BY SPIRIT ALONE:
AMERICAN JEWS SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Introduction

In the beginning, or at least how it is described in Torah, God began to create the heavens and the earth. God goes on to create light and darkness, celestial bodies, land and sea, vegetation and a variety of animal life. At the end of this first creation narrative God announces the intention to "make human beings in our image, after our likeness."[1] God then creates the first humans, male and female, in the "image of God," and decides to rest after seeing that all that God made was "very good."[2]

Just a few verses later we read a more intimate creation narrative, one not as concerned with cosmic details. In this seemingly alternative creation story, God takes the dust of the earth and fashions it into the first human, a man. God then "breathes the breath of life"—*nishmat chayim*—into this man so that they will become a living being. After realizing that this man is all alone God decides to create another human being. This time, though, God takes a rib from the man in order to create the woman. These two humans meet, and the man declares, "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh! Let this one be called woman (*ishah*), for this one is taken from man (*ish*)."[3]

Through just two chapters (only 56 verses), the origins of the universe and humanity that we read about in Torah leave us with questions: are the two creation narratives describing different versions of the same event or are they meant to be different understandings of Creation? What is this *nishmat chayim*—breath of life—that God passes along to man in the second story, and does woman's physical creation from a rib mean that she does not possess this same *nishmat chayim?* Before we get a chance to explore the

[1] Gen 1:26 (NJPS).
[2] Gen 1:31 (NJPS).
[3] Gen 2:23 (NJPS).

meaning the story continues and these humans are exiled from the Garden of Eden and removed from the possibility of eternal life and a personal connection with God.

This disconnection is further emphasized in Genesis 6:3 when God says, "My *ruchi*—'spirit'—will not forever endure the humans as they are but fallible flesh." Just as man and woman were seemingly animated by different elements—man by *nishmat chayim* and woman by a physical aspect from man—here, too, we see a dissociation between the spirit and the body. Later in Leviticus, we get yet another term for what animates a living being: *nefesh*. God declares, "for the *nefesh*—life—of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as *nefesh*—life—that effect expiation."[4] With these examples we see an interplay between both the physical and the spiritual as necessary to sustain life.

We read numerous times throughout Torah about the burying of the physical body at the end of one's life, but nothing is mentioned about what happens to the spiritual aspect that had been connected to God. We gain new perspectives of life beyond physical existence if we continue to read the rest of *Tanakh*. In *Qohelet* ("Ecclesiastes") we read that "the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the *ruach*—lifebreath—returns to God who bestowed it."[5] Before this description we had only seen the spiritual animating feature of life in relation to the body, with the inferred understanding of it disappearing at death. With this addition in *Qohelet*, the physical body is reunited with the earth and the spirit is understood to return to God.

[4] Lev 17:11 (NJPS).
[5] Qohelet 12:7-8 (JPS).

The physical and spiritual took on new meanings for Jews when they experienced transformation in a rather short period of time. They were exiled and allowed to return,[6] were challenged by assimilatory pressures,[7] were persecuted politically,[8] and then exiled once again after the destruction of the Second Temple.[9] In a time that could have led to a full abandonment of the Jewish religion and of God, Jews got creative and developed new forms of Judaism.

Over the next two millennia Jews lived all over the world. Some Jews believed that they needed to return to the homeland promised to them in Torah, and others felt strongly about practicing Judaism in the Diaspora. Over that time the foundational concepts of Jewish identity were questioned by Jews and non-Jews alike: was Judaism a religion or a culture? Was it possible that certain evolutionary steps allowed Judaism to be a combination of both? Judaism had developed an immense system through which one could identify: music, dance, poetry, liturgy, law, food, sacred literature, calendar, theology, rituals and ceremonies, and ethical and moral codes for the individual and society provided avenues to claim Jewishness. Eventually, the concept that Jews could identify as a nation also became a reality. For centuries, wherever they lived, the Jewish community had distinguished themselves as a group of people with their own languages and practices. In the 19th century, the political climate shifted in such a way that allowed for groups of people to declare their desire to be self-governed within the boundaries of their homeland.

Each Jewish community in every generation has asked themselves some form of the same questions: what is Judaism? How does one practice Judaism? How does one define

[6] Babylonian Exile 587 – 538 BCE.
[7] Hellenistic Period 332 – 110 BCE.
[8] Hasmonean Kingdom 110 – 63 BCE.
[9] Roman Rule 63 BCE – 136 CE.

oneself as a Jew? Sometimes these questions are forced upon the Jewish communities by external circumstances (e.g., exile, destruction of holy sites, or new definitions of identity). Other times these questions are posed and explored from within the Jewish communities themselves (e.g., rabbis through Talmud, Midrash Rabbah, Maimonides during the medieval period, emerging denominations post-Enlightenment). There are also Jewish communities that believe that they already have the answers to those questions; they believe that the purpose of their Judaism was very clearly laid out in Torah and it is impossible for them to comprehend that God has not already provided humanity with everything that they need to live a meaningful Jewish life.

These kinds of questions—or the act of questioning—point to the desire to know more about ourselves and our universe. Trying to understand the essence—the spirit of something—can lead to defining purpose. Does life itself have inherent meaning or do we create meaning in order to guide and validate our thoughts and actions? What is it that gives us cognitive understanding and reasoning to discern what life is? Can we rely solely on modern scientific discoveries and definitions of how we relate to this world and plane of existence, or is there something that we can tap into by way of religion that connects us to the source of our questioning and search for meaning beyond the physical limitations we can comprehend?

Long have people attempted to reconcile notions of physicality and spirituality both within and without religious frameworks. The human search for meaning is directly tied to traditional and ancient concepts of the soul. Within Judaism, the soul has been referred to as *nishmat chayim* that breath of life God initially breathed into humanity. Jewish mysticism later understood the soul to be multifaceted: *nefesh*, relating to natural instinct; *ruach*,

relating to emotion and morality; *neshamah*, relating to intellect and the awareness of God; *chayah*, considered a part of God; *yechidah*, essentially one with God.[10] More traditional beliefs about the soul relate the adherence to *mitzvot* to a deeper connection to God which provides the possibility of the soul achieving immortality.[11] Others understand the concept of the soul to be an indescribable feature that falls somewhere between providing life to animate objects and allowing for that being to express a concept of the self.

By the 20th century, there was a growing desire to express one's self both as an individual and as a way to connect to a larger community. For many Jewish people, Zionism emerged as a new means of political identity that sought the geographical and political unification of Jews all over the world. Much of Jewish identity crafted from Torah was tied to a Jewish homeland and later traditional texts explored the eventual returning to that homeland. In response to the violence of modernity, many Jews began believing that Zionism was a viable option. Paralleling the trends of their neighbors, Jews around the world turned toward nationalism as a way to play more of an active role in their destinies. For so long, Jews maintained their loyalties out of religious conviction; contemporary Jews actively searched for different forms of connection through a combination of culture, spirituality, and politics.

With nationalistic tendencies came international relations. Questions about the differences between nations and cultures were asked at a time when technological and scientific advancements were progressing at a rate unmatched in human history. For European Jews this trajectory came to a violent head in World War II after the National

[10] Kaufman Kohler and Isaac Broyde, "Soul," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* Vol 11. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), 472-476.
[11] ibid.

Socialist German Workers' Party rose to power in Germany. The National Socialists' plan for a "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" resulted in the mass genocide of roughly two-thirds of the European Jewish population. By the end of WWII, six million Jewish men, women, and children were killed as a part of what would later be referred to as the Holocaust, the *churban*, and the Shoah. For the rest of the world this tragedy was obviously of unimaginable proportions. Millions of others European communities had been targeted including Soviet civilians, Poles, Serbians, disabled individuals, Communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, political dissidents, and homosexuals.[12]

For Jewish communities there was no equivalent in their people's history for them to turn for answers. Jews had been persecuted and murdered in expulsions, auto-da-fé, and *pogroms*, but the systematic extermination implemented by the National Socialist regime was unparalleled. There were also theological questions about the nature of God: did God allow this event to take place, was God hiding, could God not stop an event like this, did God die in the camps along with God's people, or perhaps was God mourning alongside the Jewish people in the aftermath of this?[13] For the Jewish people who had begun to challenge themselves with active ways to identify with their Judaism, how were they to interpret this event and in what ways would Judaism be defined moving forward?

Before reaching any conclusion to these questions, both the world and Judaism would be faced with a new form of Jewish identity: the formal, political creation of the State of Israel. Only a few years after the end of WWII Zionist ideologues had manifested the

[12] "Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last edited February 4, 2019, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution.
[13] Steven Katz, "Introduction: Ultra-Orthodox Responses," in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust*, Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21.

possibility of a Jewish nation. The world's political leaders at the newly formed United Nations supported the State of Israel by voting for its immediate establishment in the historic homeland of the Jewish people.[14] Due to the proximity of the end of the war and the birth of Israel, the tragedy of the Holocaust is often used as a way to validate the Jewish State.[15] Many traditional Jews around the world, though not all, believed that "both the Holocaust and the birth of Israel were part of God's divine plan, and perhaps, in different ways, auguries of the day of redemption."[16] Most American Jews, however, did not seem to identify with either historic event at least not right away.

For the first 20 years or so after World War II, American Jewish communities watched the events of the European theater of WWII and the creation of the State of Israel occur on distant soil.[17] Since before the United States was formed, American Jewish communities had been a part of their own unique journey which evolved and adapted with the shifting values of their neighboring American communities. The diasporic experience had primed Jews to explore identity and connection to Judaism as a religion and a culture, and the freedoms granted to religious communities in America were sustained and unlike any that Jews had experienced in history. These freedoms provided Jews ample opportunities for experimentation while searching for meaning and to offer valuable perspectives in the growing number of conversations about Jewish identity.

A core element informing this search for meaning were those notions of the soul which provided complementary paths toward exploration and innovation. In the latter half of the 20th century, American Jews turned to experimental theological strategies to connect with

[14] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 71-72.
[15] ibid, 70.
[16] ibid, 69.
[17] ibid, 2.

God and with each other. Though not all Jews felt the imperative to invigorate Judaism in the wake of the Holocaust and the establishment of a political Jewish nation, those who did established an assortment of approaches to investigate.

This thesis will examine three distinct Jewish schools of thought and practice which used notions of the soul in relation to spirituality in the United States in the 20th century. By focusing on a series of case studies, this thesis will investigate how various notions of the soul provided American Jews with new or different lenses through which they interpreted their Jewish values and traditions.

The first case study explores Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidism as it gained popularity and population in post-WWII American culture and society. Recognizing the freedoms granted to religious communities in the U.S., the spiritual leader of Chabad-Lubavitch, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), utilized unique methods of outreach to engage less observant Jews and attempted to educate them in how to connect their Jewish souls to God.

The second case study explores the Havurah Movement, which emerged as a Jewish expression of the countercultural activities taking place in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s. While not initially unified under centralized leadership, the Havurah Movement began as smaller communities (*minyanim*) that felt self-empowered to reinterpret and redefine Judaism. The willingness of these Jews to experiment with Jewish ritual practice was one mechanism for Jewish American women to fight for equality in forming and manifesting Jewish identity. Havurah Judaism also provided opportunities for non-Hasidic Jews to begin utilizing traditional Hasidic teachings in order to seeking a mystical approach to spirituality.

The final case study examines Buddhism as a response of many secular American Jews seeking spirituality beyond Judaism. Postwar spiritual trends in the U.S. led many Jewish individuals to find that Buddhist teachings and practices matched their desires to engage in meaningful soul searching.

