. Not only should the good Jew use these things with devotion but he should also use them with great care. Baal Shem <sup>23</sup> stated,

Man eats them, man drinks them, man uses them; these are the sparks that dwell in all things. Therefore one should have mercy on his tools, and all his possessions for the sake of the sparks that are in them; one should have mercy on the holy sparks. <sup>23</sup>

One can clearly see how a religious philosophy such as this would have appealed to the poorer, uneducated classes of Jew in Eastern Europe. A person need not be a religious scholar in order to serve God and fulfill his duty. He need only to do everyday tasks with feeling, love, devotion and intention. Such a philosophy would have no doubt made life more enjoyable and more bearable. Everything would be done with a conscious effort. All senses would be at a peak of feeling to savor the world.



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## Additional Service to God

Besides the redemption of holy sparks, service to God also includes prayer, good deeds and benevolent assistance. Prayers are to be offered with joyous feelings and even bodily expressions such as swaying back and forth. This no doubt has a hypnotizing effect enabling the individual to pray with utmost concentration. Good deeds are to be done with a pure and sincere heart. Assistance to one's fellow man is also considered to be an act of worship to God and is a reflection of one's relationship to him for a true lover of God is a lover of man. Even evildoers and sinners are to be loved because within them also are sparks of divinity.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, all prayers, good deeds, assistance and other acts of worship must be done with enthusiasm (Hitlahavut) or it is of little value. In all things really, the Hasid is worshiping God.

He can speak idle words with his mouth, yet the teaching of the Lord is in his heart at this hour; he can pray in a whisper, yet his heart cries out in his breast; he can sit in a community of men, yet he walks with God: mixing with the creatures yet excluded from the world.<sup>25</sup>

## Humility

Just as everyday deeds done without devotion and intention are of little value, so are they of little value if they are not done with humility. Humility does several things: it brings about a perfect love between peoples; it makes men's actions of value for the work of a haughty man is wasted, and it allows room for God to pour in his holiness for "In him who is full of himself,<sup>26</sup> there is no room for God."

As long as a man sees himself above and before others, he has a limit and God cannot pour his holiness into him for God is without limit. But when a man sees himself as nothing, he is not limited by any other thing, he is limitless and God pours his glory into him.<sup>27</sup>

To have humility, man must annihilate the self. Humility then is not just thinking little of one's self but rather not thinking of one's self at all.

## The Community

Hasidism as once said earlier, concerned itself little with dogma and ritual.

It strove to internalize Judaism or to make the truth of the divine presence a living reality to the individual and the community. We have seen how Hasidism affects the everyday life of the individual but to influence the social order was another goal and result.

It is believed by the Hasid that Hasidism acts in such a way as to form a community. This is mainly due to the fact that the core of Hasidism is not to be found in teachings but in a mode of life. This mode of life would naturally affect and mold the community.

... it does not form a fraternity, it does not form a separate order, which guards and esoteric teaching, apart from public life; it forms a community of people...<sup>28</sup>

Another characteristic of the Hasidic community is that it is a free, voluntary association of people around a religious master.

The master is called the Tzadik ( ). He lives with the community and is its religious leader. He is considered the guide to his followers, the link between man and God and is believed to perform miracles and with some Tzadiks, to have the power over life and death.<sup>29</sup> He is the one who possesses "suspended contemplation" and utter devotion to God which is not possible for the general individual in the community. The Tzadik constantly has thoughts on God and raises the prayers, thoughts, and actions of his followers to God. He is like a channel in which divine grace can flow to the people. Men are brought closer to God through him and through him God's bounty flows.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

The Hasid strikes many people as being a rather strange fanatic. He dresses rather unusual, speaks a strange combination of medieval German and Hebrew, holds to a rather unique philosophy in many ways, is aggressively anti-social, and is opinionated and stubborn. And, more or less, depending upon the background of each observer, he generally may be these things - though I think if a person got to know the Hasid individually and personally, suspicions, negative attitudes, and stereotypes would suffer starvation on both sides due to the lack of ignorance.

## Footnotes

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- 18
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