

**NEO-HASIDISM AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO  
REFORM SPIRITUALITY**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 1 A Brief History of Jewish Mysticism .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Ancient Jewish Mysticism: The Post-Biblical Pursuit of Holiness .....	8
Medieval Jewish Mysticism: Towards Divine Ethics .....	10
The Renaissance of Jewish Mysticism: Lurianic Kabbalah and Beyond.....	17
<b>Chapter 2 A New Hasidism .....</b>	<b>22</b>
Practical Kabbalah, The ‘Historical’ Besht, Ba’alei Shem, and Their Detractors.....	22
The Eastern European Confluence of Hasidim, Mitnagdim, and Maskilim .....	29
Seeds of Neo-Hasidism.....	33
Eastern European Roots of Neo-Hasidism: Hillel Zeitlin.....	39
Western European Roots of Neo-Hasidim: Martin Buber (1878-1965) .....	45
<b>Chapter 3 American Neo-Hasidism .....</b>	<b>57</b>
Neo-Hasidism’s American Bridge: Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) .....	58
Neo-Hasidism’s Social Justice Ethos and Imperatives.....	62
Neo-Hasidism in 1960s American Counter-Culture .....	70
Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi (1924-2014) and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994).....	72
<b>Chapter 4 Revitalize and Revolutionize .....</b>	<b>78</b>
A Path Forward.....	81
A Neo-Hasidic Educational Model: Songs, Stories, and Psychedelics.....	85
A Vision for a Neo-Hasidic Community of Tomorrow.....	102
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>105</b>

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<p>ברוך אתה יהוה אלוהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וציונו לעשות בדברי תורה Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with commandments, and commanded us to study words of Torah.</p>
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## Preface

Jewish tradition only endures from generation to generation when each new link is independently strong enough to withstand the inertia of time's steady progress. Each link must be reinforced with elements of creativity drawn from the wellspring of Jewish collective memory as well as those which are unique to one's contemporary experience. As the state of the world is constantly in flux, Jews across time and space must adaptively navigate their particular circumstance in the never-ending drive towards meaning-making. It is this process of meaning-making, even in the face of immeasurable and unavoidable suffering, which Victor Frankel credits with sustaining Judaism through the deep-darkness of the Shoah.<sup>1</sup> The Jew has always been faced with the challenge of embodying the faith's highest aspirations for human potentiality. This is the mantle which has been passed down through the ages; to innovatively contribute to the eternal project of human perfection and communion with the Divine. This intergenerational project has been formed and fashioned by Jews who knew that they could neither complete nor desist from the work; the fruits of their labor would be reaped and repurposed by their descendants.<sup>2</sup> In the pages to come I make my own contribution to the particular Reform Jewish project of integration of this particular Jewish mission with the universal human striving for knowledge of the self and thereby God.

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<sup>1</sup> Frankel, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1985. Pg.137.

<sup>2</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:16.

## Chapter 1 A Brief History of Jewish Mysticism

Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz inquired of his teacher, the Seer of Lublin: ‘Show me the customary way to follow in service to God!’ The *zaddik* answered: ‘There is no such thing as telling a person which way to go. God may be served by way of study, or by way of prayer, or by way of fasting, or by way of eating. Every person should pay heed to the way [one’s] heart is drawn – that [one] may devote all [one’s] strength to follow that chosen way.

Martin Buber, *The Way of Man: According to the Hasidic Teaching*

Reform Judaism has defined itself by the aphorism ‘choice through knowledge.’

In the words of Eugene Borowitz, who was a defining figure for generations of Reform rabbis by way of his legendary tenure as professor of education and Jewish thought at HUC-JIR: “Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> However, the “choices” which the movement offers its followers are decidedly limited - a stymying factor on our potential creativity. Despite the continued expansion of the ‘big tent’ which the Union for Reform Judaism advocates, and the postwar forays which will be discussed in Chapter 3, in many ways the rationalism which helped to birth the movement have crystalized to impede the ability to draw from the full depth of Judaism’s spiritual reservoir.

Michael A. Meyer, the historian of the Reform movement, has portrayed the early generations of Reform thinkers as divided by many religious and theological issues, some important and some less so...However, he emphasizes that virtually every Reform thinker was united in their commitment to rationalism and the use of scholarship to study religion and develop a contemporary Judaism that would be spiritually relevant for each current generation. A central assumption in this

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<sup>3</sup> Borowitz, Eugene B. *Reform Judaism Today*. New York, NY: Behrman House, 1983. Pg.xxiii.

commitment to rationalism included a rejection of mysticism in all forms, including and perhaps in particular a rejection of Kabbalah.<sup>4</sup>

If Reform Jews are to meet the immense spiritual demands of the post-modern age, we cannot endlessly weave and unweave the threads of Jewish creativity according to nostalgia for days gone by like Penelope. Our contribution to the tapestry of tradition must be constructive and congruous with the needs of the people we hope to serve.

Among the many threads in the tapestry of Judaism is that of mystical tradition which seeks to uncover the hidden mysteries of reality beyond perception through the removal of the obscuring veil of individual consciousness. In our time, this veil is more opaque than ever obscured by the rampant individualism that defines American (and thereby the world's) perspectives. Rachel Elior relates Jewish mysticism to "secret theological and cosmological systems that add hidden structure, inner sense, depth, flexibility, and secret meaning to revealed reality, a reality assumed not to be subject to any change."<sup>5</sup> This chapter will demonstrate the importance of embracing Jewish mysticism as a through line of the tradition which offers us the necessary conceptual and linguistic means to interweave our lives with the eternal pursuit for spiritual meaning. The incarnation of Jewish mysticism which began in 18th century Podolia (present day Ukraine) with Israel ben Eleazar, better known as the Ba'al Shem Tov, offers us as contemporary seekers a model for the power and potentiality of incorporating mysticism into a popular movement. The Hasidism of that age has many spiritual descendants. Neo-Hasidism, which began in Poland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrated that the underlying

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<sup>4</sup>Dana Evan Kaplan. "American Reform Judaism's Increasing Acceptance of Kabbalah: The Contribution of Rabbi Herbert Weiner's Spiritual Search in 9½ Mystics". In *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren, 235–53. [Boston, MA: Brill, 2020], 235

<sup>5</sup> Elior, Rachel. *Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom*. Translated by Yudit Nave and Arthur B Millman. Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010. Pg.3.

ethos of the original movement is not necessarily incongruous with the Modern world. However, it is the Neo-Hasidism of America in this day and age which is most applicable and best suited for integration into the anemic spirituality of the American Reform Jewish experience. As will be demonstrated throughout the following chapters, Neo-Hasidism offers a map to help navigate our quest for “freshness, vitality, and a joyful” connection to God which must begin with an individual search of psychological and spiritual truth that is in “accord with the style concepts, mood and meaning of the modern Jew.”

To begin with a better understanding, this chapter contextualizes neo-Hasidism in light of Jewish mystical movements that preceded it. The following explanation of the trajectory of Jewish mysticism, writ large, is meant to identify the language and underlying concepts that will frame Neo-Hasidism as a project of spiritual rediscovery, renewal, and reintegration in contemporary circumstances. In the following chapters I will build upon this foundation by examining historical and contemporary figures and paradigms of neo-Hasidism in order to raise the structure of a spirituality that is accessible and meaningful to Reform Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Chapter 2, in addition to providing the necessary context of chapters providing the necessary context of the Ba'al Shem Tov himself, I will discuss Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter as necessary precursors to Neo-Hasidic thought. Additionally, in that chapter I intend to describe the lives and influence of Hillel Zeitlin and Martin Buber, the fathers of neo-Hasidism in eastern and western Europe respectively. The third chapter will provide insight into Neo-Hasidism's history in America, with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as the bridge from Europe and the missionary spread of Neo-Hasidic ideas propagated by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. Chapter

4 will include an ethnographic survey of contemporary neo-Hasidism through interviews with community leaders and scholars, as well as my own prescriptive insights as to how neo-Hasidic wisdom can enrich Reform spirituality.

In order to accomplish the above stated goals, first one must decode the term neo-Hasidism itself. Hasidism, in all of its forms, is itself a complex and storied history of the Jewish endeavor to uncover and imbue life with the latent holiness of existence. What defines neo-Hasidism and distinguishes it from Hasidism is its engagement with and sanctification of aspects of the modern world, secular and otherwise, which are facts of the lives of contemporary Jews. In name alone, those who subscribe to neo-Hasidism connect themselves to a super-legal ethic. The etymology of the word *hasid* functions as a demonstration of the pursuit of that holiness which is above and beyond the letter of the Law. The linguistic root of *hasid* is akin to *chesed*, lovingkindness, as if describing one who demonstrates lovingkindness to God and one's fellow human beings. The first use of the word in the Tanakh, and the only usage in the Torah, appears in Parshat V'Zot HaBracha, the final parsha of the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>6</sup> There are a few iterations thereof in the Prophets and a preponderance in the Writings, concentrated in the book of Psalms, especially those psalms in the genre of praise.<sup>7</sup> In these instances, the word is often translated as "faithful," and "devoted," or "godly" or "pious."<sup>8</sup> The term *hasid* does not only exist in the abstract, in fact, the religious methodology, movements, and

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 33:8.

<sup>7</sup> 1Sam. 2:9; 2Sam 22:26; Jer. 3:12; Mic. 7:2; Psa. 4:4; Psa. 12:2; Psa. 16:10; Psa.18:26; Psa. 30:5; Psa. 31:24; Psa. 32:6; Psa. 37:28; Psa. 43:1; Psa.50:5; Psa.52:11; Psa. 79:2; Psa. 85:9; Psa. 86:2; Psa. 89:20; Psa. 97:10; Psa.116:15; Psa. 132:9; *ibid.* v.12; Psa. 145:10; *ibid.* v.17; Psa.148:14; Psa.149:1; *ibid.* v.5; *ibid.* v.9; Prov. 2:8; 2Chr. 6:41.

<sup>8</sup> Jewish Publication Society translation of the Tanakh; Robert Alter translation of the Tanakh; Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament; Kohlenberger/Mounce Concise Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary; et al.



sentiments identified with it have been some of the most formative and influential for Judaism as we know it today. However, it is but one stream which flows from the vast sea of Jewish mysticism discussed herein.

### Ancient Jewish Mysticism: The Post-Biblical Pursuit of Holiness

The first reference to the *ḥasidim* in the Mishna describes those communal elders who would wait a full hour before prayer in order to ensure their hearts and minds would be directed towards God with such devotion that neither a king nor imminent danger could distract them.<sup>9</sup> The Mishnah also describes the ecstatic nature of the prayer they would offer, full of music and dance.<sup>10</sup> The ascetics of Qumran identified with the term in the Dead Sea Scrolls, referring to their desert abode as “the fortress of the ḥasidim.”<sup>11</sup> By the time the Babylonian Talmud was redacted, a *ḥasid* connoted one who goes beyond the letter of the law. In one representative instance, the sages imagine a conversation between God and King David wherein the latter provides a number of proofs of his character and comportment which he believes earn him the moniker of *ḥasid*.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in the Talmud, this sort of extension beyond basic fulfillment of the *mitzvot* comes to be associated with mystical activities known as *ma’aseh merkavah*, named for the divine chariot depicted in the book of Ezekiel. One such example is the Talmud’s description of the personality of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who was engaged in even the minutiae of Jewish tradition.<sup>13</sup> These mystical *ma’aseh merkavah* were esoteric in nature and both the Mishnah and the Gemara describe the very particular conditions

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<sup>9</sup> Mishnah Berakhot 5:1.

<sup>10</sup> Mishnah Sukkah 5:4.

<sup>11</sup> Discoveries in the Judean Desert, Oxford 1955 -, 2:45.

<sup>12</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 4a.

<sup>13</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 28a.

under which they could be studied.<sup>14</sup> Due to the secretive nature of their practice and relative scarcity of written material, less is known about this particular tradition of *ma'aseh merkavah* and its practitioners, the *yordei merkavah*. The Mishnah in particular, being redacted by the rationalist Yehudah haNasi, downplayed references to the mystical tradition which only resurfaced in the Tosefta and other apocryphal works such as the Book of Enoch.<sup>15</sup> What is known, however, is that these mystical practices had significant influence on Talmudic and post-Talmudic Heikhalot literature.

Unlike legal and midrashic works of the age, Heikhalot literature is concerned with genuine religious experience unto itself rather than in contraposition to the rest of the literary corpus. As the framework of Rabbinic Judaism continued to crystallize and Christianity grew in strength and numbers it was incumbent upon these mystics to develop their practice within the framework of Halakhic Judaism so as not to find themselves outside the bounds of what could be considered authentically Jewish praxis; although it should be noted that the original religious impetus for these mystically-inclined Jews developed intentionally independent of what might be considered the mainstream, incorporating contemporary gnosis from a diverse array of sources.<sup>16</sup> Admission to these selective circles was predicated on demographic and physical as well as moral and ethical standards. In the eighth century Yehudai (ben Nachman) Gaon, the head of the Babylonian academy in Sura, connected the mystical endeavor to the ethical practice of *teshuvah*; this “moral reinterpretation” of mystical experience is in keeping with one *Heikhalot* tract wherein Rabbi Akiva reimagines the seven palaces as seven

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<sup>14</sup> Mishnah Chagigah 2:1; Babylonian Talmud Chagigah 13a.

<sup>15</sup> Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995. Pgs.42-43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pgs.47-48.

degrees of moral perfection, the first of which is to become a *ḥasid*.<sup>17</sup> In order to become one of the *yoredei merkavah* and to descend to the *merkavah* and through many trials and tribulations as well as the seven heavenly palaces one had to undergo the proper training and preparation. Circa 1000 CE, Hai (ben Sherira) Gaon, then the head of the Pumbedita Babylonian academy, recorded his own understanding of the mystical embodied practices of the *yoredei merkavah* which included ascetic fasting processes coupled with a particular posture of placing one's head between one's knees while reciting hymns.<sup>18</sup> This combination of morality and spirituality which is actualized in an embodied experience is a primary feature of the Jewish mystical thrust.

#### Medieval Jewish Mysticism: Towards Divine Ethics

In Joseph Dan's conception of *sifrut ha-musar*, the genre of ethical-mystical literature, the authors' intention was to facilitate the socio-ethical as well as religious cultivation of their audience.<sup>19</sup> For this particular authorship, the mystical devotional life had necessarily practical implications. The pursuit of virtue within this context, in a sense, is synonymous with the pursuit of spiritual perfection and mystical experience. In the eleventh-century work *Duties of the Heart*, which Dan describes as "the first masterpiece of *sifrut ha-musar*," Bahya (ben Joseph) ibn Pekuda endeavors to transcend strict rationalism in an effort to recapture the latent spirituality of Jewish tradition by differentiating between the 'duties of the heart,' - which are characterized by the absence of physicality (focusing instead on intentionality) in their religious significance - and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pg.78.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pg.49.

<sup>19</sup> Dan, Joseph. "Ethical Theories in Jewish Mystical Writings." Essay in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, edited by Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K Crane, 71–83. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012. pg.73.

‘duties of the limbs,’ which is a corollary of *halakhah*.<sup>20</sup> Bahya’s construction of the ‘duties of the heart’ is itself a ḥasidic innovation because it goes beyond the letter of the Law in order to develop a more holy ethos of behavior and seeks to capture those elements of religious experience which cannot be fully realized in the totality of the Law itself. Bahya’s specific articulation of the extra-legal principles of the tradition has come to be called by scholars such as David Blumenthal as “intellectualist mysticism” or “philosophical mysticism” and is comparable to the sufi mystics who were prevalent in the milieu of his contemporary context.<sup>21</sup> As Bahya posits in the introduction to *Duties of the Heart*, his conception of mystical experience is primarily through the catalyst of knowledge; wisdom is humanity’s mechanism for knowing and enacting God’s will.<sup>22</sup> However, because Bahya identified a number of other pathways of connection to the Divine beyond sheer intellect, Lobel classifies him as a proponent of philosophical mysticism rather than intellectualist mysticism which is a more apt description of the spirituality of Maimonides.<sup>23</sup>

Moses Maimonides, in his preeminent code the *Mishneh Torah*, sought to disentangle the plain sense of the Law from generations of layered Talmudic discussion which obscured it. In doing so he put forth a democratization of *halakha* by making it accessible to those who could not parse the complexities of the Talmud in much the same way Isaac Al-Fasi did for the Talmud itself in the previous generation. The clarification of the *halakha* itself was but one of two transformational changes, identified by Moshe

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pg.74.

<sup>21</sup> Lobel, Diana. A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya ibn Pequda’s *Duties of the Heart*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2007. Pg.48.

<sup>22</sup> ibn Pekuda, Bahya ben Joseph. *Duties of the Heart*. Translated by Yehuda ibn Tibbon and Daniel Haberman. New York, NY - Jerusalem, IL: Feldheim Publishers, 1996. Pg.3.

<sup>23</sup> Lobel, Diana. A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya ibn Pequda’s *Duties of the Heart*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2007. Pg.53.

Halbertal, that Rambam sought to create in the Jewish world; the second being “a substantive shift in Jewish religious consciousness.”<sup>24</sup> It was in service of this second goal that Rambam saw fit to include a chapter on “Human Dispositions” in the *Mishneh Torah*’s *Sefer Maddah*. Therein, Rambam undertakes a discussion of humanity’s individual differences. He constructs a paradigm of behavior guided by adherence to a ‘middle way,’ calling those who do so *chacham* (wise); but he acknowledges there are those who are exceedingly exacting in their personal conduct who are called *hasid* (devout).<sup>25</sup> While Rambam does not ascribe the same merit to this distinction as earlier sources, his mention of the classification of *hasid* proves its enduring nature. Rambam’s intellectualist mysticism is on full display throughout the *Mishneh Torah*, “[t]he pinnacle of religious experience is [described as] the joining of love and awe...accomplished through the medium of contemplation and knowledge.”<sup>26</sup> Later in his career, in the Epistle on Martyrdom, Rambam demonstrated that strict adherence to *halakha* is secondary to the underlying concerns and values of the people who perpetuate the living tradition.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, in the lands of Ashkenaz, there were communities developing without the same concern or regard for the philosophical traditions with which Bahya ibn Pekuda and Moses Maimonides engaged. Their adherence and commitment to the halakhic framework, while assuredly not perfect, and the circumstances of the culture which surrounded them demanded they be constantly ready to lay down their lives for the sake of *kiddush Hashem*. In the shadow of the Crusades, Medieval German Jewry came to

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<sup>24</sup> Halbertal, Moshe. *Maimonides: Life and Thought*. Translated by Joel A. Linsider. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pgs.1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Human Dispositions 1:4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Halbertal, Moshe. *Maimonides: Life and Thought*. Translated by Joel A. Linsider. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pg.199.