By exploring these specific ways that American Jews utilized internal and external sources to engage in spirituality, this analysis investigates Jewish models for integration of both physical and spiritual conceptions of the self and community. Ultimately, this thesis showcases a period of meaning-making that took place over a number of years in Jewish communities across America.

Chapter 1: The Soul in Service of God

As a recognizable global organization, Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidism is a particularly active expression of Hasidic beliefs and practices. Founded in 1767 by Schneur Zalman of Liadi when he became the spiritual leader of what was then a tiny group Hasidism in Liozna (then Czarist Russia), Chabad-Lubavitch has grown into a global entity whose main message of evangelizing Judaism as a means of redeeming the world is accomplished through outreach. Chief among its outreach programs in the U.S. has been an emphasis on engaging college aged Jews to find spiritual connections to specific rituals of traditional Judaism—lighting candles, laying *tefillin*, celebrating Hanukkah—in order to ignite and foster a turning of the soul toward *halakhic* Judaism.

Chabad-Lubavitch Origins

The founder of the modern Hasidic movement was Yisrael ben Eliezer (c. 1700-1760) also known as "Ba'al Shem Tov" (owner of a good name). Although many teachings at the core of the Hasidic Movement could be traced back to early parts of the 12th and 13th centuries in Europe, the Ba'al Shem Tov proposed a new approach to Jewish practice: every Jew should have full access to Judaism in order to pray more fully and develop a worldview which would allow for one to pour out one's soul in every moment.[18] If a Jew developed a deeper connection to the previously esoteric aspects of Judaism, then the barriers separating the secular and the spiritual could be shattered and all of humanity could recognize a fundamental truth for followers of Hasidism: the divine presence of God ("HaShem") is in each and every facet of existence. The goal then became to achieve *devekut*, "attachment to

[18] Kaufman Kohler and Louis Ginzberg, "Ba'al Shem Tov – Israel ben Eliezer," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* Vol 2. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), 383-386.

God," by every means necessary, including ecstatic prayer, focus and intention in all activities, reinterpretation of Jewish mysticism, and even very specific dress codes and customs.[19]

After the Ba'al Shem Tov died, his students traveled to remote locations to spread his teachings, under the authority and encouragement of the Besht's successor Dov Baer of Mezeritch (1704-1772). Schneur Zalman (1745-1813), known now as the *Alter Rebbe*, began to adapt further the tradition he had inherited. Schneur Zalman believed the role of the *rebbe* did not serve as the intermediary between a Jew and God but instead must guide each member of his community to take on the responsibility of ascending him or herself. Schneur Zalman urged his followers to realize their own intention in their actions. By focusing one's intellect towards deep meditative prayer and practical action (e.g., loving one's neighbor, giving of *tzedakah*), Schneur Zalman guided his followers towards what he believed to be a rational devotion of God. The mind was the way to the heart, he believed, and having knowledge of Godliness grounded the more mystical faith elements of Hasidism. By taking inspiration from the mystical tradition, Schneur Zalman emphasized certain attributes of God; by 1775, he developed the triad concept of ***ḥ****ochmah* (wisdom), ***b****inah* (comprehension), ***d****a'at* (knowledge), which became the acronym Chabad.

The Hasidic sects that developed in the 18th century were met with criticism and dismay by traditional Jewish lay and rabbinic leaders (who became known as the *Mitnagdim*, literally, Opponents). These "opponents" rejected the ecstatic nature of Hasidic worship and practice and worried that the joyful expressions of faith were dangerously reminiscent of

[19] ibid.

previous false messianic movements.[20] Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon, questioned the legitimacy of Hasidism and declared its followers heretics, punishing them by excommunication.[21] The Vilna Gaon believed Hasidism's *tzaddikim* were not only a threat to scholarly rabbinic leadership, but felt that the movement's adherence to mysticism was misguided and falsely promised an individual and personalized relationship with God. These efforts to stifle Hasidism never fully succeeded and the movement continued to gain followers in the region and beyond.

Chabad-Lubavitch philosophy began to solidify in 1797 when Schneur Zalman published *Likkutei Amarim* (*Collection of Statements*), which Lubavitchers know by its opening word *Tanya* ("it was taught in an oral tradition"). Through five sections, Schneur Zalman outlined a systematic intellectual approach one could utilize to achieve a Jewish spiritual life that was in service of God. As a rational guide to *avodah* (service to God), *Tanya* grounded the teachings of Chabad which allowed for literate members of his community to utilize their intellect in combination with their spirituality.

Transition to the United States

Over the next century as the Chabad-Lubavitch dynastic influence spread its followers increased. Though Lubavitch and other Hasidic Jews were part of the emigration that brought 2.5 million mostly Eastern European Jews to the United States between 1881 and 1924, the largest number of Hasidim arrived right before, during, and immediately after WWII, when several prominent European *rebbes* moved their courts to New York in order to

[20] Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image*, trans. Jeffrey Green. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 92-93.
[21] ibid.

escape from territories under threat from the growth of National Socialism.[22] Interestingly, these waves of Jewish immigrants chose not to blend into the dominant American culture; instead they opted to re-create (as best they could) their communities in the neighborhoods of New York and later expanded to New Jersey. They maintained their traditional dress: men with uncut beards wore black hats and black coats; women wore wigs and/or head coverings and followed customs of *tzniut* (modesty) as articulated by their respective *rebbes*. Initially, during the 1940s and 1950s, Hasidic Jewry seemed limited in geographical impact and had little influence on other American Jewish communities. That changed in 1951 when Menachem Mendel Schneerson succeeded his father-in-law as the seventh Chabad-Lubavitch *rebbe*.

Schneerson was initially reluctant but eventually accepted leadership of Chabad-Lubavitch.[23] Although it has been documented that Schneerson made many attempts to stay private, his followers became obsessive about their leader for many of the same reasons that the *tzaddikim* had been influential back in Europe. Within his own community, the *Rebbe* achieved the status of having tremendous power and acting as the intermediary between heaven and earth. In her sweeping work about the far-reaching influences of Schneerson, Sue Fishkoff relates a conversation with Zalman Shmotkin who serves as a *shaliach* (emissary) of Lubavitch Hasidism:

> to hear the Rebbe talk about the pride of being a Jew, telling that the world is waiting for us to be what we're supposed to be, was tremendous. The next time you got sidetracked by your petty issues, you'd remember how the Rebbe made you feel that what you do makes a difference in the world.[24]

[22] Jerome R. Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 30.
[23] Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 161.
[24] Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 79-80.

Schneerson was the "root-soul" of his generation (a notion that Jerome Mintz defines as the "literal and spiritual embodiment of Moses and inheritor of his great soul, the soul that spoke directly to God"[25]). Followers of Chabad Hasidism believed the *Rebbe* to be the central conduit through which every living Jewish soul is united. Lubavitcher Hasidim drew close to the *Rebbe* wanting his blessing and guidance with all major (and some minor) decision, through happy transitions and some challenging times.

Turn Towards Outreach

To demonstrate the role that Jewish individuals could play in changing the world, the *Rebbe* launched a variety of outreach initiatives to engage non-observant Jews. Initially, these efforts were Schneerson's response to the Holocaust; his main goals were to revitalize and bring joy back to a broken Jewish world.[26] With these "*mitzvah* campaigns," Schneerson sought to promote the celebration of Jewish holidays along with specific ritual commandments that were easy to perform. There were ten initial campaigns which included teaching and facilitating the lighting of Shabbat candles, putting up *mezuzot*, studying Torah, keeping kosher, giving charity, filling one's home with Jewish books, keeping the laws of family purity, loving one's fellow Jews, and giving children a Jewish education.[27] Recognizing that these tasks were beyond the capabilities of one person, Schneerson deployed emissaries, *schlichim*, on his behalf to locations around the United States and abroad.

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[25] Mintz, *Hasidic People*, 48-49.
[26] ibid, 49.
[27] ibid, 49-50. *Mivtzah* [pl.: *mivtzoim*] Hebrew for "campaign." The Lubavitcher Rebbe announced many "mitzvah campaigns," or *mivtzoim*, to encourage non-observant Jews to activate their Judaism through certain actions. Lubavitch youths typically go out on Fridays and on the eve of Jewish holidays to do *mivtzoim*, or outreach work (Fishkoff, 328).

Even in America, there were Orthodox (as well as liberal) criticisms regarding these campaigns. Fishkoff notes that there were Jews in other *halakhically* observant, non-Hasidic communities who believed that this sort of outreach cheapened religious practice to encourage non-observant Jews to perform isolated rituals without adopting the total lifestyle.[28] However, the *schlichim* were not deterred as they continued to believe Schneerson's core message regarding *mitzvot*. In his book, *The Mystical Dimension*, Chabad theologian Jacob Immanuel Schochet defended outreach:

> each mitzvah, in and of itself, is a deed of cosmic significance that activates a person's preexisting connection to God. It is a holy act, worth doing for any reason. Not only that, but one person performing one mitzvah could be the key event that tips the scales of universal goodness and ushers in the Messianic Age.[29]

Chabad's followers believed the *Rebbe* was the intermediary between heaven and earth, and the *schlichim* fully understood themselves to be the bridge between the non-observant and observant worlds in global Jewry and the United States in particular.

In the 1960s, Schneerson determined that a prime market for outreach was American college and university campuses. Many college students were active in political and social demonstrations, and experimentation with dress, music, and drug use was prevalent. Schneerson believed that Chabad was the perfect antidote for college-aged Jews who found themselves in these environments. He had a vision that the message of traditional Judaism, enacted by intelligent and sincere young married couples, would counter some of the anti-establishment sentiment that he believed was leading Jewish youth astray. The very first college Chabad House opened in 1969 at University of California, Los Angeles; a second one opened in 1972 at University of California, Berkeley.

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[28] ibid, 49.
[29] Jacob Immanuel Schochet, *Chassidic Dimensions*, Vol. 3 of *The Mystical Dimension*. (New York: Kehot Publication Society, 1990), 208.

The first campus *schlichim* discovered that their roles on campus were multifaceted: they served as parents, teachers, best friends, camp counselors, career advisors, spiritual guides, psychiatrists, on-call chefs, and, of course, rabbi and rebbetzin.[30] Vivi Deren, a *shlicha* in Stamford, Connecticut, spoke with Fishkoff in the early 2000s about how the Chabad-Lubavitch community was accepted and integrated into the non-Hasidic world: "there was a rosy period after the publication of *The Chosen* [1967]... [W]e taught in [Reform] schools. We were the *Fiddler on the Roof* people. As long as we were cute and quaint, it was all right."[31] In order to maintain this peace, *schlichim* were instructed to avoid conflict with existing Jewish institutions in their regions.[32] However, growing trends in American Jewry began to shift in such a way that threatened Chabad's niche as the prominent Jewish organization in the public eye. On college campuses, Hillel[33] began to rise in popularity due to its more pluralistic offerings for Jewish students. While Hillel operated as a social and advocacy group, Chabad maintained its focus of outreach bringing American Jewish youth closer to God and their Jewish heritage.[34]

There were many other spiritual offerings to which Americans had access in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., ashrams, churches, Buddhist temples) and Schneerson wanted to ensure that Lubavitch urban locations around the country would make the religious and spiritual impact he sought.

