

Bayazid Bistami

Bayazid Bistami (804-874) began the Islamic mystical movement away from religious ritual and scholarship as a means to enlightenment, towards a personal relationship with God. Coming from Persian Zoroastrian stock, Bayazid was the first to speak openly of "annihilation of the self in God" and "subsistence through God," ideas which came to underpin Sufi prayer worship and, later, the Jewish Kabbalah and Hasidism. He is quoted as saying: "The thickest veils between man and Allah are the wise man's wisdom, the worshiper's worship and the devotion of the devout."

Bayazid expanded the central Sufi ideal of "equanimity," or complete self-effacement and rising above personal ego. The practice of equanimity, which held that a mystic should experience praise and disgust by other people as exactly the same, was a necessary precursor to spiritual enlightenment. A story told about Bayazid that captured some of this mystic's philosophy ended being sucked up into the Jewish mystical stream, and was included in the writings of the 16th century Jewish Kabbalist, Hayyim Vital. Vital's tale mirrors exactly that told by the 11th century Sufi saint al Ghazali, about Bayazid.

It is important to note that the ideas contained in al Ghazali's tale, those of complete humility and, more importantly, equanimity, were age-old for Sufis, but new to the Jewish mystical realm. Ultimately, it is hard to overestimate the importance of equanimity to Jewish mystics, as later Jews viewed it as necessary for the achievement of divine union and even prophecy. After Kabbalists like Isaac of Acre (13th century) and Vital wrapped the ideal into Jewish mysticism,

Bayazid's conception began to show up regularly in Jewish mystical teachings – becoming central to the 18th century Jewish mystic and founder of Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov.