<sup>27</sup> Maimonides, Moses. *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*. Translated by Abraham Halkin. Discussions by David Hartman. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1993. Pg.47.

embody the ethos of the *hasid* articulated by the Mishnah and later Rambam of stringent piety and thus they are known as *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. Despite a relatively short creative period of the movement (1150-1250), the German pietists “were intimately connected with the whole of Jewish life and the religious interests of the common folk,”<sup>28</sup> unlike the exclusive mystical traditions which preceded (and immediately followed) them. In an effort to secure the future of mystical knowledge, the Hasidei Ashkenaz sought to “strip the centuries-old veil of secrecy,” and thereby publicly disseminated what had formerly been confined to esotericism.<sup>29</sup> The defining figures of the movement: Samuel the Hasid, Judah the Hasid, and Elazar ben Judah all came from the renowned Kalonymos family who, originally from Italy, defined the landscape of German Jewish scholarship.<sup>30</sup> *Sefer Hasidim*, a work attributed to these three pillars of Hasidei Ashkenaz, is defined by Gershom Scholem as the “most important literary monument of the movement.”<sup>31</sup>

Whereas F. I. Baer hypothesized that “the teachings of *Sefer Hasidim* form a definite and consistent whole,”<sup>32</sup> Haym Soloveitchik and others have since differentiated between the first 152 sections of the work (which had numerous citations from the *Mishneh Torah* and a similar anti-magical sensibility) as having “systematic; radical; and far-ranging” differences from the rest of the book which seem opposed to the basic tenets of the Hasidei Ashkenaz.<sup>33</sup> Whether we consider *Sefer Hasidim* to be a unified whole or two discrete works, it is invaluable in that it provides a rare depiction of the day-to-day

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<sup>28</sup> Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995. Pg.81.

<sup>29</sup> Soloveitchik, Haym. "Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: "Sefer Ḥasidim I" and the Influence of Ḥasidei Ashkenaz." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 92, no. 3/4 (2002): 455-93. Pg.459.

<sup>30</sup> Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995. Pg.82.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Pg.83.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Soloveitchik, Haym. "Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: "Sefer Ḥasidim I" and the Influence of Ḥasidei Ashkenaz." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 92, no. 3/4 (2002): 455-93. Pg.457.

lives of Medieval German Jewry. The trauma of the Crusades notwithstanding, the lives of these Jews, and the ethos of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, were profoundly influenced by the Christian context which surrounded them. Scholem's description of the Hasidei Ashkenaz is essentially the marriage of a renaissance of merkavah mysticism, contemporary Christian mystical ideas, and a novel conception of what it means to be a *hasid* which was completely divorced from intellectualism and learning.<sup>34</sup> The conception of devoutness put forward by the Hasidei Ashkenaz was largely ascetic in nature, and, furthermore, they developed their own systematized standards of morality which went beyond the boundaries drawn by *halakha*.<sup>35</sup> Another contribution of the Hasidei Ashkenaz which influenced the development of Kabbalah was their contributions to the mystification of prayer through the prominence they gave to mystical exegesis by way of three interpretive strategies: 1) *gematria*, ascribing esoteric meaning based on the calculation of the numerical value of words, and phrases to make connections to those of equal value; 2) *notarikon*, interpreting the letters of words in an acrostic manner; and 3) *temurah*, the systematic interchange of letters.<sup>36</sup>

In the Sephardic contemporary context, a number of scholars were beginning to reclaim the Jewish mystical tradition in their own way. Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides or Ramban, was one of the first to introduce mysticism into his commentary on the Torah. According to Elliot Wolfson, "[p]erhaps no one figure is more responsible for the legitimization of Kabbalah as an authentic esoteric tradition of

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<sup>34</sup> Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995. Pgs.90-91.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Pgs.92,94.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Pg.100.

Judaism.”<sup>37</sup> Nachmanides’ hermeneutic was dependent on reading the text of Torah as foundationally two-fold in nature, with plain-sense as well as esoteric meanings.<sup>38</sup>

Another example is that of Bahya ben Asher, known as Rabbeinu Bahya who seemingly innovated the four-fold method of interpretation (*peshat*, plain sense reading; *drash*, or *midrash*, the homiletical interpretation; *remez/sekhel*, hint or mind in the philosophical sense; and *sod*, or *Kabbalah*, the secret, mystical meaning) in his commentary on the Torah produced in Zaragoza, Spain circa 1291.<sup>39</sup> In addition to his exegetical exploits, Bahya filled his commentary with moral insights and spiritual guidance by way of mystical sagacity. The degree to which Rabbeinu Bahya was influenced by the Zohar has been the subject of academic discussion since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. First, Yaakov Rifman hypothesized that Bahya was only aware of a few, scattered anthologies commenting on a smattering of *parshiot* which would only later come to compose the Zohar; then, Bela Bernstein posited that while Bahya did inherit the full redacted Zohar, he did not make significant use of it; but, by 1969 Ephraim Gottlieb declared the Zohar “the source” of Bahya’s commentary.<sup>40</sup>

According to Dan, “from a historical point of view, the most successful solution to the problem of spiritualization was achieved by the new conception of the meaning of the commandments developed by the early kabbalists...which was forcefully expressed in the Zohar.”<sup>41</sup> By employing narrative ethics, the Zohar offers other archetypes of

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<sup>37</sup> Wolfson, Elliot R. "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic." *AJS Review* 14, no. 2 (1989): 103-78. Pg.103.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Pg.106.

<sup>39</sup> Fishbane, Eitan. Opening Reflection on Bahya for Mysticism and the Moral Life course at JTS.

<sup>40</sup> Gottlieb, Efraim. *The Kabbalah in the Writings of R. Bahya Ben Asher Ibn Halawa*. Jerusalem, IL: Kiryat-Sepher, 1970.

<sup>41</sup> Dan, Joseph. “Ethical Theories in Jewish Mystical Writings.” Essay. In *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, edited by Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K Crane, 71–83. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012. pg.76.



holiness and practical piety through the embodiment of virtues. The decision to teach morality and mysticism through narrative recognizes that something deeper and more affecting takes place through the medium of the story. “The question of moral struggle and decision making does not exist in the abstract...rather being tied to stories and happenings,” thereby making the story, and its inherent mystical-ethical teachings, more compelling to the reader.<sup>42</sup> Eitan Fishbane displays the Zohar’s paradigmatic quid pro quo model of human moral behavior for divine interventionism through the tale of R. Hiyya and R. Yosi walking along the road and ascribing God’s providence to the study of Torah.<sup>43</sup> This system is a basis for the magical utilization of practical Kabbalah. It is essentially a renewed codification of humanity’s ability to influence the world and its analogous supernal reflection by way of certain actions usually tied to *mitzvot* and ethics. The Zohar was also influenced by the surrounding Christian culture. Yitzhaq Baer suggests that the Zohar’s valorization of poverty is connected to the proclivity of proselytizing Franciscan monks in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Castile.<sup>44</sup>

Outside of the Christian context however, others were also creating Jewish mystical communities which were influenced by their particular circumstances. Abraham Maimonides, son of Rambam, and his compatriots in Fustat and Alexandria perpetuated an Egyptian Jewish pietism which was so formed by Judeo-Arabic cultural synthesis that it has come to be known as “Jewish-Sufism” because of its incorporation of Sufi models.<sup>45</sup> Abraham Maimonides was a proponent of solitary meditation and ascetic

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<sup>42</sup> Fishbane, Eitan P. *The Art of Mystical Narrative: a Poetics of the Zohar*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pg.285.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Pg.286, Zohar 1:157a.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Pg.296.

<sup>45</sup> Russ-Fishbane, Elisha. *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pg.46.

detachment as a means of obtaining mystical-prophetic insight.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, blending of Jewish and Sufi mystical traditions precipitated a number of perceptible engagements, if not in actuality at least in Genizah documentations. In one such document a citation from the thirteenth-century Sufi authority 'Umar al-Suhrawardi implies that the Egyptian pietists concerned themselves with the Sufi practice of ecstatic dance.<sup>47</sup> Due to the taboo nature of adopting practices from gentile society, Abraham Maimonides and his contemporaries sought biblical and rabbinic precedence for incorporating these sorts of mystical practices. For example, in order to take advantage of the beauty of Sufi musical chant and motifs—which Abraham Maimonides described as the ideal preparatory mechanism for individual and communal prayer—the Egyptian pietists invoked the description of the mystic-prophetic potentiality of music in Rambam's writings.<sup>48</sup> The degree to which these practices were transmitted in Jewish mystical traditions beyond the Middle Ages has not been the specific focus of academic discussion as of yet, but I propose that they had influence on Isaac Luria (who, despite being born in Jerusalem to an Ashkenazi family, was educated in Egypt in the sixteenth-century)<sup>49</sup> and thereby Lurianic Kabbalah as well as Hasidism as we know it today.

### The Renaissance of Jewish Mysticism: Lurianic Kabbalah and Beyond

In the generations following the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492, sixteenth-century Safed became the focal point for the revival of Kabbalah. It was the reconvening point of Jewish mystical traditions formed all over the Jewish world, refracted through

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. pg.122.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pgs.123-124.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Pgs.124-125.

<sup>49</sup> Scholem, Gershom. "Issac Luria: A Central Figure in Jewish Mysticism." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 29, no. 8 (1976): 8-13. Pg.9.

the prism of the land of Israel. Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488-1575) was among the exiles from Spain who eventually settled in Safed. He became a well-renowned halakhist through his works the *Beit Yosef* (a commentary on Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's *Arbaah Turim*, published in four parts between 1550-1559) and the *Shulchan Aruch* (still a definitive code of Jewish law, also published in four parts in 1565).<sup>50</sup> Caro was outstanding in that his legal endeavors were driven by his own mystical experiences which are detailed in his diary-like work *Maggid Mesharim*, wherein he engages with his mentor, the personified Mishnah.<sup>51</sup> Another primary innovation of this new, blended Kabbalah, born out of its practitioners' experience with catastrophe and exile, was the incorporation of messianism with Jewish mystical modalities.<sup>52</sup> Beyond messianism, the three characteristic ideals of Lurianic Kabbalah which, according to Scholom, most influenced later Jewish mysticism, including Hasidism, were: "*Tsimtsum* - a withdrawal or contraction; *Shevirah* - a breaking or shattering; and *Tikkun* - restoration."<sup>53</sup>

Despite the fact that he did not inscribe many of his teachings, Luria was extraordinarily influential. The Kabbalists of Safed, who adopted his ethos, portrayed in their writings a synthesis of theoretical and practical Kabbalah. Centuries after the Spanish incarnation of Kabbalah's blending with ethical literature, the mystics of Safed recast many of the same themes of human efficacy on the sephirotic world by way of ethical and religious deeds.<sup>54</sup> Moses Cordovero's (1522-1570) *Tomer Devorah*, his ethical-spiritual manual for integrating morality and mysticism, is one such paradigmatic

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<sup>50</sup> Ginzberg, Louis. "*Caro, Joseph b. Ephraim*" *The Jewish Encyclopedia* edited by Isadore Singer. 1903. Volume 3, pgs.583-588.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Pg.8

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Pg.10

<sup>54</sup> Fine, Lawrence. *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, The Beginning of Wisdom*, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984. pgs.83-84

example of Safed's foray into this genre.<sup>55</sup> Similar to Bahya ben Asher, Hayyim Vital (1542-1620), a preeminent disciple of Isaac Luria, saw the conquering and transcendence of one's *yetzer* as emblematic of morality and a defining feature of a *hasid*.<sup>56</sup> For Cordovero, as with earlier thinkers, embodying godliness is not an inherent feature; rather, it is the product of the cultivation of the self by way of virtuous behavior.<sup>57</sup> According to Lawrence Fine, however, the "crown jewel" of Safed's ethical-mystical literature in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is the relatively enigmatic author Elijah Di Vidas's (1518-1587) *Reshit Hokhmah*, the Beginning of Wisdom.<sup>58</sup> *Reshit Hokhmah* draws heavily on the Zohar and, in some ways, seems to be an extended discussion of the practical Kabbalah of Cordovero's Tomer Devorah.<sup>59</sup>

The presumptive inheritor of this ethical-mystical chain of tradition after Safed was Ashkenazi, Eastern European, Polish Jewry. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Isaiah b. Abraham Horowitz produced *Sheney Luhot ha-Berit* which, although primarily produced in the land of Israel, is reflective of contemporary Ashkenazic culture and demonstrative of Horowitz's ability to seamlessly wield and interweave a wide variety of strains from the rabbinic tradition.<sup>60</sup> However, it would be the charismatic figure of Shabbatai Zevi and his ability to harness the latent messianic aspirations of Lurianic Kabbalah which would come to define the prevailing suspicious attitude towards mystical movements which

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<sup>55</sup> Fishbane, Eitan P. "A Chariot for the Shekhinah: Identity and the Ideal Life in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 3 (2009): 385–418. Pg.390

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Pg.406

<sup>57</sup> Koch, Patrick B. *Human Self-Perfection: A Re-Assessment of Kabbalistic Musar-Literature of Sixteenth-Century Safed*. Los Angeles, CA: Cherub Press, 2015. Pg.78

<sup>58</sup> Fine, Lawrence. *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, The Beginning of Wisdom*, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984. Pg.84

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Pg.86

<sup>60</sup> Krassen, Miles, ed. *Isaiah Horowitz: The Generations of Adam*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1996. Preface by Eliot R. Wolfson, pg.XI

were encountered by the Baal Shem Tov and the Hasidism of his generation. Even before his conversion to Islam in 1666, Shabbatai Zevi used the doctrine of *Tikkun* to justify apostasy as can be seen in his disciple Solomon ben Abraham Laniado of Aleppo's letter to Kurdistan. In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem posits that Zevi's personal magnetism was his lone exceptional characteristic and only thereby were his antinomian acts viewed by his followers as sacramental.<sup>61</sup> The trauma of Sabbateanism and its false messianism contributed to the suspicion of mysticism held by Jewish scholars in the eighteenth-century. Still, many of the lay people continued to seek out practitioners of practical Kabbalah and continued to put stock in Jewish mystical experience.

In the next chapter I will explore the character and circumstances of the Besht as well as the politics and scholarship about him in an effort to understand how this charismatic figure launched the mystical movement, Hasidism, whose reverberations can be observed to this day. The divergent understandings of the true nature of Beshtian Hasidism underlie the foundational differences between Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism today. In full view of the history of Jewish mystical engagement presented above, it seems that despite its richness and depth it remained the exclusive purview of religious and intellectual elites. One reading of The Besht is that, while he maintained his own tight-knit circle, he was the catalyst for the democratization of mystical ideas and practices such that more Jews had access to them. Neo-Hasidism built upon this endeavor and sought to make Jewish mystical experience even more accessible and egalitarian. The Reform movement, in embracing aspects of neo-Hasidism, has the potential to further

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<sup>61</sup> Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995. Pgs.292-293

extend the reach of Jewish mysticism and to offer it as a legitimate path of seeking spirituality in the postmodern world.

## **Chapter 2 A New Hasidism**

### Practical Kabbalah, The 'Historical' Besht, Ba'alei Shem, and Their Detractors

The true nature of the Ba'al Shem Tov has been the subject of academic and religious debate since, with magnetic charisma, he first began his campaign to alleviate the suffering of the Jews of eastern Europe through a new form of Hasidism. His life became so legendary that there were many who doubted that he had ever lived. His status as the progenitor of Hasidism and as an enigmatic character defying definition has elicited countless portrayals seeking to understand his mission and to attach various addenda to it. From the time of his death, Hasidic groups have sought legitimacy and prominence by way of their connection to him. Neo-Hasidism has been deeply involved in the process of creativity; recapturing and reimagining the essence of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching in an effort to establish itself within the framework of Jewish tradition while also innovating with the tools of the modern world. The Reform Movement has historically taken a derogatory posture towards mysticism, in part because of the Movement's prevailing attitude towards beliefs and practices which were deemed irrational. In order to gain appreciation for the project and process of neo-Hasidism, one must first understand the context which birthed the Hasidic movement. The fathers of neo-Hasidism utilized the space created by the central tension concerning the scope and intention of the mission and message of the Besht (that is, for whom he intended his message and to what degree he envisioned the universal application thereof) to attempt to define it in terms of renewal and rediscovery rather than innovation. Like a volcanic eruption, Hasidism burst forth with a burning lava which subsequently hardened into cool rock. The essential self-conception of neo-Hasidism is a rekindling of the flame inspired

by the Besht. In this chapter, I will provide historical context to the Ba'al Shem Tov derived from recent scholarship as well as the circumstances and personas that enabled and carried out the first wave of neo-Hasidism.

Israel ben Eliezer and Sarah was born into a chaotic time and region, in 1698 in Podolia, on the border of modern day Ukraine and Romania.<sup>62</sup> After the coerced conversion of Shabbatai Zevi to Islam in 1666, a number of his followers willingly became apostates and joined him in his new faith precipitating two *herem* (religious censure) decrees (1670, 1672) against him and the “empty criminals who cling to him,” by the Council of the Four Lands (Greater and Lesser Poland, Galicia including Podolia, and Volhynia) which prohibited them from every synagogue in Poland.<sup>63</sup> Soon thereafter, in 1672, the Turks invaded and occupied parts of Poland as well as Western Ukraine until the treaty of Karlowitz in 1699.

In the early years of his life, beginning with the blood libel in Sandomierz (1698) and subsequent impositions of harsh penalties on the Jewish community for “host desecration and ritual murder” by the Polish-Lithuanian Sejm (parliamentary body) in 1699, Jewish communities’ already tenuous position became all but untenable.<sup>64</sup> Accusations such as these, scapegoating the Jews, were a reflection of the insecurity of the hegemonic population, similar to the those that produced similar antisemitic legislation leading up to and in the fallout of the Cossack rebellions of the previous century which eventually culminated in the bloody Khmelnytsky Uprisings (1648-1658)

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<sup>62</sup> Elior, Rachel. *Israel Ben Eliezer and His Contemporaries*. Jerusalem, Israel: Carmel, 2014. Pg.3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Pg.4.



and which resulted in the deaths of half of the Jews of Ukraine.<sup>65</sup> Over the course of Israel ben Eliezer's years, from 1698 until his death during the holiday of Shavuot in 1760, he bore witness to thousands of book-burnings, blood-libels, pogroms, and intracommunal *herems* against the Sabbatians and their descendants, the Frankists, as well as other proponents of practical Kabbalah.<sup>66</sup> However, in the midst of these turbulent times, the community demanded meaning which could only be sufficed with mystical-magical personalities.

There is precious little agreement on the biography of Israel ben Eliezer and even less on how he ascended to prominence under his better-known moniker, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht), or "the Master of the Divine name." According to Moshe Rosman, with some consensus it can be said that the Besht had, "certain mystical powers and was known as a non-ascetic pneumatic-ecstatic who projected charismatic appeal. He involved himself in the problems of everyday life and communicated with people through folksy discussion and telling stories. He was in some sense the founder of the movement that became known as Hasidism."<sup>67</sup>

Rachel Elior defines charisma as "the quality of an individual's personality by virtue of which [one] is separated from ordinary morals and treated as if [one] were endowed with supernatural, superhuman qualities, or at least with specific extraordinary

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<sup>65</sup> Heyde, Jurgen. "Relations between Jews and Non-Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth Perceptions and Practices." In *New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands*, edited by Polonsky Antony, Węgrzynek Hanna, and Żbikowski Andrzej, 198-218. Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> For a full account of the many traumatic events of the Jewish community during this time see timeline of Elior, Rachel. *Israel Ben Eliezer and His Contemporaries*. Jerusalem, Israel: Carmel, 2014. Pgs.3-11.

<sup>67</sup> Rosman, Moshe. *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*. Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013. Pg.11.

qualities.”<sup>68</sup> These qualities, scientifically unquantifiable as they may be, were the tinder that enabled the spread of the Besht’s ideas long after his death.