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[30] Fishkoff, *Rebbe's Army,* 92.
[31] ibid, 120. *The Chosen*, a fictional book written by Chaim Potok and published in 1967, depicts the unlikely friendship between two teenage boys—one Hasidic, one modern Orthodox—living in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The work was an international success; a movie version of the story was released in 1981.
[32] Chana Piekarski, ed. *Shlichus: Meeting the Outreach Challenge: A Resource Handbook for Shluchim*. (Brooklyn: Nshei Chabad Publications, 1991).
[33] The Hillel Foundation was founded in the 1920s.
[34] Elad Nehorai, "Why Chabad is the Best at Kiruv," from Pop Chassid, published June 17, 2012, http://popchassid.com/chabad-kiruv/.

Chabad in the Public Eye

Since the initial success of Chabad in the 1960s and 1970s, it has continued to stay relevant in the American Jewish world. Chabad has held a steady place in the spotlight through outreach, Torah study, and *mitzvah* campaigns. In Los Angeles, the Chabad Telethon has been in the general public's awareness since 1980 when the original event was held.[35] Chabad of California promotes the annual event with street banners and billboards, highlighting the actors, musicians, and community leaders who help in sharing hosting responsibilities of the six-hour televised fundraiser. Even with the celebrities, the most recognizable image from the event has become the dancing rabbis. These individuals celebrate all evening long whenever a larger donation comes in, and their celebrations serve as a Hasidic symbol of happiness when someone performs a good deed.[36]

Chabad has had a lasting impression that is felt by non-Hasidic Jews and non-Jews alike. Many understand Chabad to belong to a more traditional stream of Judaism, one that often lends them more credibility due to their outward appearance and rigid adherence to *halakhah* and ritual observance. When government officials invite Chabad representatives to public events, they stand out due to their attire. The black clothes play into ideas about "authentic" Judaism. Chabad has always taken full advantage of these moments in the public eye, but it is always in service to their mission of spreading "joy" (observance) amongst Jews. Lubavitchers believe that "when serving God in this way, one can be sure that they are doing what God wants at any moment, thus cultivating a state of joy."[37]

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[35] As of 2019, Los Angeles is home to the third largest Jewish population in the world after New York and Jerusalem, representing approximately 475,000-569,000 people (from "Key Findings: 2019 Los Angeles County Jewish Voter Poll." Jewish Data Bank, revised October 5, 2019).
[36] Chabad Telethon, "Our Story," Accessed January 2020, http://www.chabad.com/telethon/story.html.
[37] Nissan Dovid Dubov, "Joy," from Chabad.org, published March 2007, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/361895/jewish/Joy.htm.

One of those joy-spreading missions occurred in 1973 when Schneerson launched a Hanukkah awareness campaign. Fishkoff describes Hanukkah as a "holiday glorifying military prowess and God's miracle-making [which] was barely celebrated by non-Orthodox American Jews."[38] Fishkoff continues by stating that Schneerson's public outreach campaign was strategic and may have contributed to Hanukkah's popularity in America:

> Menorah-lighting was a logical ritual for the Rebbe to seize upon as one of this outreach campaigns because the holiday itself demands that Jews publicize it. Jews are required to commemorate the Maccabees' victory by placing lighted menorahs in their open windows. In America, where Jews no longer faced persecution, Schneerson proclaimed that the mitzvah of publicizing [Hanukkah] should be given new emphasis.[39]

The *Rebbe* encouraged his *schlichim* to reach out to every Jew possible in order to give him/her the opportunity to kindle the Hanukkah lights and celebrate the holiday. That year, Chabad distributed about 60,000 tin menorahs.[40] The following year, there was a public menorah lighting by *schlichim* in front of the Liberty Building in Philadelphia. By 1979, United States President Jimmy Carter invited Chabad representatives to light a Hanukkah menorah at the White House.

After the Rebbe

Even with all of the attention that Chabad receives in terms of the world accepting their religious "authenticity," most non-traditional Jews consider Chabad and Hasidism to be just one of the many ways to engage with Judaism.[41] In the U.S., the style of dress and the refusal to engage in pluralistic dialogue keep Lubavitchers at a distance during more

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[38] Fishkoff, *Rebbe's Army*, 287.
[39] ibid, 288.
[40] Jennifer Medina, "With Tin Menorahs, an Outreach to Promote Faith," *The New York Times*, published December 18, 2009, https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/18/menorah-medina/?_r=0.
[41] Josh Nathan-Kazis, "A Reform Rabbi's Response to Chabad," *New Voices*, published September 23, 2008, https://newvoices.org/2008/09/23/0037-3/.

progressive conversations. There is also a perception that the Chabad community is obsessed with Rabbi Schneerson and herald his death as the arrival of the messiah, two concepts that more progressive Jews describe as "disturbing" and "cult like."[42] During his lifetime he was well known for his charisma and scholarship; since his death, the *Rebbe* remains the public symbol of Chabad.

When Schneerson died in 1994 there was no immediate successor. The Hasidic belief of holiness via proximity to a *tzaddik* was and is still strong—many people opt to visit the *Rebbe*'s grave (the *ohel*) for a variety of reasons: they pray for healthy babies during pregnancy, seek blessings for upcoming life changes, ask for guidance with challenges, look for wish-fulfillment.[43] While the Lubavitch Hasidic world has remained loyal to their leader and his teachings, the Chabad organization has shifted towards a more traditional model of engagement via synagogues and schools.[44] They have even created an impressive educational Website which reaches millions around the world every year.[45] Much of this continued outreach is made possible because of the financial success Chabad has sustained over the years.

Concluding Thoughts

Chabad-Lubavitch has maintained a presence all over the world. However, finding a spiritual home in America allowed for the organization to take root and spread its influence. The emergence of Chabad Houses in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s

[42] Lisa Beyer, "Expecting the Messiah," *Time* magazine, published March 23, 1992, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,975127,00.html.
[43] Ohel Chabad Lubavitch, "Visiting Conduct," accessed January 2020, https://www.ohelchabad.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/78447/jewish/Conduct.htm/lang/en.
[44] Jack Wertheimer, "A Census of Jewish Supplementary Schools in the United States 2006-2007," Avi Chai Foundation, accessed January 2020, http://avichai.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Supplementary-School-Census-Report-Final.pdf.
[45] Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, "Our Impact," from Chabad.org, Accessed January 2020, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/36217/jewish/Our-Impact.htm.

came at a time when many Americans, especially college-aged students, were seeking different ways to connect to community. The social climate of the era became more anti-establishment and Chabad offered different ways to connect to Judaism and spirituality than the more normative Jewish institutions and synagogues.

Even after the Rebbe's death, Lubavitchers never wavered in the goal of bringing as many non-observant Jews toward regular Jewish practice by performing *mitzvot.* Lubavitchers continue to believe that humankind is on the verge of a great reawakening and, if Chabad is successful in their mission in getting more Jews to practice *mitzvot,* they will be able to usher in the return of the messiah. Guided by the Hasidic philosophy crafted by Schneur Zalman, Lubavitchers believe that the human soul craves a reuniting with God (*devekut*). Through proper training and adherence to *mitzvot*, the soul can be transformed from a raw and emotional state to one that is guided by intellect to reach toward the divine. By helping non-observant Jews to enact a *mitzvah*, *schlichim* help this Jewish soul find the deep connection to God it was seeking.

Chapter 2: America's Spiritual Growth

We now turn towards the ways in which American Jews empowered themselves to recreate the boundaries of their spiritual claims. Even before the arrival of Hasidic Jews in large numbers in the United States, Americans of all religious backgrounds were involved in a spiritual revival. Following the First Great Awakening during the Colonial Age, and the Second Great Awakening in the mid-19th century, the turn toward the 20th century brought a new light to the relationship of one's soul the natural world in which one lived.[46] Many scientific and technological advancements continued to shape global relationships and American Jews found opportunities to reshape Jewish identity and spirituality.

Transcendental Inspirations

In his book *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, professor of religion Leigh Eric Schmidt argues that an early 19th century new age of spirituality drew inspiration from the transcendental thought movement of the time. Transcendentalism elevated the value of the individual and taught that one must become self-reliant in one's quest for truth. Members of Transcendental societies believed that institutions corrupted the inherent purity of the individual. This corruption could be overcome by utilizing one's own intellect in order to transcend limitations set by organized religion. In the pursuit of creative self-expression, one could transcend these boundaries and achieve a desired mystical experience or religious feeling.[47]

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[46] Between 1725-1755, the First Great Awakening exposed American colonies to a variety of religious and spiritual offerings by way of established churches (e.g., Quaker, Dutch Reformed, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist) as well as Enlightenment rational trends (e.g., atheism, Deism, Unitarianism, Universalism). Between 1790 and 1840, the Second Great Awakening was a largely Protestant revival movement that stressed salvation through revivals (public religious gathering featuring emotional preaching), repentance, and conversion (Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Second Edition. [London: Yale University Press, 2004]).

[47] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 12.

With the model set by Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond, many Americans began to value silence and solitude while locating religion's essence to be within and emanating from the individual. Certain spiritual practices, such as meditation and personal reflection, brought about a level of sympathetic appreciation for other religious traditions as potential spiritual resources.[48] By transcending religious distinctions in favor of individual enlightenment, spirituality took on an expansive definition which allowed for a growing conviction that all religions of the world shared a common search for meaning.[49] This universal approach to spiritual exploration represented a possible integration of cross-cultural experiences which Schmidt described as the potential to "unify a fragmented world of divided selves and lost souls."[50]

In a modernizing American society, the romanticized journey of the individual achieving a sense of spirituality became increasingly difficult. Transcendentalists had developed an idealized dream of nature and humanity unifying, which led to the development of rural communities who intentionally formed in order to foster a deep connection to the land. However, urbanization and industrialization set up obstacles for those who sought to shed any attachment to materialism. The growth of factories, the influx of immigration, and a technologically innovative economy created a massive need for labor. These factors both forced and enticed many rural Americans to leave America's farmlands for the cities.

Many new Jewish immigrants, with no land of their own, found themselves caught up in the rapid urbanization of these major American cities. Jewish communities responded to the influx of immigrants to main urban areas in a variety of ways. A number of organizations

[48] ibid, 14.
[49] ibid, 15.
[50] ibid, 58.

attempted to meet the diverse needs of an ever-growing and evolving American Jewish population. Some examples of the national and local organizations used to help those moving to the cities included: Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (1870), Young Men's Hebrew Association (1874), Associated Hebrew Charities of the U.S. (1885), Tenement House Building Committee (1885), the Russian Emigrant Relief Fund of New York (1887), Young Women's Hebrew Association (1888), Baron de Hirsch Fund (1891), Hebrew Free Loan Society (1892), Educational Alliance (1893), the National Council of Jewish Women (1893), the Jewish Federation (1895), International Ladies' Garment Association (1900), Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society (1900), and the Bureau of Education (1910). The organizations met many of the physical and economic needs of the waves of immigrants who came to the United States during the 40 years of mass immigration. But those immigrants looked elsewhere for their spiritual needs.

Until the 1920s in America there were several authoritative bodies of Jewish leadership but not a single national organization. Well into the 1920s, seminaries were founded in order to train clergy for specific denominations. In Eastern and Western Europe, plurality was a central tenet of Jewish experience. There were multiple ways to practice Judaism without being governed by rabbinic councils, and with the advent of Zionist movements, Jews could choose politics and culture over religiosity. Zionism became a test for many Jews who felt at home in the United States. America offered opportunities that allowed Jews to hold multiple identifications (ethnic, national, ideological) while still exercising a freedom of choice. For those who felt America was the Promised Land, Zionism deepened the understanding of disadvantages Jews in other global locations experienced.[51]

[51] Andrew R. Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the 20th Century*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 12.

Society for Ethical Culture

Not all Jews associated Judaism with politics. For some, cultural understandings of Jewishness became a stronger mark of identity. The founding of the Society for Ethical Culture in 1876 by Felix Adler (1851-1933) provided an outlet for Jews who did not feel religious or that *halakhic* Judaism expressed their values. Born in Germany to a Reform rabbi, raised in New York, and educated in Europe, Adler was heavily influenced by neo-Kantian ethics and a growing understanding of a universal morality. Adler rejected traditional forms of Judaism as well as Reform Judaism for he felt they no longer served as the media through which individuals could achieve their true moral potential. In 1905, he published *The Essentials of Spirituality*, a devotional book in which he outlined how one could cultivate authentic spiritual connections he believed Judaism to be lacking. He began by describing that "the first essential is an awakening, a sense of the absence of spirituality…first there must be the hunger before there can be the satisfaction."[52] Adler believed that satisfaction for this "hunger" could be satisfied through any number of religious channels, whether through "the Buddhist belief in Nirvana, or the ideas of Ethical Culture."[53] Adler claimed that spirituality was not associated with any one type of religion or philosophy, rather, it was "the quality of the soul manifesting itself in a variety of activities and beliefs" with inspiration coming from anywhere like the Bible, or Emerson, or Whitman.[54]

Adler and his ideas were incredibly compelling; the Ethical Society continues to influence secular, Humanistic, and non-denominational Jews and non-Jews. As a movement,

[52] Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 142.
[53] ibid, 144.
[54] ibid.

however, it did not compete with Jewish denominations, with seminaries, and professional clergy organizations. Adler believed that it was not the role of the movement to seek expansion by proselytizing but that the movement needed to convince the world to become more ethical. As a response to Transcendentalism the Society for Ethical Culture developed a deeper and more personal connection to spirituality, and its emphasis on creative self-expression helped to transcend traditional notions of mysticism and religion.[55]

In Between the Wars

The First World War wreaked an enormous amount of havoc on authoritarian and self-referential forms of religious expression. Schmidt explains that, in the time between WWI and WWII, there were a variety of practices and sources of spirituality which spoke to a trend of religious liberalism in America. Meditation surfaced in America as a way to achieve spirituality; practitioners believed it to serve as an "inclusive practice that blended the spiritual and the scientific in perfect harmony…transcending the bounds of ceremony and narrowness of particularity, opening into universal knowledge."[56] A metaphysical pioneer from the New Thought movement named Annie Payson Call (1843-1940) noticed that Americans were becoming more "nervous, restless, and overexerted" during the years between the wars.[57] She believed that Americans, Jews included, were suffering from "Americanitis."[58] Even with new cultural and spiritual practices, it became increasingly

[55] ibid, 12.
[56] ibid, 172.
[57] ibid. The New Thought Movement began with teachings of American clockmaker and mental healer Phineas P. Quimby (1802-1866). The core belief system developed from the notion that physical illness originated in the mind due to improper thoughts, and one could eventually overcome any illness by opening one's mind (mind-cure philosophy) to God's eternal wisdoms (Schmidt, *Restless Souls*).
[58] ibid.

difficult for many Americans to stay focused and concentrate on keeping their bodies and minds calm.

The emotional needs of Americans—Jews and non-Jews—had evolved. Some Americans believed that organized religion no longer had the answers they needed in order to heal emotional and psychological pain.[59] Another major shift in understanding the self was developed by the Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). As explained by Michael Meyer in *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, Freud believed that religious doctrines

> were illusions, if not delusions, that had no basis in any reality but in the psyche of the believer. Religion, he noted, was "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity." In other words, religion was symptomatic of mental disease, the pathological consequence of repression.[60]

Freud had come to believe that the rigid structures that religion provided for early civilizations were unnecessary, and that reason and science would guide humanity moving forward into modernity. Freud's understanding of morality was based in rational thinking rather than religious commandedness. He felt the particularism of Judaism was an antiquated but once necessary defense mechanism that would eventually need to be shed. For Freud, this view often manifested with Jews in the form of Jewish humor which he believed to be a means to relieve tension and frustration from centuries of being oppressed.[61]

One of Freud's major contributions to the world was a new understanding of the *psyche*, a Greek term for the soul or spirit. In the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1771), the soul was defined as "a spiritual substance, which animates the bodies of living

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[59] Heinze, *American Soul*, 15.
[60] Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. (Detroit: Oxford University Press, 1988), 315-316.
[61] Heinze, *American Soul*, 65.

creatures"[62] and that the soul's "primary operations of willing and thinking" had "no connection with the known properties of the body."[63] Freud's understanding of the term changed *psyche* to be "the totality of the id, ego, and superego including both conscious and unconscious components."[64] While not representative of anything physical, Freud suggested that the combination of these three components of the human psyche contribute to one's unique behavior and personality.

The breadth and scope of Freud's influence and the psychotherapy he championed had long lasting impact on the way American Jews understood themselves and their complex identities throughout the 20th century.

The Aftermath of WWII

The traumatic events of World War II reinforced a growing desire among psychiatrists and other mental health professionals for Americans to examine their psyche. Lt. Col. Roy Grinker (1900-1993), a Freudian psychiatrist serving in the Army Air Forces, believed it critical to work towards a "restoration of psychological strength" for American soldiers and the society into which they were returning after the war.[65]

In 1946, Rabbi Joshua L. Liebman (1907-1948) wrote *Peace of Mind: Insights on Human Nature That Can Change Your Life*[66] in which he discussed his desire to combine religious practice and psychological insights. Inspired by his personal relationship and conversations with Grinker, Liebman believed that both religion and psychology were insufficient on their own and that humans needed the insights of both working together in

[62] ibid 13.
[63] ibid.
[64] ibid 13.
[65] Roy Grinker, *Fifty Years in Psychiatry: A Living History*. (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1979), 6-15.
[66] Joshua L. Liebman's *Peace of Mind: Insights on Human Nature That Can Change Your Life* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1946) became the first best-seller to be written by a rabbi with more than a million copies sold during its first three years.

order to gain inner peace.[67] Through the promotion of meditative practices and self-acceptance, Liebman hoped to shift postwar trauma into a realm of reflection that would eventually allow for an individual move beyond grief and sadness in order to find happiness and meaning.[68] For Liebman, self-acceptance was the foundation which allowed for neighborly love to become actualized in American society, and the psychological health of the individual made it possible to fulfill the Jewish principle of sustaining the community.[69] In a time when Jewish communities could have turned inwards and isolated themselves in the United States, Liebman called for a recommitment of the Jewish value of community in order to model a sense of belonging for all humanity.

In her wide-ranging work on the history of Jews in the United States, Hasia Diner argued that, in the immediate aftermath of WWII, American Jews benefited along with other Americans in the country's new prosperity and affluence. Through suburbanization and cultural acceptance, political and cultural liberalism seemed to triumph over the isolationism and separatism of the 1930s, and the economic boom projected an expansiveness of unlimited possibilities.[70] By the 1950s, Jewish and non-Jewish Americans found it economically feasible to leave overcrowded cities and move to planned communities with local services and outdoor leisure spaces. With the combination of a demand for housing, an increased use of automobiles, and postwar prosperity, the suburbs provided affordable living opportunities especially to those who were eager to enjoy a new version of the American dream after the deprivations during the war years.[71]

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[67] Heinze, *American Soul*, 196.
[68] ibid.
[69] ibid, 225.
[70] Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States 1654-2000*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 259.
[71] ibid.

Many American Jews moved to suburbia and join the ranks of other upwardly mobile Americans. In the urban environments of the larger city centers where many Jews lived close to one another, they had established Jewish areas with Jewish businesses and Jewish grocery stores. In the suburbs, the synagogue became prominent as it provided a central space for Jews to celebrate life-cycle events and to socialize with other Jews. While many Jews observed fewer details of Jewish law and ritual, synagogue affiliation had never been as high since before mass migrations around the early 1800s.[72] Diner marks this era as the first time that American Jews actively chose to live as Jews and bringing their families into Jewish life.[73] They joined in record numbers but their engagement with Jewish life waned.

In a response to an underactive membership, synagogues and their denominations reevaluated how best to serve their members in post-WWII America. Orthodox communities strengthened their efforts in creating all-Jewish, Hasidic communities to appeal to the *halakhically* observant Jewish immigrants before, during, and after WWII.[74] Conservative Judaism attempted to provide a balance between innovation and tradition, between commitment to Jewish law and the realities of a postwar Jewish life in America.[75] Following the insights and philosophy of Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), nonaffiliated communities formed and experimented with prayer while rejecting the notions of Jewish chosenness; they formed the basis of Reconstructing Judaism.[76]

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[72] Diner, *The Jews of the United States,* 260.
[73] ibid, 260.
[74] ibid, 293-294.
[75] ibid, 300.
[76] Kaplan was long affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the seminary of the Conservative Movement; he founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in 1922. Against Kaplan's wishes, his students founded a new denomination influenced by communitarianism and a belief in the continual evolution of Jewish practice and theology. That movement was called Reconstructionist Judaism; in 2018, it renamed itself Reconstructing Judaism. (https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/news/about-our-new-name)

In the first half of the 20th century, American Reform Jewish worship had been characterized by its adherence to decorum and the use of English during prayer service. With nature of Jewish identity shifting in the second half of the century, the Reform Movement began incorporating certain identifiably Jewish elements into its communities like optional head coverings, chanting the *kiddush* to welcome Shabbat, and using Hebrew in prayer.[77] To meet the challenges of suburbanization and assimilation, and to retain the membership of a rapidly growing youth population, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations opened several summer camps in the 1950s and 1960s which were followed by the creation of youth groups, social events, and recreational activities geared specifically to school aged children. As their popularity increased (and their efforts mirrored by Conservative and neo-Orthodox Jews), it became clear that religious worship only played a small part in what was becoming a social and cultural way of life for Reform Jews in America.[78]

Yet, religion was only a minor aspect of identity with which American Jews were concerned. The 1950s and early 1960s were a time when the American public wanted to believe that the political leaders of the country cared about the people's best interests. American Jews wanted also to be perceived as Americans and maintained a fairly public patriotism. However, national loyalty to the United States was questioned across the cultural and ethnic landscape in the wake of the Cold War and McCarthyism. Tensions arose leading to backlash against religious institutions.[79]

While affiliation with synagogues remained strong, a lack of religious feeling or spiritual connection left many liberal American Jews feeling disconnected from institutional

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[77] Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 300.
[78] ibid, 298.
[79] Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 58.

Judaism. The strategies had used in the 19th and early 20th centuries in order to acclimate Jews into American life and create a uniquely American liberal Judaism had seemingly worked all too well. Many Jews located their religiosity not in a denominationalism but in the acceptance of an ethical ideal of universal justice, freed from the particulars of ritual, which allowed many American Jews to look elsewhere for a spiritual connection.[80]

The Beginnings of the Countercultural Movement

The generation born in the boom time just after WWII were the first to grow up with television, through which they would witness the assassination of a president and other national leaders, Civil Rights demonstrations, the Vietnam War, space exploration, and nuclear test explosions.[81] Television broadened horizons, entertained wildly, expanded cultural appetites, and exposed violence in the American living room; the immediacy of images began shaping cultural values and belief.[82] A greater awareness of the world and the interconnectedness of people was broadcast into homes across the nation. With the increased recognition of the world's problems came an interest in solving them; possibilities existed where before they had not. American religious scholar Wade Clark Roof interviewed individuals from this generation for his book *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. He discovered that many religious Americans found that their religious institutions were no longer spiritually fulfilling for them on a personal level; not out of any strong doctrinal or moral objection but because church or synagogue

[80] Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 152.
[81] Roof, *Seekers*, 53.
[82] ibid.

seemed irrelevant to them.[83] With the increase of pluralism within religious settings, spirituality became another horizon to be explored.