Polish tax records indicate that there was an individual, referred to by various Polish-Ukrainian iterations related to Ba’al Shem (e.g. Balsem; Balsam; Balszam Doktor), living rent-and-tax-free in the house owned by the *kahal* of Mezhbizh (in Podolia) with the occupational title of kabbalist.<sup>69</sup> Despite his title, or perhaps because of it, the Besht was not readily accepted by the existing mystical and rabbinic power structures, who had already come to call themselves Hasidism, as can be demonstrated from the following excerpt from *Shivhei Ha-Besht* (a hagiographical account of his life, first published a generation after his death in 1814):

A story: When the Besht came to the holy community of Mezhbizh, he was not regarded as an important man by the Hasidim – that is to say, by R. Zev Kutses and R. David Purkes, because he was called the Besht, the master of a good name. This name is not fitting for a tsaddik.<sup>70</sup>

Ba’al Shem was a term ascribed to shamans who, through the magical manipulations of divine names and other techniques of practical Kabbalah, sought to draw down and utilize the power of the divine emanations for the sake of affecting the earthly realm.<sup>71</sup> Like the famous R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel, who brought the golem of Prague to life for the sake of the community, ba’alei shem were specialists in magical defense. They were tasked with protecting the community from the machinations of demons which were thought to cause disease and *dybbukim* (bad spirits) as well as

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<sup>68</sup> Elior, Rachel. *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*. Translated by Shalom Carmy. Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006. Pg.1, footnote 1.

<sup>69</sup> Biale, David, David Assaf, Benjamin Brown, Uriel Gellman, Samuel Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, Marcin Wodziński, and Arthur Green. *Hasidism: A New History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pg.17.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Pg.40.

providing herbal and talismanic remedies for the concerns of everyday life.<sup>72</sup> Unlike the Besht, many of the ba'alei shem remained itinerants throughout their careers. Through their travels and those of other sorts of itinerant preachers, Kabbalah and other magical practices spread throughout the region by way of the patronage of Jews and Christians alike.<sup>73</sup>

In *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*, Rosman provides four of the major critiques of practical Kabbalah:

Rational rejection – argued that ba'al shemism was nothing more than magic and therefore contrary to the idea of an omnipotent God illegitimate as part of Jewish religion; rejection of the practitioners but not the art; the idea that magical manipulation of names is an ancillary mystical activity concerned with minor ontological phenomena. It distracts from the essential objective of mysticism, which is to commune with the Divine; (and finally, most common in 18<sup>th</sup> century) not actually a criticism per se but rather a caveat: dealing with names can be dangerous business, perhaps one should stay away from it.<sup>74</sup>

Whereas before the study of Kabbalah had been the exclusive purview of elite circles of scholars organized in study houses called *kloyzn*, with the proclivity of these itinerants and technological advances in printing there was increased access to books and knowledge about subjects which had previously been dependent on oral transmission.<sup>75</sup> *Sefer ha-Heshek*, the explanatory work of Hillel Ba'al Shem, which warned against layperson forays into practical Kabbalah, bears testament to both the growing interest in the subject matter as well as the threat which book culture posed to the existing rabbinic

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Pg.41

<sup>74</sup> Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*. [Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013.] 23-24

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Pg.35.

and ba'al shem status quo.<sup>76</sup> The Besht and his ilk posed an especially grave threat to the insular, elitist, esoteric *hasidim* who preceded them because they were engaged in the popularization of the mystical tradition. He taught orally rather than textually and in the vernacular, Yiddish, rather than Hebrew. Perhaps of greatest concern to the rabbinic hierarchy, aside from the fresh and ongoing trauma of Sabbateanism, was the Besht's ethos concerning the magical power of speech displayed below in the story of the Busy Man. "Everything is invocation, making every utterance potentially mystical and magical. Thus, even the simpleton has the potential to access God as the most learned Talmudist."<sup>77</sup>:

The Ba'al Shem said: "Imagine a man whose business hounds him through many streets and across the market-place all the livelong day. He almost forgets that there is a Maker of the world. Only when the time for the Afternoon Prayer comes, does he remember: 'I must pray.' And then, from the bottom of his heart, he heaves a sigh of regret that he has spent the day on vain and idle matters, and he runs into a by-street and stands there, and prays: God holds him dear, very dear and his prayer pierces the firmament. (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, translated by Olga Marx, [New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1991] 69)

This story displays three of the major spiritual innovations of the Besht which tended to provoke his detractors: The Divine presence is accessible everywhere, even in the marketplace, by everyone, even the busy man; Accessibility of the hidden divine realm is available to every member of the community; and There is equality of all modes of divine worship.<sup>78</sup>

Much of our knowledge about the Besht is gleaned from stories such as this one and the other above as well as in various collections of aphorisms attributed to him. The

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.Pg.36.

<sup>77</sup> Class notes. *Hasidism*, Professor Haim Reznitzer. August 31, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Class notes. *Hasidism*, Professor Haim Reznitzer. September 9, 2020.

spoken basis of his life, legacy, and teaching defies comprehensive historical scholarship. In the words of Elie Wiesel, “Obsessed with eternity, he neglected history and let himself be carried by legend. The works attributed to him – *Shivkhei ha-Besht*, *Keter Shem Tov*, *Tzvaat ha-Ribash* – really belong to others.”<sup>79</sup> *Keter Shem Tov* is the earliest of these Beshtian anthologies, edited and redacted by a disciple of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, Aaron ben Zvi Hirsch of Optaw, with the first of two volumes published in Zolkiew in 1784, already twenty-four years after the Besht’s death.<sup>80</sup> The second volume of the Zolkiew edition of *Keter Shem Tov* was not published until 1795; and the single-volume Karetz edition, which formed the basis for all subsequent editions of the work did not appear until 1797.<sup>81</sup> Sometime in the intervening years, either in 1792 or 1793, the first edition of *Tzava’at Harivash* was published; bearing many resemblances in both form and content to his student, R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezhirech’s *Maggid Devarav Leya’akov*, published a decade earlier.<sup>82</sup> Generally scholars agree that Jacob Joseph was more pedantic in recording the Ba’al Shem Tov whereas the Maggid was more confidently syncretic.<sup>83</sup> Unlike many other Jewish leaders, Israel Eliezar Ba’al Shem Tov never wrote a book himself but had more than 1,400 books written about him.<sup>84</sup>

The only piece of writing which can be attributed to the Besht himself is the 1752 epistle which he conveyed to Jacob Joseph to be sent to his brother-in-law R. Gershon

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<sup>79</sup> Wiesel, Elie. *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, trans. Marion Wiesel. New York, NY: Random House Inc., 1972. Pg.8.

<sup>80</sup> Magid, Shaul. "The Intolerance of Tolerance: Mahaloket (Controversy) and Redemption in Early Hasidism." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2001): 326-68. Pg.327, footnote 4.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Schochet, Jacob Immanuel (1998). *Tzava'at Harivash: The Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*. New York, NY: Kehot Publication Society. Pg.ix.

<sup>83</sup> Class notes. *Hasidism*, Professor Haim Rechnitzer. September 14, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. September 16,2020.

Kotover who was, at that time, in the Holy Land.<sup>85</sup> The epistle, known as “The Holy Epistle” in Hasidic tradition, recounts the ‘soul ascents’ undertaken by the Besht on Rosh Hashanah 5507 [1746] and 5510 [1749] wherein he learns the theological meaning of the catastrophes which are befalling the Jews and the preconditions for the Messianic Age.<sup>86</sup> Although the Besht claims to have been made aware of the impending blood libels in the course of the first ascent he describes, Elior posits that this description is intended as a commemoration and comfort for survivors of the forced conversions and subsequent murders of the Jews of Zaslow following a blood libel which began on Passover (21<sup>st</sup> of Nisan) in the wake of the decree by Pope Benedict the 14<sup>th</sup> which permitted the killing of Jewish children after the age of seven and also precipitated blood libels and murders in Szepetowa and Dunajow.<sup>87</sup> The Epistle is demonstrative of the three circles of activity described by Emanuel Etkes, which characterized the Besht’s life: “1) the Besht as Baal Shem, 2) the Besht as carrier of a religious message, and 3) the Besht’s concern for Klal Yisrael.”<sup>88</sup>

### The Eastern European Confluence of Hasidim, Mitnagdim, and Maskilim

Despite its popularizing and democratic elements, which were highlighted by the progenitors of neo-Hasidism, it is now agreed that Hasidism started as an elite movement, in contrast to earlier scholars who argued that it had populist roots.<sup>89</sup> The historical Besht

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<sup>85</sup> Etkes, Emanuel. *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*. Translated by Saadya Sternberg. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2005. Pg.272.

<sup>86</sup> Biale, David, David Assaf, Benjamin Brown, Uriel Gellman, Samuel Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, Marcin Wodziński, and Arthur Green. *Hasidism: A New History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pgs.48-49.

<sup>87</sup> Elior, Rachel. *Israel Ben Eliezer and His Contemporaries*. Jerusalem, Israel: Carmel, 2014. Pgs.7-8.

<sup>88</sup> Etkes, Emanuel. *Hasidism: Continuity or Innovation?* Edited by Bezalel Safran. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988. Pg.7.

<sup>89</sup> Class notes. *Hasidism*, Professor Haim Rechnitzer. September 30, 2020.

concentrated on the elite, but the idealized The Besht was a populist. After his death, as discussed above, there were many attempts to recapture the essence of his life and teachings as well as to recast them to serve the particular agendas of the leaders who succeeded in making his legacy the popular movement that we know as Hasidism. While the development of the movement as such is outside of the scope of this project, it is necessary to elaborate on the Rabbinic and Enlightenment respondents thereof, the Mitnagdim and Maskilim, in order to set the stage for the modern reengagement with mysticism and the seeds of neo-Hasidism. Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797), the Vilna Gaon, known as the Gra, was, “the most accomplished Talmudic Scholar in European Jewish history...[and] also widely considered the founding father of the rabbinic movement of opposition to Hasidism.”<sup>90</sup>

Because of the Gra’s engagement with the sciences – he published works on geometry, astronomy, and geography in addition to the more traditional subjects – he was also appropriated by the early Maskilim and later Wissenschaft historians as “the originator of the movement of Jewish enlightenment in the East.”<sup>91</sup> However, despite their similar anti-Hasidic sentiments and dedication to scholarship, the Mitnagdim and Maskilim are diametrically opposed insofar as the essential project of the latter group was to gain admittance and acceptance for the Jews into European Society. This process was accelerated in western Europe as compared to eastern Europe and so it was only a half-century later that the Maskilim were prevalent enough to merit the ire of Hasidim and

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<sup>90</sup> Nadler, Allan. *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. Pg.127.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Mitnagdim alike. This shared foe, ironically, brought Hasidim and Mitnagdim closer together.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries these sects of the Jewish community polemicized one another in efforts to maintain and widen their spheres of influence. Phinehas of Polotsk (d.1823), a prominent and prolific disciple of the Gra, derided both Hasidim and Maskilim in his work, the *Keter Torah*, as outgrowths of the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination. Phinehas described the *yetzer ha-ra* as first enticing the people of Israel with “the beauty of the gentiles’ verse and songs, and [then with] their critical investigations and learning.”<sup>92</sup> Immediately thereafter, Phinehas warns of the evil inclination’s temptations by way of premature study of Kabbalah:

Be very careful that [the evil instinct] does not prepare a wine for you before its time, God forbid, or feed you unripe fruits, which will set your teeth on edge...[one who undertakes the study of Kabbalah without the mastery of Talmud] is the master of falsehood.<sup>93</sup>

Rabbi Nachman ben Simchah of Bratslav (1772-1810) was a great-grandchild of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (1700-1760), a grandchild of Nahman of Horodenka (1680-1765), and a nephew of Barukh of Mezhibizh (1753-1811) as well as a unique and charismatic figure in his own right.<sup>94</sup> After the initial formulation of his circle and his subsequent relocation from Zlatopol to Bratslav in 1802, R. Nachman entered a period of intense creativity which continued until the end of his life and is largely available to us thanks to the detailed account of his life, stories, and teachings transmitted by his devoted follower, Natan Sternhartz of Nemirow (1780-1845).<sup>95</sup> These two volumes called *Likutei Moharan*,

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid. Pg.135.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. Pg.40.

<sup>94</sup> Biale, David. Assaf, David. Brown, Benjamin. Gellman, Uriel. Heilman, Samuel. Rosman, Moshe. Sagiv, Gadi. Wodzinski, Marcin. *Hasidism: A New History*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.) Pg.111.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. Pg.113.



unusual in their “elegant literary style,” were published shortly before his death (1808) and immediately thereafter (1811).<sup>96</sup> Early in *Likutei Moharan* (1:64) Nachman developed his own typology of heresy which is far less antagonistic to Maskilic ideology than that of Phinehas of Polotsk:

Know, that there are two types of heresy. There is one heresy that stems from extraneous (secular) wisdom...[the claims of] this heresy may be answered, for they come from extraneous (secular) wisdom, brought about by the breaking of the vessels...God can be found there...There is a second kind of heresy, made up of wisdom which is really no wisdom at all. The perplexities and questions of this heresy come from the void (*halal*).<sup>97</sup>

These writings from Phinehas of Polotsk and Nachman of Bratslav both disparage the other two Jewish sects in their time and at the same time make begrudging allowances for the wisdom that can be found in them. Particularly in the section from *Likutei Moharan*, Nachman honors the divine aspects of secular wisdom, similar to Maimonides’ own formulation “one should accept the truth from whatever source it proceeds.”<sup>98</sup> In describing secular wisdom in Lurianic terms as shards of the broken vessels of creation, Nachman leaves open the possibility that this wisdom can be redeemed to serve a holy cause. Nachman also justified singing melodies of other nations as niggunim as permissible because in doing so he was bringing God’s attention to the evils that nation had visited upon Israel.<sup>99</sup> Nachman’s resonance continues to be felt across time, space,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. Pg.114.

<sup>97</sup> Shaul Magid "Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Nahman of Bratzlav's Likkutei MoHaRan" *The Harvard Theological Review* [88, no. 4 (1995): 495-519] 501-502.

<sup>98</sup> Maimon, Moses Ben. *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics (Shemonah Perakim): A Psychological and Ethical Treatise*. Original translation to Hebrew by Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Edited, annotated, and translated into English by Joseph Isaac Gorfinkle. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1912.

<sup>99</sup> Class notes. *Hasidism*, Professor Haim Rechnitzer. October 28, 2020. Sefer Hamidot, *Yeshua*’ 28

and philosophy. He is, in many ways, a figure of the quintessential beginning of the Modern Jewish literary endeavor and the “father of the Modern Yiddish tale.”<sup>100</sup>

As such, Nachman of Bratslav should be credited not only with the continued spread and popularization of Hasidic ideals but also with providing the necessary *tzimtzum* for Hasidism to grow in a more synchronous, or at least less-adversarial, fashion with the other movements of his day. Nachman also legitimated some necessary critiques of the Hasidism of his day which would pave the way for neo-Hasidism’s similar endeavor. Despite his notable pedigree, he initially spurned leadership opportunities until after his pilgrimage to the land of Israel in 1798-1799; upon his return he acquired a small circle of followers, aligned with the likes of Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745-1813) and Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (1740-1810), and engaged in open disputes with other popular Hasidic leaders, including his uncle, who epitomized what he saw as the decline of the movement. In this manner, he and his followers endeavored to perpetuate a spiritual revival based on “constant self-evaluation and purification.”<sup>101</sup>

### Seeds of Neo-Hasidism

The *Sefat Emet*, one of the most popular and recent (published 1905-1908) “classic” books of Hasidic teaching and the “essential treatise for Ger Hasidim,” was the magnum opus compilation of the teachings by Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905); the rebbe of Ger.<sup>102</sup> His grandfather, Rabbi Yitshak Meir Rottenburg (1799-1866)

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<sup>100</sup> Kamenetz, Rodger. *Burnt Books: Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka*. New York, NY: Schocken, 2010. Pg.16.

<sup>101</sup> Biale, David. Assaf, David. Brown, Benjamin. Gellman, Uriel. Heilman, Samuel. Rosman, Moshe. Sagiv, Gadi. Wodzinski, Marcin. *Hasidism: A New History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pg.111.

<sup>102</sup> Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, Artur Green, and Shai Gluskin, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1998). Pg.XV

was considered a renowned scholar and preeminent disciple of Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859) who was also a devotee of the “Holy Jew,” Rabbi Ya’akov Yitshak Rabinowitz (1766-1813), Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pshiskhe (1765-1827), and the “Seer of Lublin,” Rabbi Ya’akov Yitshak Horowitz-Sternfeld (1745—1815).<sup>103</sup> Rottenburg changed his last name to Alter at some point either due to his support of the 1830-1831 uprising or his vehement opposition to the so-called Dress Decree of the Russian Empire in the 1840s which banned “Jewish traditional attire.”<sup>104</sup>

After Menachem Mendel died, subsequent to a long period of enigmatic isolation, Yitshak Meir moved out of Warsaw – apparently with the help of funding provided by some Warsaw merchants who were among his followers – and established his own court in Ger.<sup>105</sup> Unlike the Kotzker Rebbe, Yitshak Meir made an effort to make Polish Hasidism mainstream and to join with rabbinic leadership by way of his close connections to halakhic authorities throughout Eastern Europe who respected him a great deal for his talmudic prowess.<sup>106</sup> Because his father predeceased his grandfather, Yehuda Aryeh Leib, Alter became the leader of the Ger community in 1870. Despite having received personal instruction from his grandfather, he was only nineteen when his grandfather died and so, for the four interim years, Rabbi Hanokh Henikh ha-Kohen of Aleksander (1798-1870) served as the heir to the Kotzk legacy.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Biale, David. Assaf, David. Brown, Benjamin. Gellman, Uriel. Heilman, Samuel. Rosman, Moshe. Sagiv, Gadi. Wodzinski, Marcin. *Hasidism: A New History*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.) Pgs.337;344

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. pgs.344; 516

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. Pg.344

<sup>106</sup> Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, Arthur Green, and Shai Gluskin. *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1998). Pg.XXV

<sup>107</sup> Biale, David. Assaf, David. Brown, Benjamin. Gellman, Uriel. Heilman, Samuel. Rosman, Moshe. Sagiv, Gadi. Wodzinski, Marcin. *Hasidism: A New History*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.) Pg.344

While they share a unified ideology of the necessity of the spiritualization of worldly existence, the differences in style are evident between the *Sefat Emet's* earlier writings when juxtaposed to his later writings – the former are characteristically more rigorous whereas the latter writings are seen as more accessible. This distinction could be indicative of the growth of the community during his tenure and should be considered a neo-Hasidic development in its own right because it sought to be more accessible and thereby removed or reframed some more esoteric elements of the tradition.<sup>108</sup> The kabbalistic means (language and symbols) of the *Sefat Emet* were employed to serve moral and psychological ends.<sup>109</sup> When he is offering a mystical insight, he instead uses simple and more universally understood language so as to be clear and direct, a universalizing endeavor to transmit his ideas beyond the Hasidic world.<sup>110</sup> “[T]he *Sefat Emet* gives the impression of a work that treads carefully, seeking to maintain the theistic language of normative Jewish piety to express a theology that leans heavily toward the panentheistic side.”<sup>111</sup>

This panentheistic view would itself become a major feature of many of the neo-Hasidic masters who were influenced by the *Sefat Emet*. The *Sefat Emet* also is a neo-Hasidic work in its ability to rediscover and reframe earlier mystical sources to serve Modern needs, similar to the Besht's endeavor, but with more fluidity and nuance palatable to other Jewish groups. This can be observed in 2:80 of the *Sefat Emet*, wherein the author draws on Nachman of Braslav and intellectualist mysticism of the Medieval

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Pg.345

<sup>109</sup> Green, Arthur, and ארתור גרין. "Three Warsaw Mystics." *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought / מחקר ירושלים* 58-1 (1996): 7-8.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. Pg.8.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. Pg.10

period in service of an integrated innovative and traditional theology.<sup>112</sup> The scholarly tone of the *Sefat Emet* is also proto-neo-Hasidic in that later writers embodied it more intentionally: “There are passages where R. Judah Leib seems as much phenomenologist of religion, a role taken up more self-consciously by both Zeitlin and Heschel, as he does Hasidic preacher.”<sup>113</sup>

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, was another necessary precursory figure to the development and spread of neo-Hasidism.<sup>114</sup> He was unconcerned with the polemics which so busied many of the great rabbis of the past and instead focused on the experiential aspects of religion. The following excerpt from the introduction to a collection of Rav Kook’s works (letters, aphorisms, excerpts from essays, etc...) by Ben Zion Bokser is demonstrative of the rabbi’s ability to shift and stretch the existing paradigm in ways which were particularly fertile for Jewish religious and cultural endeavors in and beyond the land of Israel:

He was essentially an existentialist thinker to whom theological issues as such were of secondary importance...Rabbi Kook is an example of Jewish mystical tradition in its pure form. He was inspired by Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, a Cabbalist who freed the Cabbalah from superstitious admixtures, seeing in it largely a way to the immediacy of God...But his interest in mysticism was not confined to the scholarly and pietistic study of Cabbalistic texts. He saw the divine illumination as an ongoing inpouring of divine light upon those sensitive to receive it, and he portrayed the history of Judaism in terms of an ongoing tension between the new light evoking a constant regeneration of life, and a heritage from earlier illuminations that had become crystallized in hollowed texts, a tension, in other words, between new creativity and tradition.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid. Pg.15

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. Pg.20

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Rabbi David Ingber on October 27, 2020

<sup>115</sup> Ben Zion Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*. [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978] 2-3

Rav Kook's flexibility as a halakhic authority was also pioneering in that he advocated for a vision of halakha which was both authentic and amenable to the modern world. His conception of the Jewish project was fundamentally towards the universal good. Rather than taking an antagonistic stance towards competing ideologies, he sought understanding of and cooperation with them as a means of revealing aspects of the all-encompassing nature of God.