In his book *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*, Rodger Kamenetz found that as adults, American Jews born after WWII asked essential questions about identity: could Judaism be flexible enough to adapt to contemporary society and still maintain a sense of traditional Jewish roots? What did Judaism have to say with a growing feminist movement and call for egalitarianism? What about the ecological crisis? Can I find spiritual growth as an individual?[84] Kamenetz attributed such questions to a desire among these individuals to reexamine personal engagement with Jewish ritual and their inability to derive meaning from Jewish spirituality.

A turn towards a renewed sense of spirituality coincided with the flourishing countercultural ideology that occurred across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Young Americans on college campuses were more likely to be exposed to racial tolerance, anti-Semitism, egalitarian gender roles, alternative lifestyles, family dynamics, and expressions of nonconformity of various kinds.[85] The youth of America emphasized the pursuit of the self as an ideal and prioritized values such as self-fulfillment, self-acceptance, and the intrinsic benefits of experience itself. These were values rooted in an optimism of the future and a flexible conception of human nature both of which were representative of American culture.[86]

Regular exposure to demonstrations and protests, either in person or via television, created a sense of belonging to a larger and more connected world. Participation in this sort

[83] ibid, 55.
[84] Kamenetz, *Lotus*, 131.
[85] ibid.
[86] Roof, *Seekers*, 68.

of activism allowed for American Jews to feel as though they were helping to build a new and better society. There was an ever-growing belief that the power of the individual could make a difference and with enough people attempting to break the societal molds and structures, change could happen. This conceptualized self that was independent and free was in direct contrast to Hasidic Jewish understandings of self as being subject to God and fulfilling the divine will. In a time when political and legal authorities were being questioned, the religious world was also being interrogated: who holds the religious authority in modernity? Are truth and meaning found inside or outside of the self?

Jewish Identity in Question

For years Reform and Conservative Judaism had been the answer to many of these questions for American Jews, as these Movements allowed for one way to be both Jewish and American. However, many of the discarded rituals and an emphasis on moral heritage as opposed to *halakhic* observance led many Reform and Conservative Jews to seek out a more traditional Jewish experience. Some Reform Jews found a home in the Conservative Movement, and other Jews connected with the outreach efforts of Orthodoxy and Hasidism. Even within the Orthodox movements there was a spectrum between Modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox. Modern Orthodoxy attempted to balance traditional Jewish practices and beliefs while maintaining secular education; ultra-Orthodoxy tended toward separatist communities and rigid observance while taking advantage of the geographic and civic freedoms granted in America to live in separate enclaves and neighborhoods.[87]

But countercultural movements promoting anti-establishment sentiment forced American Jews to confront their identity from every angle. The founding of the State of

[87] Kamenetz, *Lotus*, 21.

Israel, although initially not the primary influence on communal identity, had inspired a great deal of pride among the American Jewish population. Pre-WWII there was little American support for Zionism, but after WWII, American Jews struggled in their reactions to the horrendous and unfathomable trauma of the Holocaust. Zionism had succeeded in its task of bringing about the Jewish homeland in its historical location. However, American Jews did not always associate with the Zionist movement, for they did not include themselves among those living in exile.[88] Now that the Jewish homeland existed, though, would Jews have to move there and make *aliyah*? Was America's brand of Judaism strong and different enough to justify staying?

The American public also grew in consciousness relating to the details of the Holocaust, with stories being shared through televised events.[89] The 1967 and 1973 wars in Israel renewed fears of Jewish vulnerability among American institutions which began to promote Holocaust-related memorial activities.[90] Diner argues that the passage of time since World War II, the aging of Holocaust survivors, the increased comfort of American Jews to talk about experiences that set them apart from other Americans, and the general attitudes and perceptions during the 1960s and 1970s which valorized group difference and privileged suffering all led to the ease in which the American public was willing to turn the Holocaust into a powerful symbol of Judaism. But Jews wondered whether they still affirmed their faith in God and the covenant after what had taken place during the Holocaust.

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[88] Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 227.
[89] On May 20, 1960, World War II National Socialist Party war criminal Adolf Eichmann was arrested by American authorities. On April 11, 1961, Eichmann was brought to trial in a Jerusalem court. The trial was televised and brought the atrocities committed by the National Socialists during the Holocaust to a worldwide audience.
[90] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 151-154. It was in 1974 that the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council asked member agencies to sponsor Holocaust Day observances around the country, promote teaching of the Holocaust in schools, and include the Holocaust as a priority item in Jewish-Christian dialogue. (J.J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power: Inside American Jewish Establishment*. [Reading, Mass., 1996], 191).

Another factor that contributed to a sense of dissonance within Judaism felt by some middle-class Jews was the dominance of males in leadership and clerical roles. As feminism impacted American norms and challenged concepts of gender roles, essentialist duties and access to power and influence, Jewish women turned their gaze on the patriarchal forms of leadership and traditionalism within all facets of Jewish practice and behavior. Seeing inequality in interpretation and implementation of Jewish theology and *halakhah*, Jewish women sought equal rights and inclusion in both ritual practice and leadership.[91] Males had long controlled the institutions of Judaism, and the strength of the counterculture movement continued to provide a way for the establishment of Judaism to be challenged in order to accommodate a new reality of equality.[92]

America had been challenged on a variety of issues relating to class, racism, and sexism. Suburbanization and American liberalism were at odds during the postwar years and this tension caused many to seek new ways of life in order to create meaning for themselves. Many liberally leaning Jews found that external factors had defined their identities: the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel, allegiance to America, denominational preference. However, some Jews were not interested in these kinds of labels and sought to create opportunities to define themselves.

[91] ibid, 315-316.
[92] ibid.

Chapter 3: The Soul in Service of Judaism

Havurah Movement

Havurah Judaism was a unique expression of Judaism not affiliated with any specific denomination. It appeared as a response to the complex set of influences that led to Jews wanting to take ownership over their Judaism. A handful of small groups—*minyanim*—formed all over the country, from Los Angeles to Boston, each with their own methods of engaging with Judaism. As historian Riv-Ellen Prell argues in her crucial work on the phenomenon of Havurah Judaism, the intention of the "movement" was to synthesize Jewish culture and traditional practice with American liberalism and idealism.[93] In an ever-evolving American landscape, these *minyanim* sought to recommit their members to Judaism in a way that they believed their parents' generation had ignored or dismissed outright.

The unifying characteristic of these communities encourage them to consider themselves an alternative to the synagogue model that had become the standard of modern Jewish life. The name *Havurah* came from the separatist religious community of mystics and scholars that had formed during the late Second Temple period.[94] Inspired by Mordecai Kaplan's ideas and teachings that Judaism was an ever-evolving civilization and that belief in a "supernatural" God was not required to be engaged in a meaningful Jewish life, Jews formed their own spiritual communities with friends and like-minded colleagues.[95]

For American Jews, membership in a synagogue community signaled the formal way to identify with the religion, but did not necessarily guarantee connection to Jewish identity

[93] Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 14.
[94] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 319.
[95] ibid.

or provide spiritual meaning. For members of *havurot*, the synagogue setting was seen as an obstacle in the way of achieving a sense of the sacred and, within the American context, represented much more about social conventions rather than religious law.[96] In her interviews with members, Prell cites participants who felt as though the physical buildings of the synagogue had fallen victim to modern assimilation; these structures did not hold the same resonance for them as they once had for previous generations of people.

Moving beyond the walls of the synagogue and creating smaller *minyanim*, these individuals engaged in what they understood to be a fuller Jewish experience of their own making. In their *havurah* they had gained a sense of independence from the larger Jewish institutions and engaged in study, discussion, and prayer in ways that harmonized with the concerns they felt dominated their lives: in these spaces they were allowed to explore questions about the observance of Jewish *halakhah*, Jewish ritual behavior, ethics, and how to engage Judaism "properly" and with the right intention.[97]

The participants of a *havurah* understood themselves not just to be Jewish but also American, that is, a hyphenated and fluid tradition of ethnicity and identity. The American counterculture allowed for previously understood boundaries and culturally agreed upon norms to be questioned, challenged, and changed; Judaism has historically and culturally created limitations to preserve tradition.[98] The men and women of the various *minyanim* sought a connection to their Jewish mythological past, one that would inform, though not control, their present and future.[99]

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[96] Prell, *Havurah*, 62.
[97] ibid, 63.
[98] Pirke Avot 1:1 "They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah" (Koren).
[99] Prell, *Havurah*, 71.

By rejecting some of the trappings of the middle-class suburban lifestyle and securities enjoyed by their parents, those Jews who came of age in the 1960s used *havurot* to challenge all aspects of their identities: Judaism as religion, American as nationality, Israel as political motivation. Within the *minyanim*, members felt as though they could reinvigorate Judaism for themselves by changing it for the better. Members wanted to be active agents, rather than passive inheritors, in making Jewish identity a fulfilling and personal experience in a contemporary American context.

Feminist Trends

For generations, a core tension within liberal Judaism was the lack of a full and equal participation of women. Jewish practice and custom forbade gender equality in the sense that it is now understood especially in an American cultural setting. This dissonance between the rejection of Jewish law in liberal Judaism and the continual cultural practice of limiting women's leadership and clerical positions become untenable for members of *havurot*. Members of *minyanim* believed strongly in changing the essence of traditional practice in order to be as inclusive of women as possible. The *minyanim* saw the possibility of incorporating modern feminist understandings within a Jewish framework, ultimately providing Jewish women with what Prell called a "systematic vocabulary for articulating their anger at continued marginalization and exclusion from the public areas of Jewish life, particularly in the synagogue."[100] The goal was to maintain a traditional authenticity in keeping Jewish law intact, while still allowing for the transformational impact of Jewish women within the organization and structure of Judaism.

[100] ibid, 277.

Within the safety of each *havurah* community, men and women engaged in Jewish worship as equals. *Halakhic* practice seemingly excluded women from participating in *minyanim* gathered for prayer, Torah readings, and other rituals requiring a *minyan*. The choice to use the name *minyan* within the *havurah* communities already demonstrated the commitment to questioning and redefining traditional Jewish authority. Participation in the contemporary *minyanim* ensured that Jewish identity could be explored, values and commitments could be questioned and reshaped, and a continued obligation to Jewish law and God could be transformational.

Experimentation with ritual was a key component to finding and creating meaning within each *havurah*. Every prayer experience had potential for spiritual growth and should be reflective of the supportive community each *havurah* had set out to create. In 1974, the Los Angeles-based Kelton Free Minyan, made up of members who had grown up as Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, held a Women's Service. The Minyan agreed that this should be a women only event, and the organizing committee, made up of the female members of the Minyan, decided to make certain changes to the traditional service, such as an additional line during the Amidah to recognize the biblical matriarchs.

Traditionally, the patriarchal tradition of Talmudic and rabbinic interpretation focuses on biblical texts in which God engages with the male leaders in order to establish covenantal relationship with them on behalf of their people and future generations. Prophetic metaphors make use of faithlessness and disloyalty; in describing the People Israel as cheating wives, females became associated with negative connotations. Whether by the gendered language of Hebrew or descriptive imagery, masculinity permeates Judaism in a way that forces a male-

dominated understanding of and connection to Torah, Israel, and God.[101] The Jewish norm was maleness and women became the Other and excluded from the male-centric experience of Judaism.

The Women's Service was just one of many beginnings to a necessary revolutionary in reshaping Jewish tradition in order to serve better the full experience of the Jewish people. The open and experimental nature of *havurot* allowed for early efforts by Jewish feminists to work towards the goal of a full transformation of Judaism as a religion and cultural experience that would grant women equal opportunities to shape.[102] In 1979, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, editors of the anthology *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, described this desire to transform Judaism into an egalitarian religious experience:

> Since Judaism is a religion of ritual, law, and study rather than theology, creed, and doctrine, Jewish feminists have devoted their efforts not so much to defining and overcoming the patriarchal structures of Jewish thought as to criticizing specific attitudes toward women and to working for the full incorporation of women into Jewish religious life.[103]

Jewish feminism explored and ultimately demanded an entirely new perspective on Judaism that acknowledged the injustices of the past in order to create something entirely new and inclusive. This shift changed traditional patriarchal understandings of Judaism and Jewish feminists (women and men) were committed to re-creating Judaism in a more inclusive image. Almost two decades after a formal founding of B'not Esh,[104] the Jewish women's spirituality collective committed to a feminist Judaism, Plaskow argued in her groundbreaking work *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective* that

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[101] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 8.
[102] ibid, xvi.
[103] Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 134.
[104] Jewish Women's Archive, "B'not Esh Jewish Feminist Spirituality Collective Founding Letter," March 30, 1981, https://jwa.org/media/bnot-esh-founding-letter.

this kind of change had precedent in Jewish history, as the rabbis reshaped the trajectory of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in order for Judaism, as they understood it, to remain relevant.[105] Jewish feminists were well aware of Judaism's past and relied upon it to guide their interpretations and reconstructions. Jewish feminists believed that this traditional rabbinic system of *halakhah* was also male-centric.

The Israelites experienced revelation as a community and Plaskow argued that for Judaism to continue to provide meaning in the contemporary age, all members of that community must be involved in the reception and transmission of tradition.[106] For Plaskow, embracing new understandings would allow for American Jews to continue linking themselves to God, other peoples, and fill their life with the continued depth and meaning they had always found in Judaism.[107]

The Jewish Catalog

The various *minyanim* of the *Havurah* movement discovered the freedom to experiment with Judaism and to create a fuller sense of expression that could be experienced by every member of the Jewish community. The importance of rabbis and cantors, lay leadership, and matters of decorum which had defined their parents' generation were de-emphasized within the *minyanim*. The ideals and values that had guided these *havurot*—communal approach and goal of empowering each individual to create meaning for themselves—soon reached the masses.

In 1973, *The Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit* was published by the Jewish Publication Society. Its editors, Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld

[105] Plaskow, *Sinai*, 18-19.
[106] ibid, 20.
[107] ibid, 103.

were explicit about its mission; they wanted Jews still engaged in institutional religion to experience Judaism to its fullest potential. The personalization of Judaism that had existed within *havurot* was now in the hands of the general Jewish public, and it became so popular that two more volumes (1976, 1980) were produced. A product of the social and cultural experimentation of its time, *The Jewish Catalog* itself was inspired by the counterculture publication *The Whole Earth Catalog*.[108]

The Jewish Catalog served as a mixture of Jewish law, tradition, ritual guidance, recipes, crafts, daily advice, and so much more. The subtitle of *The Jewish Catalog* said it all: it was meant to be a Do-It-Yourself Kit. For many liberal Jews, the book was also a basic introduction to less common or familiar but traditionally practiced aspects of Judaism. The *Jewish Catalog* contained innovations pioneered by members of various *havurot* and also renewed an interest in incorporating Jewish music and art in worship. The *havurah* style of community and worship became so popular that some Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative synagogues utilized some of their suggestions:

> In place of the large formal synagogue service…participants met weekly, biweekly, or monthly; sat in circles; dressed casually; took turns leading worship and study; ate, talked, and celebrated together; and participated in the happy and sad moments of one another's lives.[109]

The three compilers and editors of *The Jewish Catalog* were quintessential young members of the Jewish counterculture. Richard Siegel and Michael and Sharon Strassfeld were all in their 20s when they began piecing together *The Jewish Catalog* and their intent with its creation was to offer Jews around the world a variety of ways in which they could

[108] *The Whole Earth Catalog* was a massive ecologically focused collection of information and resources aimed to provide "anyone who was interested" with useful tools on a variety of subjects (paraphrased from the intro to *The Whole Earth Catalog*, Stewart Brand and Caroline Maniaque-Benton, eds. [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968]).
[109] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 321.

craft a meaningful Jewish life outside of institutional Judaism. Along with so many Americans during this time, they were inspired by the possibility of democratizing everything. Later, Michael Strassfeld reflected on their original goal:

> To open up access to lots of people, and move away from what was perceived as hierarchical. In the case of synagogues, services were run by the rabbi and the cantor, and often people in the pews were pretty passive, and I think that part of the what was in the air at the time, the 1960s, was this sense that things should change, be open to change, and that there's a new generation that wants to do things in a different way.[110]

From the introduction to *The Catalog* itself, one can see that the editors attempted to tackle a large understanding of Judaism, its potential beliefs, practices, values, etc., all while reaching a broad Jewish audience across denominational lines, the editors noted,

> Some people may be drawn to the halakhah and various types of halakhic observance within a mitzvah system. Others will be more concerned with the underlying psychological, mythical, spiritual levels and the vehicles which have developed within Judaism to express these. Still others will find the possibilities for physical expression within traditional forms – openings for the artist and craftsman. There is no need to be reductionist about this; many other orientations and needs can find expression within this work. The hope, in fact, is that the catalog will facilitate the development of a "repertoire of responses" so that a person can accommodate himself to the rapid pace of societal and environmental change – as well as to his own personal, emotional, and spiritual flux.[111]

Just as the *havurot* had attempted to speak to a generation of young adults seeking meaning outside of institutional Judaism, *The Jewish Catalog* identified and described opportunities for exploring and creating that meaning.

The original members of the various *havurot* had understood that these systems did not provide the spiritual freedom many young Jewish Americans sought. Without rabbis or affiliation with any one denomination, the *minyanim* were able to create new rituals and

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[110] Mark Oppenheimer, "DIY Judaism," *Tablet Magazine*, published February 27, 2017, https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/225606/diy-judaism.
[111] Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld, eds., *The Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 9.

liturgy within a communal support system. The *Havurah* Movement exposed the desire of many Jewish Americans to experience religion in a more spiritual manner and to do so within community. The *havurah* represented the deep desire for Judaism to be intimate and revitalized from within.

Neo-Hasidism

By the early 1980s, many of the *havurah* members began leaving their communities in hopes of further exploring other ways to engage in meaningful spirituality. For years, the *havurot* had been focused on experimentation, creativity, and aligning Judaism with the unique ethics and values of the American counterculture. Some of these individuals would go on and continue to experiment with Renewal Judaism as a movement by actively mixing Jewish ritual with Eastern spiritual practices. Others were more interested in exploring traditional Jewish mystic teachings of Hasidism. Neo-Hasidism became an attempt by non-Hasidic Jews to spiritually enhance their Jewish experiences. By utilizing traditional Hasidic teachings but not conforming to Hasidic ideologies, an individual could select the more attractive aspects of traditional Hasidism while rejecting those teachings they found to be incompatible with their modern sensibilities.[112]

American Jews interested in Hasidic spirituality were able to learn basic concepts, such as *devekut*, through a variety of works by Martin Buber (1878-1965), Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942), and Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972). A newer concept to liberal American Jewish communities was that of *hitbodedut*, a practice which taught how isolation in the woods could allow one to have a personal conversation with God. Neo-Hasidim, much

[112] Andrew R. Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the 20th Century*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 351.

like the *Havurah*, believed that the physical structure and formality of the synagogue prevented a deep and intimate connection with God. The ecologically-minded found this returning to nature appealing as it spoke to the American spiritual ideas of Transcendentalism as well as the anti-establishment mentality of their own countercultural generation.

Followers of Hasidism had long been connected to a particular dynasty with an allegiance pledged to a style of teaching (e.g., Chabad-Lubavitch as the rational-mystical school). Loyalty to a specific *rebbe* was incredibly important for Hasidim to articulate certain practices and traditions deemed appropriate by their spiritual guide. However, neo-Hasidism was inspired by the freedoms afforded in America and drew inspiration from many different Hasidic thinkers and texts. This fluidity allowed those within the neo-Hasidic movement to live a more Hasidic lifestyle without having to live in a strictly Hasidic community. These neo-Hasidim either rejected or reinterpreted many Hasidic understandings about gender, secular thought, and non-Jews. Their goal was to reawaken the wisdom of Jewish spirituality for both Jews and the rest of the world. They believed that the secular world of progress and modernization was important, but that the fields of literature, philosophy, science, and technology, while holding wisdom and could improve lives, did not contain deep insights of existence. In a post-Holocaust world, humanity needed to become more spiritually fulfilled and neo-Hasidism provided a Jewish opportunity to engage in both intellectual and theological understandings within modernity.[113]

Rabbi Arthur Green (1941-), a prominent neo-Hasid who emerged from the *Havurah* movement, said that the task of a religious individual in modernity was "not to offer

[113] Ariel Evan Mayse, "The Development of Neo-Hasidism: Echoes and Repercussions Part I: Introduction, Hillel Zeitlin, and Martin Buber," LehrHaus, published December 19, 2018, https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-development-of-neo-hasidism-echoes-and-repercussions-part-i-introduction-hillel-zeitlin-and-martin-buber/.

counterscientific *explanations* for the origin of life. Our task is to *notice,* to pay attention to, the incredible wonder of it all, and to find God in that moment of paying attention."[114] The goals of the neo-Hasidic community are manifold, but they set out to reclaim a uniquely Jewish spiritual and cultural identity within a modern context. Due to the open and experimental nature of the American Jewish counterculture movement, neo-Hasidism was able to guide its followers towards new methods of prayer. Wordless chanted melodies called *niggunim*, which were said to elicit a more emotional and spiritually fulfilling engagement with the divine, became popular expressions of prayerfulness.

An important teaching in Hasidism is that God resides in everything—humans, animals, nature—and that every entity had a soul. By becoming aware of this connectivity, a Jew could transform his or her engagement with the world into an active relationship with God by developing a sense of awe in his or her daily life. Prayer helped to train this awareness, but the recognition of possible spiritual interactions at every moment was the key to the Hasidic lifestyle that could change the individual neo-Hasid as well as the world around them. The acknowledgement of a soul allows for an understanding of the transcendent nature of an individual being that represents a connectivity between the earthly realm and that of the divine. Utilizing Hasidic practices to cultivate this awareness provides an individual with a way to interpret God's breath as the soul within and sustaining everything. Neo-Hasidim seek out an active connection to their soul. When successful, they will shape their lives in connection to all living entities, therefore connecting with God.