In Rabbi Kook's world of thought, the love of God carried with it a love for all God's creatures, an openness to all ideas and a continued passion to perfect life through reconciliation, harmony and peace. Despite his commitment to the inherent value of Jewish particularism, he would not abide by disparagement of other religions or even atheism, seeing each manifestation of religious thought as laying claim to its own spiritual authenticity, a seeking after God and [God's] ways in the world.<sup>116</sup>

Rav Kook sought to raise the spiritual state of Jewish life by incorporating elements of the "three fundamental forces" present in the land of Israel which he described in a message to the annual conference of Agudat Yisrael: the Old Force: 1. Ultra-Orthodoxy, Hareidim, who he described as insular and unwilling to engage with the modern world; 2. the New Force (a kind of Modern Orthodoxy defined as teaching Torah in addition to practical disciplines a person needs in life); and 3. Secularism (Nationalist, Zionist, and not concerned with religion or God.)<sup>117</sup> His particular vision of the "Judaism that will rise to its historic authenticity and fulfill its liberating role in civilization" was a synthesis of: Orthodoxy (conventional religiosity); Nationalism (Zionist movement writ-large); and Liberalism (the general humanist tradition of the Enlightenment,) all of which

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Pgs 8,12.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. Pgs.15-16.

he saw as organic elements of Jewish tradition.<sup>118</sup> Rav Kook's teachings and vision are a source of inspiration for early neo-Hasidic sources as well as contemporary ones.

Rav Kook did not lionize the Hasidism of The Besht, rather he saw the spiritual movement as rising to meet the needs of the Jews of that time and place but as essentially lacking. For Rav Kook, the Hasidic endeavor was laudable in that it sought to restore soulfulness to Judaism in the wake of the reactionary return to "repetition of the letters and observance of the commandments and customs with a bent back and broken heart," after the catastrophic false messianism of Shabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank.<sup>119</sup> Rav Kook's main critique of the founders of Hasidism was that their movement was "not sufficiently academic [and] did not lend itself to gradual education."<sup>120</sup> In this respect, he saw the Mitnagdim as providing the necessary contrast to the Hasidim, keeping them grounded within the bounds of Jewish tradition:

At the helm of the opposition was the shining light of the Israelite soul in terms of learning and practical education...This was the Torah psyche of the Gaon Rabbi Elijah that stood opposed to the expansion of the divine soul current of the Ba'al Shem Tov's psyche, for it was not sufficiently based on learning...Precisely through the tension between the two sides, this "controversy for the sake of heaven" built a beautiful cupola over the great square of K'nesset Israel (Ecclesia Israel) in exile.<sup>121</sup>

Rav Kook endeavored to create his own neo-Hasidism calling for a "great Hasidism," "very superior Hasidim," and "great Hasidim, unique in greatness of knowledge."<sup>122</sup> The

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. Pg.20.

<sup>119</sup> Kook, Abraham Isaac. *When God Becomes History: Historical Essays of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook*. Edited and translated by Bezalel Naor. New York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2016. Pg.72.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Pg.73.

<sup>121</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook. *When God Becomes History: Historical Essays of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook*. [Edited and translated by Bezalel Naor. New York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2016] 72

<sup>122</sup> Naor, Bezalel. "The Hasidism of Rav Kook." The Lehrhaus, November 12, 2019. <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-hasidism-of-rav-kook/>.

knowledge he referred to is partially encapsulated in the acronym “*KeMaH*, the initials of *Kabbalah*, *Madda*, *Hasidut* (Kabbalah, Science, Hasidism).”<sup>123</sup> The synthesis of these elements, in Rav Kook’s vision would produce an enhanced understanding of ‘real Torah’: “In this regard I [Rav Kook] invoke the adage: ‘If there be no *KeMaH* (Flour), there be no Torah; if there be no Torah, there be no *KeMaH* (Flour)’ (*m. Avot* 3:17).”<sup>124</sup> Bezalel Naor describes Zeitlin and Buber (who will be discussed forthwith) as being “favorably impressed” upon meeting Rav Kook in Jerusalem.<sup>125</sup> The degree to which this favorable impression translated to demonstrable influence is outside the purview of this paper, however, there are elements of Rav Kook’s thought which continue to resonate in neo-Hasidism today.

#### Eastern European Roots of Neo-Hasidism: Hillel Zeitlin

Hillel Zeitlin was born in Korma, in Mogilev Province, on the Dnieper River in 1871. According to his own account, he was prodigious learner of Jewish subjects including but not limited to Talmud, Hasidism, and Philosophy from a young age.<sup>126</sup> At the age of thirteen, imperceptible to those around him, Zeitlin entered a period of mystical ecstasy which he attributed, in part, to his experience of the sermons delivered by Rabbi Shalom Dov Baer of Rechitsa (1866-1920).<sup>127</sup> Due to his family’s financial hardships, Zeitlin set out from his home and thereupon encountered the complexities of the world beyond his shtetl. He dove deeper into philosophy, Jewish thinkers from the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Zeitlin, Hillel. *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*. Edited and translated by Arthur Green. Sections translated by Joel Rosenberg. Introduction by Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012. Pgs.1-2.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. Pg.2.



Middle Ages (Ibn Ezra, Maimonides) and his own day (Mendelsohn, and Spinoza, about whom he published a monograph in 1900) as well as other non-Jewish Enlightenment, positivist philosophers the likes of Darwin, Kant, and Hegel and beyond.<sup>128</sup> These non-traditional exploits brought Zeitlin into contact with Biblical criticism, which produced a sort-of crisis of faith for him which he described as “denial – or at least radical doubt.”<sup>129</sup> His intellectual journey also brought him into conversation with philosophers such as Hartmann and Nietzsche (about whom he published another monograph in 1905) whose outward heretical positions indicated to Zeitlin an inner thirst for knowledge of God; this engagement brought him back to Kabbalah and Hasidism and culminated in “a synthesis of profound pessimism and profound faith.”<sup>130</sup> After moving to Warsaw in 1907, where he worked as a journalist, he also returned to his Torah studies with renewed vigor and experienced a state of spiritual ecstasy which he compared to that of his youth and which brought about a “visionary” creativity.<sup>131</sup>

Moshe Idel proposes two models of Hasidic thought: Katabatic-redemptive (descent for the sake of ascent); and the anabatic mystico-magical (‘ascent’ through contact with the Divine). “This ‘ascent’ is a deep transformation of the self through its temporal spiritualization, self-effacement, annihilation, and cleaving to the divine.”<sup>132</sup> The twin mystical, formative periods of Zeitlin’s life display that neo-Hasidism is capable of embodying both models of mystical experience. Zeitlin’s mystical experience, at least the latter one, cannot be classified as Hasidic and is rather neo-Hasidic because it

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid. Pg.3.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Pg.4.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Pgs.4-5.

<sup>132</sup> Idel, Moshe. *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995. Pgs.103-104.

manifested through synchronous exposure to and embrace of Jewish and non-Jewish sources. Zeitlin was heavily influenced by Buddhist thought, identifying the book of Ecclesiastes with its teachings, especially the Buddhist idea “of suffering being the central religious problem of human life.”<sup>133</sup> Zeitlin’s first published work in Ahad Ha-‘Am’s Ha-Shiloah, “*Good and Evil*,” (1899) is an intellectual tour de force of religion and philosophy including a “wide-ranging historical survey, touching on the Hebrew Bible, Greek philosophy, early Christianity, the rabbinic tradition, and medieval philosophy, Islamic and Jewish... [ as well as] the Jewish mystical tradition.”<sup>134</sup> At the end of the work, Zeitlin connects Buddhist conceptions of love and compassion in the face of suffering to the endeavors of The Besht and Nachman of Bratslav by way of the bridge of Tolstoy’s construction of Christianity.<sup>135</sup> At the time of his writing of “*Good and Evil*” it is evident that Zeitlin is deeply invested in a scientific worldview, favoring the thought of Spinoza to that of Hasidism. But, in his 1910 essay, “*The Fundamentals of Hasidism*” Zeitlin offers a quasi-systematic presentation of Hasidic mystical theology, interwoven with early sources from the movement and demonstrates a palpable shift as he chooses the Besht as the quintessential source on the proper conception of God.<sup>136</sup>

Zeitlin envisioned a Jewish revival styled after the ‘original’ Hasidism of the Besht. He defined the foundational endeavor of Hasidism at its outset “to bring into contemporary Jewish life the freshness, vitality, and joyful attachment to God, in accord with the style concepts, mood, and meaning of the modern Jew, just as the BeSht did – in

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<sup>133</sup> Zeitlin, Hillel. *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*. Edited and translated by Arthur Green. Sections translated by Joel Rosenberg. Introduction by Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012. Pg.11.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. Pg.12.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. Pg.14

his time – according to the style, concepts, mood, and meaning of the Jews of that time.”<sup>137</sup> Zeitlin’s personal construction and deconstruction of this ideal can be seen in his 1913 essay, “*In the Soul’s Secret Place*,” a response to William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* which demonstrates Zeitlin’s commitment to and affinity for the Western literary tradition even as he was deeply immersing in Hasidism.<sup>138</sup>

Zeitlin sought to be an activist as well as a literary figure, and founded a number of organizations geared towards various segments of the Jewish population, all espousing “transcendence of party loyalties, concern for the entire Jewish people and its fate, and a combination of political and economic reforms coupled with a call for spiritual renewal”<sup>139</sup>:

- *Ahdut Yisrael* – Perhaps an alternative to Zionism, “a vision for unifying and recharging the entire Jewish people”<sup>140</sup>
- *Beney Heikhala* – ‘Children of the palace,’ a group elite in their religious education, so much so that Zeitlin sought to address them in Zoharic Aramaic.
- *Yavneh* - An elite (elite within the elite of Beney Heikhala), Jewish, intentional community envisioned in print in a series of 1923 articles called “*The Call of the Hour*” in the Warsaw Yiddish daily *Der Moment* (of which Zeitlin was one of the founders). Zeitlin’s vision for a “rarefied and reinvigorated Judaism, one based on his idealized vision of early Hasidism and deeply tied also to the image of the circle around Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai in the Zohar.”<sup>141</sup> Zeitlin’s particular vision

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<sup>137</sup> Green, Arthur, and Ariel Evan Mayse. *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Pg.XV

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. Pgs.2-3

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Pg.4

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. Pgs.4-5.

for a neo-Hasidic community was steeped in the zeitgeist of 1920s Poland, “the values of socialism, including supporting oneself by the dignity of one’s own labor and disdain for commerce as a form of exploitation, were integral to the rules he composed for the community he sought to create.”<sup>142</sup> A letter from Zeitlin to Nehemiah Aminoach (one of the founders of the Poel Mizrachi movement, the religious version of Labor Zionism) penned in 1925, attests to the existence of a Yavneh group in Warsaw which studied “mainly the *Tanya* by the Rav of Liadi, the *Kuzari* [by Judah HaLevi], the works of the *MaHaRaL* [Judah Loew ben Bezalel], and similar things.”<sup>143</sup>

The call for an elite and intimate religious brotherhood is in line with the long tradition of Jewish mysticism reaching back into the fantasy circle of devoted disciples surrounding Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai in the Zohar as well as those of Rabbis Moshe Cordovero and Issac Luria of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Safed; Rabbi Shalom Shar’abi in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jerusalem (Ahavat Shalom circle, the original Bet El); Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto in Padua and Rabbi Nahman in Bratslav.<sup>144</sup>

Zeitlin’s Yavneh and its implicit critique of society were addressed to a broader audience of Warsaw Jews, those alienated from the Hasidic community but still open to tradition. His identification with, even glorification of, the working class is striking. He preached against the spiritual malaise of empty materialism and assimilation, extolling the virtues of a life unencumbered by luxury and unsullied by the exploitation of other workers.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid. Pg.5.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. Pg.7.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. Pg.9.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. Pgs.10-11.

In the charter document, *What Is Yavneh* (untitled manuscript, ca. mid-1920s), Zeitlin outlined his vision for the community he hoped to create. He couched the endeavor in juxtaposition to the ‘original Hasidism’ of the Besht:

Yavneh wants to be for Jewry what Hasidism was a hundred and fifty years ago. This was Hasidism in its origin, that of the Besht. This does not mean that Yavneh wants to be that original Hasidism. It rather wants to bring into contemporary Jewish life the freshness, vitality, and joyful attachment to God, in accord with the style concepts, mood, and meaning of the modern Jew, just as the BeSht did – in his time – according to the style, concepts, mood, and meaning of the Jews of that time...furthermore, Yavneh does not intend to remain only a society for inner religious experiences. Yavneh is also a society of Torah. As such, it demands of its members that their inner life in God be expressed in holy and pure actions.<sup>146</sup>

In a written interview with himself, *What Does Yavneh Want* (1924), Zeitlin describes Yavneh as “a renewed and more universalized version of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s spiritual path.”<sup>147</sup> Zeitlin then posits that Beshtian Hasidism is defined by three loves: “the love God, the love of Israel, and the love of Torah”<sup>148</sup> He saw the Hasidism of his day as “very far from the pure Hasidism of the Besht,”<sup>149</sup> and sought to go farther, broader, and deeper by universalizing its message and incorporating “all that is healthy, pure, and honorable in Socialism...’Love of Israel’ will be transformed into a great worldwide ‘Love of Humanity’...Justice, Justice shall you pursue will be spread through all social relationships.”<sup>150</sup> The inherent tension of Zeitlin’s desire to popularize his vision of neo-Hasidism while also creating an elite circle of scholars around himself is analogous with the circle which The Besht created that would eventually proliferate his ideology. Both Zeitlin and the Ba’al Shem Tov recognized that aspects of their vision

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<sup>146</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019] 15-16

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. Pg.17.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. Pg.19.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. Pg.23.

could only be realized by those whose particular abilities were above and beyond the average person's. Even so, both men saw the potential for their disciples to spread their message and thereby their focus on these particular individuals was a means of universalization unto itself.

Neither Zeitlin's translation of the Zohar from Aramaic into Hebrew nor his dream of a renewed Hasidic community came to fruition in his lifetime. However, his *Di Teyvah*, especially its "monastic" rule, influenced the young Zalman Schachter when he was still a Chabad Hasid. (Schachter, who will be thoroughly discussed in the next chapter, was introduced to the text by its Hebrew translator, Natan Hofshi, during a visit to Jerusalem in the 1950s.) Zeitlin was among the martyrs of the Warsaw ghetto. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah 5703, when his block was called to assemble at the Umschlagplatz "Zeitlin came out wearing tallit and tefillin, with a copy of the Zohar in his hand."<sup>151</sup> He died on the road to Treblinka. May the tzaddik's memory be a blessing.

#### Western European Roots of Neo-Hasidim: Martin Buber (1878-1965)

According to Martin Buber's eminent biographer, Paul Mendes-Flohr, Buber wished people to consider his ideas independently as universally applicable, rather than delving into his personal life in an attempt to understand them through the context of his experience.<sup>152</sup> This is assuredly a common feature of one of such undeniable genius whose formation was so tumultuous; as much as it is a common sociological feature to seek to understand how that very process of formation birthed an exceptional individual.

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<sup>151</sup> Zeitlin, Hillel. *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*. Edited and translated by Arthur Green. Sections translated by Joel Rosenberg. Introduction by Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012. Pg.32.

<sup>152</sup> Mendes-Flohr, Paul. *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press., 2019. Pg. xiii.

Buber, whose life and work were particularly idiosyncratic, should not be entirely divorced from his individual condition. Neither, however, should his personal biography obscure the universal resonance of his teaching. In truth, Buber's life and work are both harmonious and dissonant. Seeking to understand Buber requires that one both deepen and transcend one's understanding of who he was, as evidenced by the life he lived. Buber's "core identity" is complex and multilayered, incorporating seemingly incongruous elements which are all equally authentic to his life. Externally, Buber's thought evolved throughout his life and he demonstrated an impressive ability for synchronicity. Internally, Buber's soul is evident in everything to which he put his mind. The way of this man was a winding one, illuminated by a world on fire.

In 1878, just over ten-years after the formulation of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Martin Buber was born in the capital of Vienna. Vienna was a cultural epicenter that produced many of the great minds which still bear weight in our contemporary society. Names such as Freud, Herzl, and Schoenberg are but a small sample of the wide range of influence commanded by these Viennese Jews. If Buber had exclusively lived out his childhood there, then he may have developed entirely differently, and perhaps he would have been less interested in or engaged with his Jewish identity.

The primary tragedy of Buber's life exposed him to a world entirely different from the cosmopolitan melting pot of Vienna. When Buber was only three-years old, his mother abruptly left him and his father without so much as a goodbye. This moment, along with the painful realization of the finality of her departure articulated by his neighbor's daughter, was defining in Buber's conception of interpersonal relationships.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid. Pg.2.