Neo-Hasidism teaches that the soul comes from God and that God is eternal. While the physical body one inhabits during one's lifetime may have a finite experience in the

[114] Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 22.

physical and earthly realm of existence, the soul, as an extension of God, is understood to be eternal. Green writes about the immortality of the soul as a syllogism for the breath of God never ending:

> As we breathe out, for the final time, that which the One has breathed into us, the divine breath is already busy entering new life-forms, new human babies, new saplings, flowers, birds, and bees all over the world. I know nothing much about rebirth or reincarnation, only that the divine breath is eternal. The real religious question for me has always been: "is there life *before* death?"[115]

This question highlights a distinction between neo-Hasidism and the rest of the countercultural Jewish trends. Members of *minyanim* were interested in personalizing Judaism, drawing inspiration from a variety of sources to better inform the ways in which these individuals could derive meaning from Jewish ritual and traditional texts. Neo-Hasidim, while still drawing inspiration from other sources, are able to recognize the interconnectivity of the universe by tapping into the mystical aspects of Judaism. With this perspective shift, a neo-Hasid recognizes that all moments can become personally and spiritually enhanced rather than set times for communal ritual or study.

Concluding Thoughts

The 1960s and 1970s brought about a renewed search for achieving spirituality that found many Americans experimenting with religions from the eastern traditions, new psychic experiences, drug use, and exploring the possibility of creating something entirely new. This postwar generation was looking for religious experiences they could claim as their own without the intervention of inherited beliefs, ideas, and concepts from the previous generations.

[115] ibid, 130-131.

This Jewish counterculture sought to gain a broader awareness of how Judaism was spiritually unique in order for them to develop a vibrant and authentic connection for themselves. These Jews sought different ways to answer the question: how does one create a meaningful life inspired by Judaism, but not always feeling bound by its traditional forms?

The *Havurah* movement was incredibly important to the growth and development of liberal and progressive American Judaism. These *minyanim* fostered a welcoming and nurturing environment to explore and experiment with ritual, tradition, spirituality, and identity. The *Havurah* movement disrupted the preconceived notions of community by questioning the need for synagogues, and the value of decorum and uniformity that they represented for Judaism.

For the members of the *Havurah* movement, Judaism was sacred but meaningless without personal connection. The process of engaging in Judaism was just as, if not more, important than traditions and rituals themselves and experimenting in a pluralistic manner provided opportunities to engage with their spiritual desires. This newfound ability to approach Judaism as an individual opened the possibility for Jewish feminists to claim an authentic voice by establishing women as equals in the communal process of redefining and transmitting Judaism. Neo-Hasidism was also able to take root within this new framework, serving as a pluralistic approach grounded in traditional Jewish mysticism.

This generation of Jews wanted to be active participants in their religious and spiritual experiences. Even as these communities experimented in art, music, social agendas, and fashion, the focus shifted to community and relationship rather than tradition for the sake of tradition. The uniqueness of each community allowed for its members to innovate and redefine authority, and emphasized experience over obligation. Even if they could not define

its essence, their soul became an expression of who they were, and these Jews were committed to defining and redefining that identity for themselves.

Chapter 4: The "Soul" in Service of the Universe

For the first part of the 20th century, the reigning metaphor describing immigration to the United States used the idea of a melting pot. It implies that immigrant cultures freely influenced each other in an assimilatory fashion while contributing to a singular national identity of America. This image includes culinary traditions, vocabulary and linguistic additions, and notions of shared diasporism. This chapter explores the ways in which spiritual practices have also been shared among communities in America. For those individuals not necessarily seeking answers from any one religion in particular, experimenting with rituals provided alternative methods to engage in and find meaning from spirituality.

In the United States, Asian meditation and yoga practices grew in popularity in the postwar period as the belief that these foreign practices brought about health, harmony, and general well-being.[116] As physical rituals, these kinds of practices did not always nourish a matching desire by an individual to achieve deeper meaning by way of engaging in one's traditional forms of spirituality.

Throughout history there have been Jews who have not connected to Judaism as a religion for a variety of reason; the freedoms one experienced in America further complicated individual religious allegiances. For some Jews, living in America offered them entirely new opportunities to reshape their Jewish identities. Sometimes this reorientation meant experimenting with and redefining one's connection to Judaism, and other times it provided a chance to identify as Jewish but not practice the religion of Judaism. Perhaps the language barriers made it difficult for some to engage in prayer services in a meaningful and

[116] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 14-15.

personal manner. Some may have found Jewish tradition far too ritualistic in nature for them to begin to derive meaning from its teachings. After the Second World War, there were also Jews who had lost faith in Judaism and in God, not knowing how to explain or reconcile the traumatic event of the Holocaust.

Beatniks and Buddhism

The interest of Transcendentalists and the influence of 20th century global demographic movement led to an increase in awareness of and interest in Buddhism and Buddhist practices. Media attention on the political and geographical ruptures of the late 1940s, particularly Indian and Southeast Asia, led to a growing appreciation of Buddhism with its atheistic concentration on spiritual insight and discernment. Buddhism offered a variety of new ways to engage in spiritual practices and a belief system; in the 1950s and 1960s, a strong interest developed among the more liberal Jewish population in America. This growth in popularity has been attributed to the writers of the Beat Generation[117] who incorporated Buddhist teachings and terminology in their novels and poetry.

The Beat writers were often portrayed by the media as degenerates but they understood themselves to be spiritual seekers forging a new kind of consciousness.[118] Professor of literary of cultural theory Jonathan Eburne claims that by defining themselves against established institutions the Beat writers exiled themselves from the American mainstream turning their marginal status of otherness into a hip commodity.[119] Their voice

[117] A countercultural literary movement of the 1950s started by authors and artists whose works were reactions against institutionalized American values, economic materialism, and conformity (Ann Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* [London: Penguin Books, 2001] xv-xvii).
[118] Wes Nisker, "Beat Buddha," PBS Blog, published April 6, 2010, https://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/blog/2010/apr/6/beat-buddha-wes-nisker/.
[119] Jonathan Eburne, "Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness," in *Modern Fiction Studies*. 43.1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 55.

appealed to college-aged middle class youth who were beginning to explore alternative ways to define themselves.

Beatniks elevated Buddhism for its exotic otherness compared to American mainstream religions. Poet and pioneer of the Beat Generation, Gary Snyder (1930-) was inspired by his own interest in Asian religion and traditional Zen training. Through his poetry and lectures Snyder emphasized concentrating on the present moment to develop inner wisdom about the human condition.[120] This Beat Buddhist worldview allowed individuals to free their mind and body from American consumerism in order to focus on a deeper spiritual connection to the universe.

Newcomers discovered Buddhist teachings to be fairly easy to engage in. As Rodger Kamenetz explained in his memoir about his own experience as a Jew discovering and finding meaning in Buddhism:

> the early stages of the Buddhist path are experiential. You don't have to be converted to Buddhism to meditate. You don't have to sign up to a long list of beliefs or assertions about historical events or figures. The most basic meditations are as available as your next breath. And if they prove useful to an individual, beyond them are very systematic paths of spiritual development.[121]

As Kamenetz relates, for newcomers to the belief system, there was a sense of freedom that came with the seeming simplicity of Buddhist practices.

Jews Seeking Answers Beyond Judaism

One of the most prominent Jews who found meaning and depth in Buddhist philosophy was Allen Ginsberg (1927-1996), a poet and leading voice in the Beat Generation. In an interview with Rodger Kamenetz, Ginsberg admitted that growing up he

[120] Gary Snyder, "Tawny Grammar," in *The Practice of the Wild*. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 73.
[121] Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 149.

found Judaism difficult to connect with on a spiritual level.[122] In the 1970s in New York Ginsberg met a Tibetan teacher of Buddhism, Chogyam Trungpa (1939-1987). Ginsberg praised his teacher for having the ability to navigate cross-cultural boundaries which allowed him to better relate Buddhism to his Jewish students.[123] Ginsberg told Kamenetz that he better understood Buddhist notions of suffering when Trungpa compared them to the Jewish-Yiddish concept of *tzuris*, a deep trauma or tragedy.

The Buddhist teaching of suffering focuses on the impermanence and ever-changing nature of life. The human body changes as it ages. We will get sick at some point, our bodies will gradually become weaker, and eventually we will die. Wealth and status do not always maintain throughout generations, as the instability and unknown that is life may cause one to lose these. These concepts of impermanence are not so dissimilar to some of the teachings found in *Qohelet*. Although we may experience happiness and joy, neither are lasting; when change occurs, human reactions of dissatisfaction and suffering may arise.

For those Jews unfamiliar with *Qohelet* and other literature from the Jewish wisdom tradition, the Buddhist approach seems novel. Yet not all Jews agreed with the connection. One of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014) spoke with Kamenetz about his disapproval regarding the trend of Jews seeking meaning from other traditions: "it's the appeal of the exotic. It doesn't feel real if it comes from their own thing."[124] Though critical, Schachter-Shalomi recognized that the more liberal denominations of Judaism had relied too heavily on rationalism in the creation of their prayer books and services. In speaking with Kamenetz, Shachter-Shalomi understood that any

[122] ibid, 151.
[123] ibid, 149.
[124] ibid, 150.

spirituality Judaism could offer would fall flat with an American audience who grew up disconnected from the more mystical aspects of the religion.

For his book, Kamenetz interviewed many of these Jews who sought spiritual meaning from Buddhism. He claims that many of those he called "JuBus" were uninterested in only Jewish answers and wanted to distance themselves from the traditional notion of chosenness. These Jews believed themselves limited by a Judaism that had become too reliant on its own ethnic pride, obsessive about preserving itself, and maintained Jewish identity at all costs.[125] At a time when the countercultural movement in the United States was pushing for more universal understanding and acceptance, denominational Judaism seemed to double down on particularism from within the synagogue.[126]

For those Jews who gravitated towards Buddhism, teachings about *karma* helped in creating a new understanding of active and passive participation in the formation of one's identity. *Karma* relates to a notion of reincarnation that is foreign to traditional Jewish understandings of reward and punishment, but in the American context it was reinterpreted as the idea of cause and effect; every action has a consequence: good actions lead to good consequences, and bad actions lead to bad consequences.[127] Buddhists believe there is a ripple effect of energy that emanates from one's actions. The consequences of those actions may not always be experienced in this world that we live in; Buddhist thought relies on notions of rebirth and multiple lifetimes.

The idea of rebirth notwithstanding, a similar concept about actions and their effects was put forth in a famous Talmudic story about Honi the Circle Maker:

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[125] ibid.
[126] Kamenetz is primarily referring to American Reform Judaism which he believes continued to streamline religion in order to eliminate the old-world religiosity (*Lotus*, 152).
[127] Peter Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 39-40.

> One day, [Honi the Circle Maker] was going along the road. He saw a man planting a carob tree. [Honi] said to him, "How many years does it take to bear fruit?" [The man] said to him, "Seventy years." [Honi] said to him, "Is it clear to you that you will live [another] seventy years?" [The man] said to him, "I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I plant for my children." [Honi] sat down and ate. Drowsiness came to him. He fell asleep. A rock formation rose around him, he became hidden, and he slept for seventy years. When he rose, he saw that man picking [fruit] from [the tree]. [Honi] said to him, "Are you the one who planted [this tree]?" [The man] said to him, "I am his grandson." [Honi] said to him, "Therefore, I must have slept for seventy years."[128]

This rabbinic story speaks to those ripple effects that may not be felt by the individual, but aligns with other Jewish teachings relating to generational responsibility, such as the one found in Pirkei Avot: "It is not for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to stand aside from it."[129] The push to make a difference and to impact the world in an active manner can lead many to feel frustrated when change does not occur which can potentially cause inactivity for belief of actions being meaningless. However, these kinds of teachings reframe action by reminding the individual that each action causes a ripple effect leading towards future consequences. Some American Jews reinterpreted the traditional Buddhist principle of *karma* to recognize that their passion for social justice was not in vain. After all, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,"[130] so why not do what we can to help nudge it while we have the ability to do so?