Shortly thereafter he was sent to live with his paternal grandparents, Adele and Salomon Buber, in Lemberg (modern day Lviv, Ukraine,) the empire's administrative capital of Galicia. The region was largely Polish, but Buber's grandparents were so fiercely protective that he was educated at home until he was eventually enrolled in a Polish gymnasium at the age of ten. His homeschooling afforded him private lessons in English, French, and German as well as an education in traditional Jewish subjects from his grandfather (a great scholar in his own right) and his great-uncle, Rabbi Zev Wolf Buber.<sup>154</sup>

In the formative summers he spent with his great-uncle in Delatyn, Martin Buber was immersed in the culture of East Galician Jewry, including many prominent Hasidic rabbis.<sup>155</sup> The Buber family's lineage placed Martin squarely in the realm of intellectual and financial elites. In addition to renowned pre-Modern rabbis and philanthropists, he is also related to Karl Marx and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Yiddish was one of his primary languages and was necessary for him to communicate in that world, but his grandmother ensured that he also received significant exposure to German. At the age of 14, Buber left his grandparents and returned to live with his remarried father. The same year, Buber ceased his own traditional Jewish observance.

During his time at the University of Leipzig in the winter of 1897-1898, Buber (after first being drawn to Polish nationalism) adopted Zionism in self-described service of the Jewish people. It is Zionism that became the philosophy that he would wrestle with throughout his life. In 1899, when he was 21 and studying at the University of Zurich, he met and later married a woman named Paula Winkler. She had been a part of the

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid. Pg.5.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.



community which revolved around Omar al-Raschid Bey (nee Friedrich Arndt-Kurnberg) “a long-bearded and colorfully cloaked mystic who expounded an orientalist blend of Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu wisdoms after converting from Judaism to Islam years earlier in Constantinople.”<sup>156</sup> Beyond improving his German, Paula supported and helped to cultivate Martin’s engagement with Zionism as well as his commitment and devotion to studying and transmitting Hasidism. In many ways, Paula was the Ruth to Martin’s Naomi, going wherever he went and making his people her people. Despite disapproving of his love, Salomon Buber would send Martin editions of Hasidic works which were unavailable in Germany and, a few weeks before his death in 1906, Martin would dedicate his first Hasidic work (*The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*) to his grandfather.

Despite his embrace of secularism, Buber was drawn to Hasidism, because in Hasidism he found the sort of individual searching and connection to God and humanity which he found lacking in the performance of what he saw as traditional Judaism’s sentimental attachment to “senseless traditions.” Buber’s conception of Hasidism, in its core ethos, was a universalist teaching containing psychological and spiritual truths which had the potential to elevate the human experience. Similarly, Buber’s conception of Zionism seemed to be as a means for the spiritual and national revitalization of the Jewish people rather than a political or religious movement. Buber saw both these movements, Zionism and Hasidism, as vital to the Jewish renaissance he envisioned. Buber first introduced the term “Jewish renaissance” in a 1901 essay as a means of “giv[ing] expression to the soul of the Jewish people” for “[o]nly when each people

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<sup>156</sup> Green, Arthur, and Ariel Evan Mayse. *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Pgs.53-54.

speaks from its innermost essence is the collective treasure [of humanity] enhanced.<sup>157</sup> In the same year, Theodore Herzl would appoint him as editor-in-chief of the weekly publication of the World Zionist Organization, *Die Welt*.<sup>158</sup> Buber's vision of cultural Zionism, which was to be actualized in the arts, literature, and language of the Jewish people could only flourish in the land of Israel. However, he would eventually break with Herzl's Zionist movement as it moved away from the cultural Zionism Buber identified with in order to expand support amongst the more religious Eastern European Jewry, a group which Buber identified wholly with the experience of exile. By 1905, Buber had all but entirely severed ties with the Zionist movement, decrying their choice to live in spiritual poverty in hopes of the wealth of national loyalty.

Upon breaking with the Zionist hegemony, Buber affiliated more strongly with the anarchist commune *Neue Gemeinschaft*. Wilhelm Dilthey (whose conception of history and interpretive method weighed heavily in Buber's work), Georg Simmel (whom Buber credited with teaching him "how to think), and Gustav Landauer (whose "mystical conception of community" refined Buber's own), had already been strong influences on Buber during his time taking courses with them in Berlin in the winter of 1899-1900, but his relationship to the latter two men would be especially fruitful in his own intellectual maturation for years after. When Buber's new community, *Neue Gemeinschaft*, eventually disbanded, he began writing his doctoral dissertation but delayed completing it in order to complete his aforementioned work, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*. "It was surely this effervescent confluence of the *Neue Gemeinschaft*, Landauer, and Paula that inspired

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<sup>157</sup> Mendes-Flohr, Paul. *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press., 2019. Pg.24.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*. Pg.29

Buber to write his doctoral thesis on the Christian mystics Nicholas of Cusa and Jacob Bohme.”<sup>159</sup> Buber credited his experience of the Hasidic soul to his reading of *Tzava’at ha-RIVaSH*, the testament of the Ba’al Shem Tov penned by the Maggid of Mezhirech. “Significantly, the line from Tsava’at ha-RIVaSH that astonished him is all about renewal – renewal of self, renewal of community, renewal of the world.”<sup>160</sup>

Buber’s calling to deliver a new representation of Hasidism was actualized in constructing a counter-narrative to the anti-Eastern European Jewry sentiment of Western Europe. His second work on Hasidism, *The Legend of the Baal Shem*, was, like his first publication, not so much a direct translation of Hasidism, as a new interpretation. “What makes Buber such a profound progenitor of neo-Hasidism is that he engaged intimately with the sources and yet renewed them with his own breath of life.”<sup>161</sup> Buber sought to communicate Hasidic teaching to his Enlightened Western European audience without the distraction of some of the more superstitious or otherwise old-world elements of the tales that he chose to ‘translate.’ In a way, Hasidism served as a palatable access-point for Buber and his audience to reconnect with elements of a Judaism from which they had become estranged. Buber’s packaging of Hasidism as “experience-driven mysticism,” inspired much connection and critique. This was especially pointed in regards to his disregard for halakha. Buber’s conception of religion is separate from the work required for spirituality. To Buber, unquestioning traditional religious observance, typified in halakhic observance, is tantamount to heresy. God, in Buber’s universalist understanding, is not the exclusive purview of Judaism; rather, relationship with the Divine is dependent

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<sup>159</sup> Green, Arthur, and Ariel Evan Mayse. *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Pg.55.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. Pg.56.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. Pg.64.

on individuals' efforts to meet God within the circumstances of one's own life and capacities:

Judaism, then, exists to give witness to this religious reality – a reality, however, that is “not the prerogative of particular religions.” Divine revelation is not the privileged knowledge of any religion; it “does not flash from the cloud, but...whispers to us in the course of every ordinary day, and is alive quite near us, quite close; the *shekhinah* [the Divine Presence] dwells among us [Jews] sharing our exile... and our suffering heals and is hallowed through the immanence of the Word [revealed in the whispers of the everyday]. This is the history of Israel, as it is the history of the human person; and it may well be the history of the world. (Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019] 143)

Whereas Heschel, who in addition to being related to Buber was also heir to a Hasidic dynasty in his own right, is purported to have said “if you want to know Hasidism as it was, start with Buber;” Gershom Scholom, the preeminent Modern authority on Jewish mysticism (who was in no small way inspired and challenged by Buber), took issue with Buber's conception of Hasidism as a spiritual movement rather than a historical one. Scholom saw Buber's work as downplaying the magical and social aspects of the Hasidic endeavor in order to further his purpose of communicating his idealized personal vision of Hasidism to the world - a world which he saw as being in desperate need of rejuvenation, and cultural and spiritual renewal.

In *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber defines Hasidim as “a Jewish sect which arose around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and still continues to exist in our day in deteriorated form.”<sup>162</sup> In the same work Buber also outlines four essential aspects of Hasidic life which will be picked up and wielded in various ways in neo-Hasidic sources:

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<sup>162</sup> Buber, Martin. *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*. Translated by Maurice Friedman. Princeton , NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995. Pg.9.

1. *Hitlahavut: Ecstasy* – Hitlahavut is ‘the burning,’ the ardor of ecstasy...[it] unlocks the meaning of life...[and] can appear in all places and at all times...[the one] who is in it is in holiness...full of fear and trembling...it is the end of constraint, the shaking off of the last chains, the liberation which is lifted above everything earthly...Hitlahavut is embracing God beyond time and space.<sup>163</sup>
  
2. *Avoda: Service* – Avoda is the service of God in time and space...[a]nd yet hitlahavut streams out of avoda as the finding of God from the seeking of God...When [one] collects [one’s self] and becomes one, [one] draws near to the oneness of God – [one] serves [the One.] This is *avoda*...when through all action the rays of the universal sun radiate and the light concentrates in every deed, this is service. But no special act is elected for this service. God wills that one serve [God] in all ways.<sup>164</sup>
  
3. *Kavana: Intention* –“Kavana is the mystery of a soul directed to a goal”<sup>165</sup> Buber divided kavana into two aspects, giving and receiving. These kavanot are expressed in the language of Lurianic Kabbalah: “This is the kavana of receiving: that one redeem the sparks in the surrounding things and the sparks that draw near out of the invisible. But there is yet another kavana, the kavana of giving...its path is creation, and the world before all other forms of creation.”<sup>166</sup>
  
4. *Shiflut: Humility* – Uniqueness is the essential good of [humanity] that is given to [one] to unfold...Only in [one’s] own way and not in any other can the one who strives perfect [one’s self]...And yet the individual is not a whole, but a part. And the purer and more perfect [one] is, so much the more intimately does [one] know that [one] is a part and so much the more actively there stirs in [one] the community of existence...But it is not humility when one ‘lowers [one’s self] too much and forgets that [humanity] can bring down an overflowing of blessing on all the world through [one’s] words and [one’s] actions.’<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid. Pgs.17-19, 23.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. Pgs.23-25

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. Pg.33

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. Pg.39

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. Pgs.41-43

The best example of how Buber wields Hasidism is in *The Way of Man According to Hasidic Teaching*, which I submit is the first comprehensive neo-Hasidic work. *The Way of Man* is unique in that it is essentially a philosophical and psychological exposition scaffolded by the Hasidic framework. The work attempts a systemization of Hasidic thought in a way that is essentially congruous with modernity. This short six-chapter book sets up Hasidic tales as the source text which Buber explicates and comments upon in a dialectic manner, guiding the reader on a deeply introspective and spiritual journey couched in Modern ideas and terminology. First, Buber establishes Hasidism as a continuation of the rabbinic tradition, which is reflected in the formatting of the Mehlman-Padawer translation (Jewish Lights, 2012), and is formatted similarly to a page of Talmud with the tale occupying the space as a mishnah might with Buber's commentary thereupon. The goal, as Buber defines it, is connection by tuning-in to the unifying, polyphonic hum of the universe, and relationship, the meeting which defines his I-Thou theology.

In the first chapter of *The Way of Man*, borrowing a concept from *I and Thou*, Buber establishes self-awareness as the foundation of the way of man according to Hasidic teaching. Self-Awareness, posits Buber, creates an "I," without which there could be no "Thou." Therefore, he chooses to begin *The Way of Man* with self-awareness but only with the caveat that it is not a passive awareness, rather one which compels a person to undertake a spiritual journey. The next chapter, "*The Particular Way*," begins with a Hasidic tale about two rabbis from Galicia (where Buber's own journey into the way of Hasidism began). Buber's Humanist philosophy is on full display as he proports the innumerable value of every individual person. He uses a series of Hasidic stories in

which Hasidic masters cite their self-actualization as the primary way to serve God. This self-actualization does not only demand a compassionate self-awareness, it also has the added benefit of advocating for innovation. Because every person is unique, Buber reasons that we best serve God through the performance of sanctified actions which are natural to the quality of each individual's character. Buber's conception of Hasidic teaching about joyousness enables him to rationalize that the tradition condones individual liberty, and its performance, as a primary way to access God. The third chapter, "*Resolution*," follows *The Particular Way* because, when one has found one's particular way one must resolve to stay on that path. Buber's discussion of acting with a unified soul is reminiscent of the Platonic allegory of the chariot (which represents the soul), in which the charioteer (reason) must work in sync with the two horses (human passions) towards the goal of enlightenment. As discussed in the first chapter of this work, the Jewish mystical endeavor also invokes a chariot to describe mystical experience which can only be accessed with a "unified soul." Buber cites the Baal Shem Tov as the final authority on what it means to act with a unified soul, that is the harmonious action of physical body and spirit together.

Beginning with "*Oneself*," the fourth chapter in *The Way of Man*, displays Buber's ability to interweave the threads of Jewish tradition with the Modern discipline of psychology. In one of the tales therein, the Baal Shem Tov equates thought with the wife, speech with the children, and action with the servants. A psychoanalytic reading of these three aspects of a person's internal life might name them: Id; Ego; and Superego. All of these things are disparate but connected aspects of a unified whole which must work in congress in order to best serve their mutual goal. The fifth Hasidic tale appears

under the header,” *Not to be Preoccupied with Oneself*.” Here, Buber, with his primary interest being relation and meeting, challenges the reader to immerse in the waters of the self so that one may step outside of oneself transformed. The purpose of this transformation is to radiate one’s light into the world without being blinded by it. Finally, after establishing and developing the I, Buber reveals that the Thou is of equal importance. The final section of the book, “*Here One Stands*,” is an answer to the original question in the first Hasidic tale, “Where are you?” Buber’s Humanist message is clear in his inclusion of the Rabbi Simcha Bunem’s tale about Isaac, the son of Yekel who embarked on a journey to make his fortune and realized that it had been buried under his hearth the whole time: You are the treasure. Even if one must embark on the journey and do the work, the treasure is there the whole time right where you left it. Our individual existence is our treasure, and we share it with the world by letting God into our lives. We let God into our lives by answering the eternal question, “Where are you?” with the authentic and personal “Hineini – Here I am.”

Unlike Zeitlin and much of Eastern European Jewry, in 1938, Buber was able to escape the fires of the Holocaust and lived out the rest of his life teaching at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Neo-Hasidism too would find refuge on alien soil, in America. The first wave of neo-Hasidism in Europe was defined by its engagement with Hasidism while simultaneously incorporating elements of the modern world. European neo-Hasidism had first-hand exposure to the spiritual wealth of Hasidic communities in their prime, and sought to capture aspects of that spirituality which would help to facilitate Jewish emancipation and modern national endeavors. Just as the progenitors of first wave neo-Hasidism had to navigate the degree to which traditional Judaism would shape their



own practice and ideology, neo-Hasidim thereafter would be compelled to do the same to varying extents. The next chapter will detail the migration and rebirth of neo-Hasidism as well as its evolving methods of interreligious and otherwise universalist engagement.

### Chapter 3 American Neo-Hasidism

In April of 1881, just over a month after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, the first in a series of more than 200 anti-Jewish pogroms in the region broke out in the Kherson province of Ukraine which were supported, or at least allowed, by the Russian government.<sup>168</sup> The August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1881 issue of the prominent Jewish weekly *Razsvet*, began a strong advocacy campaign for the emigration of Jews from Russia.<sup>169</sup> In September of the same year, a proclamation was issued by the populist Executive Committee of the People's Will party which further demonized the Jews and called for more violence against them, thus they were alienated from the Russian regime as well the political opposition to it.<sup>170</sup> The next month, *Razsvet* published another article which called for emigration to Palestine.<sup>171</sup> 1881 marks the beginning of the First Aliyah, where more than 25,000 Russian Jews emigrated to Israel. However, from 1881 to 1912, only 2.1 percent of Jews who left the Russian empire went to Palestine; 84 percent of these Jews instead immigrated to the United States of America.<sup>172</sup> 1881 also marks the founding of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) which, although originally focused on Jewish refugees, now has expanded its purview to include all refugees seeking to make a better life in this land. The mass emigration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century first brought Hasidism to American shores, but Neo-Hasidism would not arrive until Rabbi

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<sup>168</sup> Cassedy, Steven. "Russian-Jewish Intellectuals Confront the Pogroms of 1881: The Example of "Razsvet"." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 84, no. 2/3 (1993): 129-52. Pg.129.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. Pg.148.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. Pg.138.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. Pgs.149-150.

<sup>172</sup> Gitelman, Zvi. "Native Land, Promised Land, Golden Land: Jewish Emigration from Russia and Ukraine." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1998): 137-63. Pg.138.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was forced to flee from the fires of the Shoah, arriving in New York in 1940.

Neo-Hasidism's American Bridge: Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)

Abraham Joshua Heschel's namesake, the Apter rebbe (1748-1825), served as the rabbi of Mezhbizh, the home of the Ba'al Shem Tov. His burial *ohel* is mere steps away from the grave of the Besht in the community's cemetery. Also among Heschel's illustrious Hasidic lineage were Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezerich, on his father's side and Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev on his mother's.<sup>173</sup> His mother was the twin sister of the Novominsker rebbe, Alter Israel Simon Perlow, and his father, Rabbi Moshe Mordechai, was the Peltzovizner rebbe until his death in 1916 from the influenza epidemic.<sup>174</sup> From the time he was a small child, Heschel commanded great respect from the Hasidic community, "adults would rise when he entered the room, even when he was little, recognizing that he was a special person. He would be lifted onto the table to deliver drushas...he was considered an *illui*, a genius."<sup>175</sup> Heschel published his first articles in Hebrew, short studies of talmudic literature, as a teenager in the Warsaw rabbinical publication, *Sha'are Torah*, in 1922 and 1923.<sup>176</sup> However—with his family's tentative approval—Heschel became interested in secular studies and, after completing his examinations at the Mathematical-Natural Science Gymnasium in Vilna in 1927, went on to matriculate at the University of Berlin in 1929.<sup>177</sup> In 1934 he was awarded a

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<sup>173</sup> Rothschild, Fritz A. "Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972): Theologian and Scholar." *The American Jewish Year Book* 74 (1973): 533-44. Pg.533.

<sup>174</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua, and Susannah Heschel. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996. Pgs.ix-x.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. Pg.ix.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. Pg.x.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. Pgs.x-xi.

rabbinical degree from the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, the seminary Abraham Geiger helped establish where Leo Baeck was on faculty until the Nazis closed the institution in 1942.<sup>178</sup>

Secular study was not without precedent in the Hasidic world. Many Hasidim from Pshiskhe, renowned by the Maskilim for their spiritual and intellectual elitism, devoted themselves to Rabbi Simcha Bunem.<sup>179</sup> Simcha Bunem of Pshiskhe (1765-1827) founded the Pshiskhe school together with his teacher, “the Holy Jew,” Rabbi Ya’akov Yitzhak Rabinowitz (1766-1813), who Heschel identified with creating a new, less magical, role for the *tsaddik*.<sup>180</sup> Simcha Bunem sharpened the Holy Jew’s critique of the *tsaddik* leadership model of contemporary Hasidism, so much so that his disciple Yitshak Meir of Ger (1799-1866) suggested doing away with it entirely “because people were depending too much on *tsaddikim* and not doing enough themselves.”<sup>181</sup> Simcha Bunem’s biography made him a unique figure in early Hasidism and a forerunner to the development of neo-Hasidism. He was born into a non-Hasidic family and was formed in yeshivah in Hungary as well as by the customs of German Jews (whom he encountered afterwards traveling with his father).

Simcha Bunem’s persona had a profound effect upon the image of Pshiskhe and appealed to enlightened Jews in the nineteenth century, representing for many a rational brand of Hasidism that eschewed magic and mysticism as well as the worship of the *tsaddik* as practiced in Lublin...Whether or not Pshiskhe was especially scholarly,

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid. Pg.xi.

<sup>179</sup> Biale, David, David Assaf, Benjamin Brown, Uriel Gellman, Samuel Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, Marcin Wodzinski, and Arthur Green. *Hasidism: A New History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pgs.333-334.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. Pg.337.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. Pg.338.

rational, and anti-mystical, the primary image that later writers cultivated about this school was its practice of telling the unvarnished truth and its equally uncompromising rejection of social hierarchy.<sup>182</sup> While not directly descended from Pshiskhe Hasidim, these qualities were certainly also present in Heschel throughout his life and captured his imagination as well as that of Buber and other neo-Hasidic thinkers.

Because the Nazis had already won a majority in the German parliament (Reichstag) by the time Heschel submitted his doctoral thesis in December of 1932, he had difficulty having his work published in Germany and was only awarded his diploma (which was necessary for his escape from Germany) in 1935 with special dispensation to have his work published by the Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow in part thanks to the Erich Reiss Publishing House in Berlin (who underwrote the cost).<sup>183</sup> Throughout the 1930s, as the situation in Germany worsened, Heschel sought employment outside of Germany and continued to write scholarly works, including a book on Maimonides which sought to draw out the spiritual aspects of the sage's work rather than fixating on his identity as a rationalist philosopher.<sup>184</sup> This is demonstrative of Heschel's place as a unifying figure who sought to rationalize the spiritual and spiritualize the rational which can also be observed in his writing on Abarbanel completed in the same time period. In 1937, at the behest of Martin Buber, who had read his book on the prophets discussed below, Heschel moved to Frankfurt to become the director of the *Mittelstelle für Jüdische Erwachsenen Bildung* (Jewish Center for Adult Education, founded by Buber in reaction to Nazism as a form of 'moral resistance' to strengthen German Jews

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua, and Susannah Heschel. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996. Pgs.xii-xiii.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. Pg.xv.

identities, active from 1934-1938).<sup>185</sup> In October of 1938, Heschel was deported to Poland where he languished until, only six weeks before Germany's invasion, he was able to make his way to London.<sup>186</sup> From London, thanks to Julian Morgenstern, then president of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Heschel obtained an American visa in 1940. Tragically, despite his persistent struggle to procure visas for his family, his mother and two of his three sisters were murdered by the Nazis during the war.<sup>187</sup>

Heschel's transition to America was not an easy one. His life in Cincinnati, where he was employed as an instructor at the HUC and lived in the student dormitory, did not offer him much in the way of spiritual or intellectual stimulation. He was continually frustrated by the American Jewish community's inability to comprehend the extent of the horrors taking place in Europe. He did, however, meet the love of his life, Sylvia Straus, in Cincinnati at the home of Professor Jacob Rader Marcus. The two moved together to New York in 1945 when Heschel was offered a position at the Jewish Theological Seminary.<sup>188</sup> In a speech, which was later expanded and published in his book *The Earth is the Lord's*, Heschel delivered a eulogy for Eastern European Jewry that was so evocative that those in attendance spontaneously rose and recited the Mourner's Kaddish.<sup>189</sup> In addition to his scholarly and theological pursuits, Heschel was deeply invested in telling the story of the East European Jewish civilization which was all but entirely destroyed by the Nazis. He did so in memoriam and as a means of describing and

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. Pg.xviii.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. Pgs.xviii-xix.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. Pg.xx.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

continuing what he saw as one of the most extraordinary moments in Jewish spiritual history,

Then came Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov and brought heaven down to earth...In the days of Moses, Israel had a revelation of God; in the days of the Baal Shem Tov, God had a revelation of Israel, Suddenly, there was revealed a holiness in Jewish life that had accumulated in the course of many generations.<sup>190</sup>

In 1955, Heschel received a Guggenheim Fellowship to write the biography of the Ba'al Shem Tov. With this work, Heschel created a paradigm for a spirituality which was lived out through the actions of one's life. Heschel collected numerous stories about the Ba'al Shem Tov and chose to transmit them through an ever-widening lens such that his reading of the Besht was substantially more universal and democratic than that of early Hasidism. Thus, Heschel's life's work, in some respects, became transmitting Hasidic spirituality and the holiness of their destroyed society into authentic (organically impelled) religious expression in postwar America. His mission was essentially neo-Hasidic because Heschel adeptly weaved aspects of Hasidism into the American experience of liberal Jews who were newly entering the middle class, and whose memory of Europe was passed down from previous generations of immigrants, as well as their allies (including those in the civil rights movement) symbiotically.

#### Neo-Hasidism's Social Justice Ethos and Imperatives

Heschel belongs to a school of enlightened, and increasingly universalist, Jewish mystics who share common roots in the Eastern European city of Warsaw, Poland.<sup>191</sup> He was the beneficiary of the influence of two foundational members of the same school

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid. Pg.xxi.

<sup>191</sup> Green, Arthur, and ארתור גרין. "Three Warsaw Mystics." *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought / מחקרי ירושלים* 58-1 (1996): Pg.3.

already discussed in the previous chapter: Yehudah Aryeh Leib, the Sfat Emet, by way of his education at the beis midrash of Alter's son Rabbi Abraham Mordecai of Gur; and Hillel Zeitlin, who frequented the table of the Novominsker rebbe—Heschel's uncle—where, quite probably, the two at least met, if not influenced one another.<sup>192</sup> According to Green, beyond their geographical connection, these three thinkers share their mystical conception of God's immanence in humanity's lived experience. Their incorporation of the wisdom of Kabbalah, as well as their invocations of early Hasidic masters in the pursuit of renewed spiritual language and ideals ground their innovative wielding of Hasidism which is foundational to neo-Hasidic thinking.<sup>193</sup> Heschel, in particular, was driven to incorporate Jewish spiritual tradition as a means of overcoming the “great spiritual poverty of American Jewry.”<sup>194</sup> Green and Mayse delineate Heschel's Hasidic roots as manifesting in five significant areas: (1) a sense of wonder about God, who fills the universe, because there is neither a time nor place where God cannot be experienced, (2) the cultivation of *da'at*, a religious mindfulness that exceeds intellectual understanding, (3) an understanding that the world is in need of great charismatic religious figures who have tremendous power and effect on those around them, (4) a great belief in the Hasidic virtues of *chesed* and *simcha* as key to spiritual life, (5) and finally that God is concerned with, and effected by, human actions.<sup>195</sup>

Heschel grounded his “radical theology” (as described by Green and Mayse) which should be considered neo-Hasidic in the writings of the *Sfat Emet* and engagement

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid. Pg.4.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. Pg.5.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. Pg.37.

<sup>195</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Pgs.138-143.



with ‘secular’ culture. His first publication in Yiddish, was entitled “*The Divine Name: Man*” and evokes the universalism of Buber.<sup>196</sup> In 1936, as referenced above, Heschel published the book which formed the basis for his 1962 masterpiece of biblical and ethical scholarship, *The Prophets*. At HUC-JIR in New York this text was foundational to the *Prophets* course taught by Provost Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss. So, for a significant portion of the movement’s future leaders, Heschel’s conception of the Prophetic Judaism has long-since taken root. In the 2001 introduction to the Perennial Classics reprinting of the book, Professor Susannah Heschel describes her father’s endeavor as essentially portraying the prophet as “a witness to the divine pathos, one who bears testimony to God’s concern for human beings.”<sup>197</sup> The book is “his clearest articulation of the connection between religion and politics, sanctity and social activism.”<sup>198</sup> After publishing *The Prophets*, Heschel became increasingly involved in the anti-war movement, founding the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam organization in 1965 and incorporating the war into his teaching about the prophets in his classes.<sup>199</sup> Heschel writes, “to the prophets, even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions,”<sup>200</sup> a fortiori the major injustices of Heschel’s day inspired his own prophetic calling, all the more so Reform rabbis—many of whom subscribe to the model of so-called Prophetic Judaism set forth by Eugene Borowitz and others—should be inspired by his example to speak truth to power. Heschel’s anti-war work was not particularly well received in his

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<sup>196</sup> Green, Arthur, and ארתור גרין. "Three Warsaw Mystics." *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought / מחקרי ירושלים* 58-1 (1996): 38-39.

<sup>197</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. Introduction to new edition by Susannah Heschel. *The Prophets*. New York, NY: Perennial Classics, 2001. Pg.xviii.

<sup>198</sup> Raboteau, Albert J. *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. Pg.8.

<sup>199</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. Introduction to new edition by Susannah Heschel. *The Prophets*. New York, NY: Perennial Classics, 2001. Pg.xix.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. Pg.4.

time at JTS. In Heschel's own words, he describes the prophet as an "iconoclast" who challenges our underlying conceptions of what is indeed good and holy and what true piety really looks like.<sup>201</sup> Heschel did this himself in his essay, "*No Time for Neutrality*," stating:

Out of sheer punctiliousness in observing the Law, one may become oblivious of the living Presence. What is the objective of observance if not to be sensitive to the spirit in oneself and in all things? [Humanity] is no mere reflection of the Above; [we are] a source of light. Divesting [one's self] of the husks, [one's] inner splendor may illuminate the world. God has instilled in [every one] something of [the One], hence the momentous importance of what [one] does with [one's] life.<sup>202</sup>

This passage is indicative of both Heschel's stirring employment of the prophetic voice as well as his masterful integration of the language of Lurianic Kabbalah. Herein, Heschel demonstrates a primary feature of his theology of social engagement, "One cannot exist in the spiritual space without a sense of moral imperative and getting beyond what might be characterized as neutrality."<sup>203</sup> Another articulation of Heschel's sense of Judaism's, and specifically Hasidism's, social justice imperatives can be found in his book on the subject, *The Earth is the Lord's*, wherein he again makes use of the language of Lurianic Kabbalah in order to draw out his vision of humanity's social responsibility through the lens of responsibility to God, "The meaning of [a human's] life is [one's] perfection of the universe. [One] has to distinguish, gather, and redeem the spark of holiness scattered throughout the darkness of the world. [Humanity] holds the key that can unlock the chains fettering the Redeemer."<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid. Pg.12.

<sup>202</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel and Susannah Heschel. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996] 78

<sup>203</sup> Fishbane, Eitan. Synchronous Lecture on Dec.10, 2020 for JTS Course: *Mysticism and the Moral Life*.

<sup>204</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Earth is the Lord's*. New York, NY: Henry Schuman, 1950. Pg.72.

Furthermore, in “*No Time for Neutrality*,” Heschel is talking about the dialectic between mitzvot as commandments in a broader sense and the imperative to serve divinity through moral actions, moving beyond indifference or neutrality, “This is the decision which we have to make: whether our life is to be a pursuit of pleasure or engagement for service...it is a system in which human relations rest upon two basic ideas: the idea of human rights and the idea of human obligations”.<sup>205</sup>

For Heschel, religion and the life of piety are more than fulfillment of the mitzvot or an abstract sense of devotional piety. In order to serve God in the spiritual sense one must engage in the moral imperatives of the day. Though Heschel himself was committed to halakhic observance, this central message is not confined to more traditional Jewish streams, and is, in fact in lockstep with Reform Judaism’s understanding of the pursuit of social justice as an essentially religious action.

Heschel gave the opening address at the 1963 National Conference of Christians and Jews on the topic of religion and race during the height of the American Civil Rights Movement; “his speech used poetic and aphoristic phrases, reminiscent of the biblical book of Proverbs, to apply the moral insights of the Bible, Talmud, Hasidic tradition, and Kabbalistic mysticism to the issue of racism and the struggle for civil rights.”<sup>206</sup> For Reform Judaism to remain spiritually relevant in its addressing of the issues of our day and age, we must also develop this fluency with our tradition’s inherent concern with justice. It was at this same conference that Heschel met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who delivered the keynote speech. From thence the two developed a close personal and

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<sup>205</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua, and Susannah Heschel. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996. Pg.75.

<sup>206</sup> Raboteau, Albert J. *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. Pg.11.

professional relationship.<sup>207</sup> This relationship was further actualized in the 1965 Selma march, where Heschel was positioned in the front row of marchers alongside King, Ralph Bunche, and Ralph Abernathy. In an unpublished memoir, he compared the experience to his sense of the Holy when walking with Hasidic rabbis, this same sense is present in his well-known quote which is oft-alluded to in the Reform context, “when I marched in Selma, I felt my legs were praying.”<sup>208</sup> The confluence of social action and prayer is cogently articulated in his essay “*On Prayer*,” wherein Heschel writes: “[P]rayer is action; it requires complete mobilization of heart, mind, and soul.”<sup>209</sup> For Heschel, prayer demands constant engagement; and although it has utility in its capacity to develop, house, and heal an individual’s internal life, it is essentially the act of hallowing time so that God can become manifest in our collective life.<sup>210</sup> In this essay, Heschel realizes his radical claim from *Man is Not Alone*, that “God is in need of [human beings]”<sup>211</sup> when he writes, “God is in captivity in this world...God is in search of man, in search of a home in the soul and deeds of [humanity].”<sup>212</sup>

In Heschel’s book, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, he equates the meaning of Jewish existence – insofar as it encompasses all of Jewish existence that has ever been or will be, from Sinai to Auschwitz and beyond – as a national encounter with Eternity, with ultimate reality, so that we might embody the awareness of the Truth of living. Injustice is a metaphysical calamity, human happiness is of divine significance,

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid. pg.15.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua, and Susannah Heschel. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996. Pg.257.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. Pgs.258-260.

<sup>211</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man Is Not Alone*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966. Pg.25

<sup>212</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua, and Susannah Heschel. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996. Pg.260.

one must rise above the “twilight of the self” in order to “sense the eternal within the temporal.”<sup>213</sup> Each part of this Truth has a corollary in Hasidic language and teachings. Heschel seamlessly attaches the national-particular endeavor of Israel—to be a “holy people”—to the imperative to seek for social and thereby cosmic justice. Similarly, Heschel’s understanding of faith is “sensitivity, understanding, engagement and attachment...the cultivation of the heart, in the depths of the soul, in the ennoblement of the mind...there is no faith without strenuous effort, effort in thought and deed.”<sup>214</sup> He embodied these qualities of faith in his passionate paper, “*Declaration of Conscience*,” read to the New York Conference on Soviet Jewry; therein, Heschel again embodies the prophetic voice in order to call out the injustices visited on the Jews of Russia as, in fact, being visited upon all of humanity,

Our only motivation is care and compassion for man as well as a sense of righteous indignation that in one of the great countries of the world cultural and spiritual atrocities are being committed resulting in anguish, depravity and irreparable loss to all humanity.<sup>215</sup>

To Heschel’s mind, one of the archetypes of Jewish faith is Maimonides - not as a sage and codifier of halakha, but rather towards the end of his life when he was impelled to devote himself to the practice of medicine for the practical sake of the practical and temporary alleviation of human suffering. Heschel saw this transition as “Maimonides [ultimate] metamorphosis: From metaphysics to medicine, from contemplation to practice, from speculation to imitation of God.”<sup>216</sup> This is the heart of Heschel’s mystical-

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<sup>213</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1976. Pgs.420-422.

<sup>214</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966. Pgs.198-200.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid. Pg.275.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid. Pgs.289-290

moral version of prophetic Judaism, that is an expression of the social justice imperatives of Neo-Hasidism: An individual's actions in this world are holy insofar as they serve the needs of humanity, great and small. Through the performance of such actions, especially those which bring justice into the world, one can experience the One and make manifest the Presence in the world for the sake of all of humanity. These fleeting moments of I-Thou relationship with God are possible only with constant attention, awareness, and striving. The pursuit of justice, in one's own context to the best of one's abilities, was for Heschel the ultimate embodiment of *imitatio dei* and the realization of the eternal partnership between God and humanity. Reform Judaism should embrace Neo-Hasidism's social justice ethos as we continue to engage with the moral issues of our time.

Buber's influence on Heschel is evident in that he "strove to build a more enlightened form of Hasidism, more open to the Other. This was to be a religion that, in its spiritual dimensions, transcends the narrow boundaries of the particularistic Hasidic communities."<sup>217</sup> The universalizing thrust of Neo-Hasidism was particularly appealing to the zeitgeist of the 1960s, as will be discussed below, but it is equally enticing to Reform Judaism's desire for a big-tent approach to community building in the movement. Heschel's presentation of Kabbalah, as described by Idel also has great potentiality for Reform contexts due to its palpability to modern sensibilities,

a more psychological understanding of the theosophical-sefirotic structure of the divine realm than found in the sources he quotes...a propensity to de-hypostatization and de-sexualization, as well as a marginalization of the magical and, only to a certain extent, also of the theurgical elements of

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<sup>217</sup> Idel, Moshe. *Solomon Schechter, Abraham J. Heschel, and Alexander Altmann: Scholars on Jewish Mysticism*. In *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren, 235–53. Boston, MA: Brill, 2020. Pgs.168-169.

medieval Kabbalah... Heschel was much more interested in translating Hasidic values than in using Hasidic vocabulary.<sup>218</sup>

Art Green describes Heschel as “inhabiting a Neo-Hasdic rebbe’s – or prophet’s – role,”<sup>219</sup> but, Moshe Idel goes a step further and imagines that Heschel saw himself as “some form of avatar of the Besht.”<sup>220</sup> In either case, Heschel’s articulation and wielding of the Hasidic tradition was seminal to renewed interest in and legitimacy granted to the spiritual civilization of eastern Europe’s applicability to the American Jewish experience.

### Neo-Hasidism in 1960s American Counter-Culture

Although his literary exposure to Kabbalah was primarily through Gershom Scholem, who hosted him in Jerusalem in 1961, the American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s wielding of the Jewish mystical tradition was much more in line with that of Martin Buber.<sup>221</sup>

In a 1984 interview with Michael Horovitz for the *Jewish Chronicle*, Ginsberg spoke about his preference in Judaism for the bohemian mysticism of Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, or Isaac Bashevis Singer.’ Perhaps not surprisingly, Buber, Scholem and Bashevis Singer’s works become popular among Jewish members of the counterculture, many of whom connected to the mystical, supernatural, and Hasidic elements of Judaism, tying them with the values and agendas of the counterculture.<sup>222</sup>

Like tens of thousands of American Jews in the 1920s-1940s, Ginsberg’s parents subscribed to socialist ideologies with progressive universalist values.<sup>223</sup> Hence,

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid. Pg.170

<sup>219</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Pg.142

<sup>220</sup> Idel, Moshe. *Solomon Schechter, Abraham J. Heschel, and Alexander Altmann: Scholars on Jewish Mysticism*. In *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren, 235–53. Boston, MA: Brill, 2020. Pg.170

<sup>221</sup> Ariel, Yaakov. *Jewish Mysticism as a Universal Teaching: Allen Ginsberg’s Relation to Kabbalah*. In *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren, 235–53. Boston, MA: Brill, 2020. Pg.183.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. Pg.192.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. Pgs.184-185.