Active participation in one's identity formation provides a sense of ownership and feeling of control that faith alone may not always afford the individual. For secular Jews who were less inclined to rely on Jewish teachings to inform their actions, reframing social justice action was necessary to align more closely with the Americanized interpretation of *karma*

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[128] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 23a (Koren).
[129] Pirkei Avot 2:21 (Koren).
[130] Originally spoken by American Transcendentalist and Unitarian Minister, Theodore Parker; later made famous when used in speeches by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Melissa Block, "Theodore Parker and the 'Moral Universe'" from *All Things Considered*, NPR, September 2, 2010).

(cause and effect). By engaging in and supporting experiences that they understood as repairing the world, secular Jews were inspired by *karmic* notions of being able to tip the universal scales in the favor of goodness and justice; if these individuals sat idly by then the universe would not change and continue in a state of injustice.

Social justice and advocating on behalf of non-Jewish communities became an essential component of liberal denominations of Judaism. As Rabbi Marla Feldman explains in an article about religious advocacy, Reform Judaism strives to empower individuals and communities to "hear the voice of the prophets in our head; to be engaged in the ongoing work of *tikkun olam*; to strive to improve the world in which we live; to be God's partners in standing up for the voiceless and fixing what is broken in our society."[131] Social justice aligns with the teaching from Deuteronomy 16:20 "*tzedek tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice shall you pursue."[132]

Both Judaism and Buddhism have traditions which teach its followers how to strive toward balance for the self and within the world. Individuals who struggled with the more religious and ritual observances of Judaism considered Buddhism that missing piece of the spirituality they had sought. Though they remained proud of their Jewish background and maintained an association with the culture, they found Judaism overly concerned with its self-preservation whereas Buddhism appeared to have a more accepting and universally applicable ideology. Dr. Marc Liberman, the nephew of a Reform rabbi and one of Kamenetz's interviewees, described his understanding of belonging to these two backgrounds as having "Jewish roots and Buddhist wings."[133]

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[131] "Why Advocacy is Central to Reform Judaism," Marla Feldman, *Reform Judaism*, published on January 9, 2015, https://reformjudaism.org/why-advocacy-central-reform-judaism.
[132] Deuteronomy 16:20 (NJPS).
[133] Kamenetz clarifies by saying that "Buddhism had gotten [Marc] somewhere spiritually in a way Judaism never had." (*Lotus*, 13).

This idea of balancing feeling grounded while still wanting to explore spiritual freedom was expressed by many of the individuals whom Kamenetz interviewed. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, straddling the line between particularism and universalism was difficult for many Jews interested in exploring spirituality beyond Judaism.

Letting Go

For Jews impacted by the devastation of the Holocaust, Buddhism offered a way to let go of the pain of victimhood while still identifying with Judaism. As discussed above, a core understanding in Buddhism is that all suffering must be eliminated. That elimination can be worked on but perhaps not completed via systematic meditations. Yet the goal of Buddhist meditative practice is to grow one's compassion so much so that it extends beyond the self and creates opportunities for the suffering of other sentient beings to end. These two ideologies and practices harmonized in such a way that created a fairly popular trend for those looking to fulfill spiritual needs beyond what they felt Judaism had to offer. These American Jews believed that Buddhism served as a path that illuminated previously suppressed teachings of Jewish mysticism and spirituality within the mainstream practice of denominational Judaism. So much of the success of Buddhism's integration with Judaism comes from its fundamental belief system that calls for a "letting go" of anything material. This permission (Buddhism's form of a commandment) was a welcome belief for so many liberal American Jews seeking a deeper spiritual experience.

A narrative that emphasized centuries of persecution and hatred left many Jews feeling empty and hopeless, not knowing Judaism well enough to use it to alleviate some of this pain. The post-Holocaust, pro-Zionist rhetoric described Judaism in relation to the societies Jews had found themselves in: how could Jews adjust practice, attire, and beliefs in

order to fit in? Would they need to assimilate entirely, or could they be accepted as they were? Buddhism offered many liberal American Jews an opportunity to rewrite the ending and achieve a sense of joy that enhanced what they knew about Judaism. In its careful curation Buddhism did not contradict Judaism, so the meshing of the two ideologies seemed easy for liberal American Jews who made the effort to find meaning. Much like Judaism, Buddhism teaches that proper thought, speech, and action can result in ethical conduct to bring about a universal sense of harmony.

By meditating, one could develop a sense of calm and if one could achieve serenity, a deep awareness could be attained in order to bring about nirvana which is the "cessation" of aggression and ignorance; the cessation of the struggle to prove one's existence to the world. Nirvana represents the freedom from temporal continuity, an ending to the cycle which one is otherwise bound.[134] The Jewish calendar is filled with the retelling of stories and memories, both identity-affirming and painful, built into the cycle of a Jewish year. For some Jews, Buddhist teachings and practice provided opportunities to move beyond certain traumas or sufferings.

Concluding Thoughts

American Jews who sought spiritual meaning from Buddhism interpreted its accessible teachings as universal by nature, not being exclusive to any one race, nationality, class, sexuality, or gender. These Jews sought a spiritual freedom they believed institutional Judaism could no longer provide. Unlike members of various *havurot,* these Jews were not interested in personalizing their Jewish religious experiences. Many wanted to claim Judaism as a part of an identity but no longer felt a connection with ritual, commandedness (or

[134] Sue Hamilton, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach: The I of the Beholder*. (London: Curzon Press, 2000), 19.

"chosenness"), Hebrew, Zionism, etc., all of which acted as reminders of Jewish particularism.

These Jews found that Buddhism did not require any external forms of practice, the learning of another language, nor did it encourage allegiance to any one nation. The absence of self, the impermanence of life and physicality, and the removal of suffering are fundamental Buddhist teachings that culminate in the understanding that there is no soul.[135] Buddhists believe that there is no god one must serve or traditional teachings one is bound to; actions have consequences and change is possible. Understanding these teachings enables one to transform beyond current experiences with the goal of becoming fully responsible for one's life.

In America, where the national myth was that of a melting pot, some Jews found Buddhism to be the natural bridge giving them permission to shed certain Jewish forms of identity in favor of a desired spirituality that embraced change.

[135] Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*. (London: Curzon Press, 1995), 6.37.

Conclusion: Was, Is, Will Be

"If one blade of grass created by God is beyond our understanding, how much more unfathomable is the soul; and if we do not understand a soul, how much less do we understand an angel, and how much less even than this can we understand the mind of God? How could we possibly expect to grasp with our mind what God knows and understands?"[136]

This thesis has researched some of the ways in which mid-century Jews living in America explored the relationship of their Jewish identities to the stretching of their souls. Living alongside communities of different faiths and backgrounds, American Jews came into constant contact with other non-Jewish American communities. Just as Judaism evolved over time, Jewish values and traditions changed through dialogue with regional environments as the national values of the United States shifted.[137] These changes have given rise to experimentation with notions of the body, the soul, and the relationship between physicality and spirituality both for individual Jews and for Jewish communities.

The contemporary age had created boundaries between cultures and nations, people and their neighbors. For Jews in America, these boundaries often resulted in synagogues and buildings where they were strongly suggested to participate in to belong and connect to their Judaism. There were many American Jews who had no desire to ground their Jewish identities in institutional religion. The freedoms afforded to them in America allowed them to explore and experience their Judaism well beyond the walls and confines of the synagogue; these explorations were not so dissimilar to the ways in which Judaism had been explored beyond the boundaries of its homeland. There was a growing trend towards universalism

[136] Attributed to Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (Poland, 1889-1943), from "Kalonymous Kalman Shapira," in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust*, Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.
[137] Examples of values expressed in the United States Constitution are pluralism, democracy, restraint on government, the inalienable rights of individuals, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion.

which had become a central component in the American identity of the 20th century. Considering themselves to be American, many liberal Jews continued to demonstrate loyalty to America while still feeling free to explore possible connections to Judaism.

The rising of the American counterculture of the 1960s coincided with these exploratory trends within Judaism. This decade was a time when people were seeking answers and possibilities beyond what modernity and science had to offer in terms of human knowledge and experience. Religion in America became an alternative source of truth and meaning. In a time of rapid changes, some chose to lean into their religious traditions to ground themselves while other were willing to seek meaning in never-before explored places.

I began my research thinking that during the time after World War II, the unfathomable reality of the Holocaust and the unlikely creation of the modern State of Israel disrupted any prior understandings by American Jews of and connections to physicality. I believed that as a result of these events, many of the Jewish communities in America sought alternative methods to achieve a connection to Judaism. My assumption was based on two factors: 1. There is precedent in Jewish history of various Jewish communities reinventing or reinterpreting Judaism in order to maintain a connection; 2. Much of my own formal and informal Jewish education has emphasized both the Holocaust and the State of Israel as being central to Jewish identity in the 20th century. By engaging in this research, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how these American Jewish communities of varying religious adherence understood their connection to Judaism.

I discovered that American Jews had found their home in the Diaspora, and that most were not interested in merely surviving in the contemporary world, but how they could learn from and contribute to it. World events would always elicit a response from Jews, but the

ways in which they respond would reveal how they identify with their Judaism. Finding purpose and answering questions relating to the meaning of life have always been uniquely human endeavors. In America, the individual became the source of one's own truth and was empowered to seek meaning as one saw fit.

Even with the American emphasis on the individual, this thesis has focused on Jewish communities that maintained a commitment to exploring identity within the group dynamic. Together they could undertake the quest for meaning, and the purpose for human existence could be explored. In America, the particular religious language of Judaism could be combined with the American value of universalism; secular education could be in conversation with Jewish mysticism.

American Jews and non-Jews were free to explore both tradition and innovation; their creativity could enhance their spirituality. They crafted visions of integrating the physical with the metaphysical, and even with the mystical. Spirituality could be an experience or a series of experiences that came from within in order to express and define the self, rather than having the self be defined by scripture or doctrine. Spirituality was something to be discovered not handed down to preserve.

These Jewish communities were actively engaged in trying to understand what gave Jewish life meaning and value. They each saw themselves as correctives for the physical establishment of Judaism that had taken hold in America. The synagogue was consistent with its decorum and formality—it provided Jews with community and ritual—but it never quite captured the spirit of Judaism for many Americans. As non-institutional alternatives, these counterculture communities existed to serve the spiritual needs of their members.

This brief window in time serves as a memory of American Jews seeking meaning in boldly new and experimental ways. These groups challenged expectations to find their own answers to traditional questions. Many of today's institutions were influenced and inspired by what these communities were attempting to accomplish: the move beyond physical boundaries to re-engage with the spiritual in hopes of better understanding the soul. To express one's self is an attempt to define one's self. Jews have a variety of understandings of what connects them to physical, emotional, cognitive, or transcendent levels of existence. In Torah this connection is explained to be the formation of the body by God and then the breath of life being given in order to animate that body. Since then, Jews have attempted to understand what the soul might be: is it blood, is it a spirit, is it the psyche? There is still no consensus as to what the soul is or how one can experience spirituality. However, the unique combination of American liberalism, secular culture, and Jewish identity allowed for these communities to engage in an authentic search for those answers.

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