Ginsberg's spirituality, colored by his family political education, jibes with Zeitlin's vision of incorporating "all that is healthy, pure, and honorable in Socialism."

Ginsberg's poetry, especially *Howl*, is demonstrative of how neo-Hasidism—in its deep engagement with the contemporary circumstances as well as the mystical tradition—provides mechanisms for true and powerful expressions: "Aiming at the spiritual, Ginsberg added an element of mysticism and holiness to his poetic manifesto, depicting the tormented figures as martyrs. Kabbalah appears in the poem."<sup>224</sup> Ginsberg exemplifies the malleability of neo-Hasidic thought. Because it is not dogmatic nor rigidly organized, neo-Hasidism presents all manner of people the opportunity to utilize its wisdom outside of the particular, covenantal framework of Judaism towards more universal applicability. Contemporary neo-Hasidic communities, as will be discussed later, have endeavored to elevate and empower artists in their communities precisely because of this creative potential to express the diversity of human experience in ways that transcend difference, even with a particular lens.<sup>225</sup>

After traveling to Israel, Ginsberg set sail for India. His spiritual odyssey there caused him to adopt the "Hindu practices, as he understood them, consist[ing] mostly of the chanting of mantras and advocating non-violence and pacifism."<sup>226</sup> Just a few years later, Ginsberg would adopt aspects of Buddhism which fit his spiritual needs, although he continued to write poetry which was heavily influenced by Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism: "In this regard, Ginsberg was a forerunner of a postmodern religious era, in

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid. Pg.187.

<sup>225</sup> In an October 27, 2020 interview with Rabbi David Ingber, founder of the neo-Hasidic community Romemu, the rabbi described the importance of the arts in offering people opportunities to spiritually connect as a primary motivation for the community's investment in artists.

<sup>226</sup> Ariel, Yaakov. *Jewish Mysticism as a Universal Teaching: Allen Ginsberg's Relation to Kabbalah*. In *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren, 235–53. Boston, MA: Brill, 2020. Pg.195.



which individuals pick, choose, and, at times, combine their spiritual, cultural, aesthetic, and communal interests.”<sup>227</sup> Today, when a young Jew’s spiritual practice is equally likely to include yoga as it is traditional (synagogue) prayer experiences, it is incumbent on Jewish institutions to infuse their work with an ethos which is pluralistic and inclusive enough so as not to alienate those spiritual seekers who have drawn aspects of their spirituality from the wells of other religious traditions. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi is a prime exemplar of neo-Hasidism’s ability to offer the spiritual depth and inclusivity necessary to meet the communal needs of the postmodern age.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014) and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994)

The ideal leader, Reb Zalman taught, can articulate a dynamic theology – rooted in tradition but flexible, adaptable, and growth-oriented. Modern seekers will not be satisfied with rigid answers of dogmatic creed, on the one hand, or with the assertion that no belief is necessary to live an authentic Jewish spiritual life, on the other. And since the contemporary rabbi is called upon to offer spiritual guidance, he or she must be schooled in the practical arts of pastoral psychology and learn how to interpret the dynamic spiritual world of Jewish theology in a modern context.<sup>228</sup>

Reb Zalman, founder of the Jewish Renewal movement and “Zaide of the Havurah movement,” was born in Poland and raised in Vienna. His family moved to America, settling in New York in 1941 after stops in Belgium and France fleeing the Nazis. He was ordained as an Orthodox Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi in 1947 and sent out to be an emissary to college students by Chabad’s sixth rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880-1950), as part of the Lubavitch post-Holocaust outreach campaign directed at

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid. Pg.196.

<sup>228</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse. A New Hasidism: Roots. [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019] 226-227

nonaffiliated Jews.<sup>229</sup> It was through Chabad that Schachter-Shalomi first met another German Jewish refugee who would be instrumental in the development and spread of Neo-Hasidism, ‘Reb Shlomo’ Carlebach. Carlebach was raised in a Neo-Orthodox household in Berlin. Neo-Orthodoxy, “which began in mid-nineteenth-century Germany, aimed at combining the Jewish tradition with the ideals of the Enlightenment. It advocated the acceptance by Jews of European culture and encouraged observant Jews to obtain a university education.”<sup>230</sup> Carlebach rejected the Neo-Orthodoxy of his youth and instead found himself drawn to Hasidism. Despite his religious training under the auspices of Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Carlebach and his twin brother joined the Chabad community in the late 1940s. “Carlebach and Schachter were the first outreach messengers to nonaffiliated secular Jews, and their work was revolutionary.”<sup>231</sup>

One major area of difference between Carlebach and Schachter-Shalomi was how they approached interreligious engagement. Schachter-Shalomi, on the one hand, was deeply engaged with interreligious engagement and sought to incorporate the spiritual wisdom, to which he referred as “spiritual technologies,” of other traditions into his own practices and beliefs whenever possible. His approach to interreligious engagement is described by his student, Rabbi Or Rose, as having four key elements: (1) humility and curiosity, (2) rooted engagement, (3) cultivating personal relationships, (4) and cultivating the spirit.<sup>232</sup>

Schachter sought to study Asian religious groups. He visited ashrams and befriended gurus and Sufi masters. He became convinced that Judaism could

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<sup>229</sup> Ariel, Yaakov. "Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius: The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 1967–1977." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 2 (2003): 139-65. Pg.140.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. Pg.139.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. Pg.140.

<sup>232</sup> Or N. Rose; “Reb Zalman, Neo-Hasidism, and Inter-Religious Engagement: Lessons from My Teacher.” *Tikkun* 1 November 2017; 32 (4): 40–47

borrow from other religions... Carlebach, too, visited ashrams and befriended gurus, but his interest in Asian religions was more limited. He was respectful of other religious traditions but did not wish to borrow from them.<sup>233</sup>

Both Schachter-Shalomi and Carlebach had experiences with LSD, the former in 1962 at the Ananda Ashram in Millbrook, N.Y. with Timothy Leary as his guide; and the latter guided by the former in 1964.<sup>234</sup> As with interreligious engagement, Schachter-Shalomi became a staunch advocate for LSD whereas Carlebach remained relatively ambivalent on the subject.<sup>235</sup> Schachter-Shalomi “claimed that the hallucinogenic drug worked to boost his spiritual growth, get him closer to God, and helped him realize the multiple dimensions of the religious experience.”<sup>236</sup>

Carlebach was particularly influenced by the singing tradition of the Modzitzer Hasidic court and began writing his own music and toured the United States, spreading his message through song and story.<sup>237</sup> Schachter-Shalomi’s outreach was more so in his role as a teacher and scholar. He traveled far less than Carlebach and instead became a fixture in the Canadian Jewish community wherein he served as the director of a Hillel and a counselor at Camp Ramah, where he sought to bring teenagers into relationship with Jewish tradition through creative involvement.<sup>238</sup> As Chabad became more conservative and centralized in the 1950s and 1960s under the leadership of the seventh rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Carlebach and Schachter-Shalomi distanced themselves from the Lubavitch community and pursued a more “liberal,

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<sup>233</sup> Ariel, Yaakov. "Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius: The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 1967–1977." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 2 (2003): 139-65. Pg.141.

<sup>234</sup> Giller, Pinchas. "Chapter 12 Shlomo Carlebach on the West Coast". In *Kabbalah in America*, edited by Brian Ogren 199-210. Boston, MA: Brill, 2020. Pg.201

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ariel, Yaakov. "Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius: The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 1967–1977." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 2 (2003): 139-65. Pg.143.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. Pgs.140-141.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid. Pg.142.

egalitarian, and innovative line.”<sup>239</sup> This pursuit eventually brought Carlebach to the home of 1960s counterculture: California.

“Carlebach is widely remembered as first asserting himself in the Northern California community at the 1966 Berkeley Folk Music Festival at the Hearst Greek Theatre.”<sup>240</sup> As the festival grew so did Carlebach’s exposure and influence, eventually leading to the creation of a new community in San Francisco: The House of Love and Prayer. The HLP “operated as a semi-commune,” in addition to serving as a gathering place for Shabbat and the holidays and a free-hostel for young Jews and non-Jews alike.<sup>241</sup> It was a place for experimentation of all kinds, heavily influenced by the meeting of Neo-Hasidism and the counterculture, members designed their own dress and religious articles; eschewed the ‘traditional’ Eastern European tunes for worship, opting instead for Carlebach’s music “which amalgamated traditional Hasidic music with country and rock music.” They also expressed themselves in their cuisine, “aim[ing] to do justice to both the Jewish tradition and hippie cuisine” with vegetarian, macrobiotic recipes.<sup>242</sup> The HLP also was much more outwardly permissive of social behaviors which would have been considered unacceptable in other communities. There was acceptance of lesbian and gay members, though most remained in the closet; there was acceptance of premarital sexual relationships between committed partners; widespread drug use, especially of the psychedelic variety following a visit from Leary; and freedom to adopt practices from a diversity of religious traditions.<sup>243</sup> “The HLP, with its unique and colorful characters,

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid. Pg.143.

<sup>240</sup> Giller, Pinchas. "Chapter 12 Shlomo Carlebach on the West Coast". In *Kabbalah in America*, edited by Brian Ogren 199-210. Boston, MA: Brill, 2020. Pg.202.

<sup>241</sup> Ariel, Yaakov. "Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius: The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 1967–1977." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 2 (2003): 139-65. 145.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. Pg.146.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. Pg.150.

stirred strong reactions among Jews. The reactions to the neo-Hasidic movement pointed to the manner in which American Jews looked upon themselves and the style of Judaism they considered appropriate. Many objected both to Hasidic Judaism, which they saw as anachronistic, and to the hippie culture, which they viewed as “unruly.”<sup>244</sup>

While Carlebach and Schachter did not live in the house themselves, the members looked to them as their spiritual leaders. “Carlebach and Schachter presented the Hasidic tradition as the opposite of a dead or haunted tradition. In order to do so, they modified the Hasidic lore and accommodated it to the values of the new generation, reinventing and reshaping the tradition along the way.”<sup>245</sup>

In addition to musical and communal innovations, Carlebach and Schachter-Shalomi also used the model of the Hasidic tale to deliver their message. They put their New Age, countercultural values into the mouths of the original Hasidic masters as a means of connecting the congregation to an expression of Judaism which was congruous with their values. Their stories painted an optimistic vision for humanity based on the essential goodness and generosity of people, even when they do not realize it.<sup>246</sup> Carlebach was particularly interested in Nachman of Bratslav and saw him as particularly applicable to his work with otherwise disengaged Jews, “I reached the conclusion,” Carlebach asserted, “that the teachings of Rabbi Nahman were excellent to bring nonreligious persons to Judaism. He has a spiritual magnitude that goes straight to the soul.”<sup>247</sup> Schachter-Shalomi developed his own model of “Hasidic psychotherapy” which

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid. Pg.152.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. Pg.148.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid. Pg.149.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

melded psychotherapeutic exercises with Hasidic ones in order to alleviate pain and suffering in one's life and was recognized as psychologically beneficial.<sup>248</sup>

In 1974, following a number of religious disagreements in the HLP, Carlebach and Schachter-Shalomi officially parted ways as their spiritual paths continued to diverge. Schachter-Shalomi was increasingly progressive in his vision for Neo-Hasidism, emphasizing feminism, environmentalism, and openness to other religions that included borrowing from them; his disciples went on to establish the Aquarian Minyan in Berkeley.<sup>249</sup> Carlebach wished to remain within the fold of Orthodox Judaism and so was reluctant to join Schachter-Shalomi in his new endeavors. The split between Schachter-Shalomi and Carlebach was a harbinger to the split in Neo-Hasidism into two streams: one which was increasingly progressive and inclusive especially in regards to borrowing from other cultures and traditions, and another which operated within a more traditionalist framework which could remain grounded in Jewish Orthodox society. Despite the efforts of this latter stream to resuscitate and coalesce around Carlebach's image, it remains tainted due to harassment testimonies which came to light after his death. "Carlebach is now decried for his sexual incontinence, it was perhaps his emotional incontinence that has remained a salient element in the Jewish community."<sup>250</sup> This description as well as many more of the particularities and complexities of Carlebach's life and work are further explicated in Shaul Magid's chapter on the subject in *A New Hasidism: Branches*.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid. Pg.153.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. Pg.155.

<sup>250</sup> Giller, Pinchas. "Chapter 12 Shlomo Carlebach on the West Coast" 199-210. In *Kabbalah in America*, edited by Brian Ogren. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020. Pg.209.

<sup>251</sup> Magid, Shaul. "Shlomo Carlebach: A Transnational Jew in Search of Himself". In *A New Hasidism: Branches*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society. Pgs.339-356.

## Chapter 4 Revitalize and Revolutionize

In my conversation with Rabbi Art Green, he reflected on the early 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon of the creation of a new term—“mainstream Judaism”—which he described as “wholly incompatible with Jewish tradition and which, even today offers neither a substantive descriptive fidelity to Jewish practice, nor a sensical translation into Hebrew.”<sup>252</sup> The idealized “mainstream,” created by the Reformers of that age as well as their Neo-Orthodox opponents, was developed in order to draw lines of religious belonging that were in keeping with the Deist and liberal Protestant (who were among the first groups to accept Jews into Western European society) conceptions thereof to the exclusion of the mystical tradition, and Hasidism specifically. The Jewish mystical tradition, unlike Jewish Prophetic ethics and legal theory, did not fit neatly into the “leaving the ghetto moment of creating Jewish Modernity.”<sup>253</sup> Despite the venerable efforts and endeavors of early neo-Hasidism to reintegrate the wisdom of Jewish mysticism in a copacetic fashion, the gatekeepers of institutional Judaism stymied their efforts. Even though Buber and Heschel taught at bastions of Jewish institutional education, they were disallowed from transmitting their ideas of potential mystical applications to the modern lives of their students. Buber was stonewalled by Scholem’s academicization of Jewish mysticism which defined it as a set of past phenomena rather than future possibilities. Heschel, during his tenure at JTS, was able to teach on Maimonides and Judah Halevi to the entirety of the student body, but Hasidism—being

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<sup>252</sup> Interview with Rabbi Arthur Green, January 8, 2021.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid. Jacob Katz writes in his 1998 book, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation 1770-1870*, that the exodus from the ghetto was not a singular moment but rather occurred “in fits and starts.”

considered “not mainstream Judaism”—could only be taught on his own time to a small seminar of students in his office.

Despite the continued engagement with the mystical tradition in numerous ways (some of which is discussed in previous chapters of this work), it was not until the 1980s that there was mass renewed scholarly and layperson interest in recapturing the Jewish mystical tradition. “We felt we lost something vital, it might even be the soul of Judaism.”<sup>254</sup> Green credits this movement towards mysticism with the failure of scientism in the wake of the horrors of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Communism.<sup>255</sup> In attempting to recover the spiritual essence of the human experience, particularly in Judaism in a postmodern world, there is a necessary reworking of spiritual wisdom in light of scientific and historical truths which bring old frameworks to something of a dead end. Not so, however, with the mystical tradition which is concerned with the internal lives and journeys of individuals. “Mysticism, after all, is an attitude towards religion which believes that everything is about the direct inward encounter with God...*devekut* (cleaving to God) is the goal of religion and the whole religion is there to bring you to *devekut* or *yihud* (unification with God).”<sup>256</sup>

The neo-mysticism which Green and others espouse is engaged in metaphorizing key themes of Judaism like creation and revelation so that they can resonate in today’s reality. “The question is not ‘were the Israelites ever in Egypt’...the question is ‘have you escaped from your Egypt?’”<sup>257</sup> The neo-mystical language of creation is of particular

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<sup>254</sup> Interview with Rabbi Arthur Green, January 8, 2021.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.



interest to Green, who considers the environment the issue of our time, insofar as it has the potential to reorient us towards a different, healthier relationship with our planet:

The contemporary religion we articulate will need to be based upon a fully nature-embracing spirituality, one that sees the divine presence as embodied within the physical world...A creation-inflected spirituality means that we celebrate the divine presence within all of God's creatures, however we spell out the details of that presence. A sense of spirituality is precisely that which brings us closer to an appreciation of nature and a sense of awe before its wonders.<sup>258</sup>

In the Reform movement, thanks in large part to the influence of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner as well as the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS), rabbis have had exposure to mystical practices and been empowered to bring them back (with varying degrees of success) to their communities, precipitating a new attitude towards the mystical tradition within the movement. Rabbi Jonathan Slater, reflecting on the founding of IJS, writes:

For too long most modern Jews had ignored the rich mystical tradition within Judaism, despite its potential to offer an alternative to ethnic-tribal Jewish identity, and despite that its teachings and practices could serve as a powerful antidote to the stale intellectualized rationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (i.e. High Reform and the Wissenschaft approaches to study and practice). It was time to bring a practice-based, spiritually informed orientation to the American Jewish Community in a new form.<sup>259</sup>

The mission of IJS is not dissimilar to that of Zeitlin and the framers of neo-Hasidism. In effect, each was an endeavor to shake off the dust and arise anew and awash with spiritual vision. Both hoped to meet the needs of the Jews in their own contexts. In a letter describing his vision for Yavneh, the idyllic, devotional community discussed in

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<sup>258</sup> Arthur Green, *Judaism for the World: Reflections on God, Life, and Love* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020] 269

<sup>259</sup> Jonathan P. Slater, "Neo-Hasidism for Today's Jewish Seeker: A Personal Reflection". Essay in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, edited by Ariel Evan Mayse and Arthur Green, 271-293 [Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society] 271

Chapter 2, Zeitlin writes, envisions infusing contemporary Jewish life with the freshness, vitality, and joyful attachment to God precipitated by the Besht in his own day and age.<sup>260</sup>

### A Path Forward

This is, in effect, my vision for the incorporation of elements of Neo-Hasidism into Reform thought and praxis as a means of continued reinvigoration of our contemporary spirituality. It is the infusion of mystical experience rather than merely the translation thereof. In the case of Hasidism, which was born out of a context quite unlike our own, translation is a requisite for experience. This is essentially the project of neo-Hasidism. However, as Nietzsche put it, “we need history for the sake of life and the sake of action and not for the sake of quietly retreating from life and from experience... it serves history only to the extent that it serves life.”<sup>261</sup> Buber, stripping Hasidism of certain elements which he thought disabled its integration into Modern sensibilities, is described by Rechnitzer as “partial translation” because it seeks to communicate ideas outside of their original context.<sup>262</sup> Buber’s own stated conception of the mission of the Hasidic masters was geared towards modern utilization, seeking to “illuminate deep dynamics of psychological life and to enrich one’s existence here and now in corporeal reality.”<sup>263</sup> This is a partial translation, because it is “according to the style, concepts, mood, and meaning” of modernity and “opens the modern person to a state of amazement in the face of the miraculous in one’s life.”<sup>264</sup> Similarly, the “radical amazement”

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<sup>260</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.XV.

<sup>261</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life.” 1874.

<sup>262</sup> Rechnitzer, Haim. “מהמילה לצליל – שירת הפיוט כהיפוך פרדיגמה פדגוגית בהוראת מחשבת ישראל” Pg.6. Article forthcoming.

<sup>263</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.61.

<sup>264</sup> Rechnitzer, Haim. “מהמילה לצליל – שירת הפיוט כהיפוך פרדיגמה פדגוגית בהוראת מחשבת ישראל” Pg.21. Article Forthcoming.

described by Heschel is a partial translation which has immediate relevance and applicability to individuals' contemporary experiences. The postmodern ability for cognitive diffusion (de-literalization) is capable of translating these insights into terms and settings which work for contemporary seekers.<sup>265</sup>

Neo-Hasidism is compatible with the ethos of the Reform movement, as well as helpful in providing a wealth of spiritual technologies which can reinvigorate Reform spirituality and practice. Kahn, referencing the postmodern reexamination of modernity and the questions it has either failed to answer or exacerbated, said, "Kabbalah and Hasidut are what the people need, so that's what we give them."<sup>266</sup> He uses Reb Zalman's, *Jewish with Feeling*, in a number of the courses he teaches at Temple Emanuel in New York City.<sup>267</sup> Green's conception of Hasidism's beginnings is essentially a "revival movement," reintroducing new passion and concern for individuals' inner lives into traditional Jewish forms of religiosity; neo-Hasidism thereby seeks spontaneity and spiritual expression precipitated by "deep connections to Jewish sources."<sup>268</sup> This sort of deep connection is only possible if, as Green envisions, Reform Judaism facilitates serious intellectual engagement for adult learners, "making the synagogue back into a *beit midrash* (house of study) and not just a *beit tefilla* (house of worship)."<sup>269</sup> In doing so, by disseminating spirituality which has political and interpersonal implications, Reform Judaism can continue to perpetuate its ideal models of social engagement with revitalized and re-spiritualized dedication. Heschel, in particular, is a model for

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<sup>265</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.XXII.

<sup>266</sup> Interview with Rabbi Andree Kahn, January 11, 2021.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Interview with Rabbi Arthur Green, January 8, 2021.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

incorporating Neo-Hasidism into the Reform movement because he has already had such dramatic influence on the movement's conception of Judaism's social justice imperatives. Even when his ideas might seem incongruous with the lives some Reform Jews lead, he is a universally respected representative of spiritual striving whose language penetrates even the most-hardened hearts. Perhaps the most readily applicable aspect of Heschel's Neo-Hasidic thought, which was lived out over the course of his time in America, is his conviction in terms of the necessity of Jewish involvement in the social justice issues of the day. The Reform movement has already taken up the language of *Tikkun Olam* in describing its social justice endeavors, and so a deeper understanding of, and involvement with, Jewish mystical thought and expression could produce the sort of Jewish-inspired activism which the movement has sought to perpetuate through various arms of the organization.

While neither neo-Hasidism nor Reform Judaism can be contained within the exclusive domain of liberal-leftist ideology, the Heschelian social-justice imperatives described in the previous chapter are central to its incorporation to Reform ideology. Neo-Hasidism is beyond the bounds of any one denomination, a fact in which Green takes great pride, but, he also says, "there are political implications to the spiritual message...The two primary ones for me are *zelem Elohim* (humanity's quality of being made 'in the image of God') and everything that derives from that, racial equality, ethnical equality, providing a decent livelihood for people, feeding the hungry, and everything else...and preservation of the planet, the ethic that comes out of *Bereshit* (Genesis) and creation theology."<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Arthur Green, Interview January 8, 2021

In recognition of this latter implication, as an example for how neo-Hasidism can be incorporated into Reform practice in a meaningful way, Green describes reinstituting the recitation of the *Ma'amadot* (reading the Biblical account detailing the particular day of creation on that given day) at the conclusion of every service, culminating with the preamble (*vayichulu ha-shamayim*) to the Kiddush on Friday night, “as a statement of commitment to our responsibility to the created world.”<sup>271</sup> In the course of my interview with Green, he remembered how Steven Schwartzschild (1924-1989), Arnold Jacob Wolf (1924-2008), and Eugene Borowitz (1924-2016), preeminent scholars within the Reform movement were vehemently opposed to the neo-mystical endeavors of Kushner and himself saying, “this spirituality is a distraction from the real issues, that are social justice issues, Prophetic Judaism issues, and will lead people away from activism.”<sup>272</sup> Rabbis like Kahn within the Reform Movement bear testament to the shift away from this notion, citing figures such Rabbi Arthur Waskow as demonstrative of how Prophetic Judaism can be lived in intimate connection to neo-Hasidism still today.<sup>273</sup> Heschel, however, is the example par excellence of how Prophetic Judaism can be simultaneously lived from a neo-Hasidic lens, but Green also provides a framework for a “Radical Judaism” which meets the pressing contemporary need,

Radical Judaism means a reframing of our contemporary perspective on the great questions, a leap forward that shows we are not afraid to be challenged by contemporary reality, while we remain devoted to hearing the greater challenge of God’s voice calling out “Where are you?” anew in our age. This means a Judaism that takes seriously its own claims of ongoing Creation and revelation, even as it recognizes all the challenges to them...This is the moment for radical Judaism. We understand that all God can do is call out to us, now and always. All we can do is respond – or not. The consequence of our failure will be monumental. God is indeed

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid. Also discussed in his book *Judaism for the World*, pg.263.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Interview with Rabbi Andru Kahn, January 11, 2021.

in need of humans; and we humans are in need of guidance, seeking out the hand of a divine Partner, one who “speaks” from deep within the heart, but also from deep within our tradition and its wisdom.<sup>274</sup>

In my own desire for a radical Judaism which meets the pressing demands of our time, I offer now some additional models for integration of neo-Hasidic wisdom according to the five essential teachings of Hasidism posited by Green and Mayse in *A New Hasidism: Roots*.

1. “All existence is radiant with divine presence.”<sup>275</sup> Any perceived differentiations between ourselves and the world we inhabit are essentially superficial. There is no reality outside of the God of all being; no existence beyond the indwelling Divine Presence.<sup>276</sup>
2. “The discovery and uplifting of sparks of divine energy, even in the most unlikely places, is an essential religious task.”<sup>277</sup>
3. Torah (in the broadest and narrowest sense) is the catalyst for discovering the divine because it is itself an embodiment of God’s own self in much the same way as the human soul.
4. Our human task includes the process of shaping ourselves and our actions towards becoming more perfect vessels of God’s service. All moral growth is rooted in the sanctification of love and fear as primary devotional pathways to God.
5. The cultivation of the personage of the tsaddik, who is defined by their embodiment of these teachings as well as prescribed middot, is “the great goal of Hasidic teaching.”

#### A Neo-Hasidic Educational Model: Songs, Stories, and Psychedelics

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<sup>274</sup> Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010] 163, 166

<sup>275</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.XIX.

<sup>276</sup> Deuteronomy 4:35

<sup>277</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.XX.

In his 1961 op-ed, “*Martin Buber’s Hasidism*,” Gershom Scholem derides

Buber’s wielding of Hasidism:

A critical analysis of Buber’s interpretation of Hasidism has to confront certain special difficulties at the very outset. The biggest is that Buber, although a keen student of Hasidic literature, does not write as a scholar citing chapter and verse for his contentions. He combines facts and quotations as suits his purpose, which is to present Hasidism as a spiritual phenomenon and not as a historical one... the merits of Buber’s presentation of Hasidic sayings and legends are very great indeed and will to a large extent stand the test of time. But the spiritual message he has read into them in his more mature works is too deeply bound up with assumptions that have no root in the texts—assumptions drawn from his own very modern philosophy of religious anarchism. Too much is left out in his presentation of Hasidism, while what has been included is overloaded with highly personal speculations. These may be of a sublime character and they may appeal deeply to the modern mind, but if we are searching for an understanding of the actual phenomenon of Hasidism, both in its grandeur and its decay (which in many ways are bound together), we shall, I am afraid, have to start all over again.<sup>278</sup>

Like many scholars, Scholem was more concerned with the explication of Hasidism than the experience thereof. Buber, and neo-Hasidism generally, does not seek fidelity to Hasidic ideals for their own sake, rather as a means to deliver the spiritual experience enabled thereby. Doing so in the Reform context is, in many ways, possible through educational modalities which are already being employed in our communities. The educational models of engagement through stories and song promote an experiential scaffolding for grafting on neo-Hasidic ideas which might, on their face, seem difficult to incorporate. In an interview, Rechnitzer suggests a model, of sonorous community as a methodology of religious education envisions engagement with texts and ideas at a pre-intellectual level of experience itself and thereby bypasses intellectual resistance and

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<sup>278</sup> Gershom Scholem, “*Martin Buber’s Hasidism*” *Commentary Magazine* [October 1961]

stigmatization.<sup>279</sup> Song also has the ability to touch people's hearts in accordance with their uniqueness, as described by Rabbi Nachman.<sup>280</sup>

Scholem's critique of Buber is not without its merits – although Rachel White cogently points out that he had his own intellectual baggage which precludes an assessment of his work as “pure scholarship”<sup>281</sup> – but Buber's response is demonstrative of his, and neo-Hasidism's true goal, to “recapture a sense of the power that once gave it [Hasidism] the power to take hold of and vitalize the life of a diverse class of people.”<sup>282</sup> In this sense, Buber's employment of the Hasidic tale as a means of delivering his philosophical and psychological sensibilities is not unlike the ways by which the original Hasidic masters did. In the previous chapter it was made clear that later neo-Hasidic leaders also made use of the Hasidic tale format in their own ways towards their own ends. Just so, as Reform rabbis, cantors, and educators can utilize Hasidic tales in teaching, not only gnosis, but lessons according to interests and needs of their communities. For example, one could tell the following story in addressing the common anxiety of not having enough Jewish knowledge:

Rabbi Zusya used to say: “My mother Mirl, peace be with her, did not pray from the book, because she could not read. All she knew was how to say the blessings. But wherever she said the blessing in the morning, in that place the radiance of the Divine Presence rested the livelong day.”<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Interview with Professor Haim Rechnittzer, January 11, 2021.

<sup>280</sup> Likutei Moharan, Part II 63:1.

<sup>281</sup> White, Rachel. “Recovering the Past, Renewing the Present: The Buber-Scholem Controversy over Hasidism Reinterpreted.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14, no.4 (2007): 364-92. Pg.366.

<sup>282</sup> Buber, Martin. “Interpreting Hasidism.” *Commentary* 36 (September 1963), 218-225. Pg.218.

<sup>283</sup> Buber, Martin, and Chaim Potok. *Tales of the Hasidim*. Translated by Olga Marx. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1991. Pg.235.



Hasidic tales and songs have engaging relevance for all demographics and can be adapted to meet the needs of the teller as well as the audience. Reform Jews already have a degree of familiarity with some of these stories, but by expanding engagement to the full corpus (and by investing in creating new midrashic iterations in the style of the Hasidic tale) we can deepen connection to the underlying virtues we seek to transmit. The degree of the Hasidic tale's demonstration of "true" Hasidic theology is at the center of the debate between Buber and Scholem. Buber, relying on the legendary literature, claims that Hasidism hallows bodily life in the everyday; whereas Scholem, citing the theoretical literature, emphasized the non-selfness and "annihilation of being" and divine nothingness beyond materiality. Neo-Hasidism allows for us to hold both of these goals in mind in our striving for meaning-making.

In that process of meaning-making (only in accordance with the highest ethics and practices, an explication of which is beyond the scope of this work) it cannot be discounted that some spiritual seekers within Reform communities might find that psychedelics can be one among many tools that can be employed along one's spiritual journey. We know that, influenced by Timothy Leary, Ginsberg and the Neo-Hasidic rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi experimented with psychedelic drugs, advocating their use as a means for spiritual and intellectual growth."<sup>284</sup> Similarly, the use of entheogens is not necessarily inorganic to Hasidic tradition.<sup>285</sup> Elior describes the Ba'al Shem Tov,

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<sup>284</sup> Ariel, Yaakov. *Jewish Mysticism as a Universal Teaching: Allen Ginsberg's Relation to Kabbalah*. In *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren, 235–53. Boston, MA: Brill, 2020. Pg.188.

<sup>285</sup> Entheogen - a chemical substance, typically of plant origin, that is ingested to produce a non-ordinary state of consciousness for religious or spiritual purposes.

and other ba'alei shem, as “herbal healer[s] of the body and soul.”<sup>286</sup> In addition to his view on entheogens, which resonates in the lives of a significant number of Jewish adults in one way or another, Allen Ginsberg’s patchwork spirituality is also an informative model for the postmodern age. The incorporation of such substances must account for all health, safety, and legal considerations in the most diligent manner. Although Buber did not approve of the use of psychedelic drugs, the interest in their safe use persists, as is reflected by recent studies which have reported the immense potentiality, psychological and otherwise, of their safe use.<sup>287</sup>

Suffice it to say that utilizing these resources in concurrence with psychotherapy, various forms of meditation, breathing techniques, and like-practices with communal support under the proper circumstances with proper foresight and considerations could provide a framework for Jews to contextualize experiences that may become much more available to them in the coming years. “Both therapy and mysticism begin by redirecting attention to the one who asks the question. The beginning of the answer is not ‘out there but in here,’ in the very consciousness of the one who is looking.”<sup>288</sup> Green also describes inner awareness as the goal of the entire religious life.<sup>289</sup> Communal exploration of

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<sup>286</sup> Elior, Rachel. *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*. Translated by Shalom Carmy. Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006. Pg.133

<sup>287</sup> Researchers at the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research have demonstrated that Psilocybin (magic mushrooms) is an effective treatment for: Smoking cessation; Depression; Alzheimer’s disease; Anorexia Nervosa; and, in collaboration with NYU’s Grossman School of Medicine, “significant improvements in emotional and existential distress in people with cancer.” The Centre for Psychedelic Research at Imperial College London has also attested to the “capacity of psychedelics to (re)connect humanity to nature, for the potential betterment of humanity and the biosphere at large.”

<sup>288</sup> Kushner, Lawrence. *The River of Light: Spirituality, Judaism, and the Evolution of Consciousness*. New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1981. Pg.33.

<sup>289</sup> Green, Arthur. *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003. Pg.153.

individual consciousness is a powerful endeavor in the highly-individualized postmodern world. By destigmatizing their use and providing frameworks for integration, entheogens can provide healing and insight to many Reform Jews' lives and spiritual aspirations. It also serves as a means of making meaning out of experiences that people in Reform communities are already having.

[T]he main goal of these techniques is to develop flexibility of mind through association and disassociation...the ultimate aim of such techniques is psychological and reminiscent of hypnotic applications for disassociating from worries and narrow concerns.<sup>290</sup>

*In Notes from the Jewish Underground: On Psychedelics and Kabbalah* (1968)

Green suggests that psychedelic drugs can offer the religious person a different perspective on the world, one that can aid development of spiritual insight; however, drugs cannot provide inspiration, rather they have the power to confirm experientially the descriptions of mystical insights widely found in the teachings of prior generations.

Members of the religious establishment have been too quick to say that any experience brought on by a drug is necessarily cheap. I rather tend to fear the opposite: to speak of psychedelic/mystic experience in terms familiar to religionists might indeed cheapen the experience.<sup>291</sup>

The theology of Hasidism, according to Green (a monist who conceives of Jewish faith in the one God as pointing to the oneness of all being) is more concerned with “a more profound rung of human consciousness rather than needing the ‘leap of faith’ requisite for theism.”<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Garb, Jonathan. *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pg.117.

<sup>291</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.294

<sup>292</sup> Ibid. Pgs.288-289

The degree to which entheogens played a role in the shamanic exploits of the original Hasidim is less clear than that of neo-Hasidim from the 1960s onward. “Idel has discussed at length the role of mystical ascent in the foundational experiences of the Besht, and from the Heikhalot literature onwards, ascent occurs frequently in a state of trance.”<sup>293</sup> This state of trance was often entered by way of practices, including but not limited to, those of Abraham Abulafia’s school of Prophetic Kabbalah which included the process of intellection (meditation on the Divine names) as a means of communion with the One. Whereas in the original formulation access to and knowledge of mystical practices (except by way of vicarious experience) was restricted to an elite circle. In the Durkheimian conception of communal religion individual consciousness can become, “sui generis of particular consciousness,” through “ritual activity and mythological thought,” resulting in collective consciousness.<sup>294</sup> This collective consciousness, expressed by Buber as “true meeting” in *I am Thou* is only possible by way of self-effacement. Neo-Hasidism’s methodologies of cultivating individuals’ capacity to engage in spiritual experiences which were formerly within the express domain of the elite is, along with disseminating mystical knowledge through stories and song, an example of neo-Hasidism’s building on the democratization of mystical-spiritual experience started by the Besht. Through the re-mystification of Jewish practice within the Reform movement, it is possible to sow “radical amazement” into the soil of the lives of postmodern American Jewry.

### Rediscovering Obligation and Mussar

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<sup>293</sup> Garb, Jonathan. *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pgs.99-100.

<sup>294</sup> Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. London, U.K.: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 2012. Pg.424.

In Kahn's words, "I don't want people to do mitzvot because they think it will bring moshiach. I want people to do mitzvot because it is going to make their lives better."<sup>295</sup> Once existentially aware of the inherent interconnectedness of the world and its inhabitants, it is incumbent on every person to work for the betterment thereof and of themselves. However, as Mayse cogently articulates, "There is no one single path or ubiquitous model of Neo-Hasidic halakhah, reflecting the fact that Neo-Hasidism has no dogmatic theology, universal standards of practice, or centralized leadership."<sup>296</sup> As such, neo-Hasidic thinkers had varying relationships to halakhah; Zeitlin heavily incorporated obligation and traditional practice into his idealized Yavneh community, whereas Buber remained purposefully detached therefrom. Neo-Hasidism's conception of halakhah and mitzvot is not necessarily connected to performance of traditional rites. Rather obligation and commandment are refracted through the prism of individual meaning-making and desire to connect to God: "*Mitzvah* is thus understood as related to the Aramaic word *tsavta*, or "connection," as frequently claimed in Hasidic sources. The Commandments set the bond between the worshipper and the Divine, and performing these sacred deeds makes it possible to step beyond one's ordinary consciousness and into the dimension of the holy."<sup>297</sup>

In this respect the Reform Movement has demonstrated its own connection to commanded-ness in the steadfast commitment to its own conception of *Tikkun Olam* which is inherent to the identities of many Reform communities and how they

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<sup>295</sup> Interview with Rabbi Andree Kahn, January 11, 2021.

<sup>296</sup> Mayse, Ariel Evan. "Neo-Hasidism and Halakhah." Essay in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, edited by author and Arthur Green, 155-222. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.158.

<sup>297</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pg.167.

demonstrate their religious affiliations. In the previous chapter, the neo-Hasidic social justice obligation, as formulated and exemplified by Heschel, was articulated in connection to its applicability to Reform spirituality and practice. Through re-mystification of that practice, *Tikkun Olam* takes on a cosmic dimension which could serve to make performance of actions undertaken in pursuit of social justice meaningful within a religious framework in such a way that inspires connection to that framework. Just so, one's morality is solely demonstrated by political activism despite political action and religious action being intrinsically connected.

Mussar was important to Hasidism from the beginning, as is demonstrated by its invocation in the Tza'avat HaRivash, "It is essential to study Mussar every day, whether much or little."<sup>298</sup> In accordance with the fifth essential teaching of Green and Mayse above, I believe tomorrow's neo-Hasidism should also include a deep engagement with the discipline of Mussar in order to craft and perpetuate a standard of ethical comportment commensurate with the gravity of moral engagement with the self and the world at large. By way of example, I offer this Ethical Will, written according to the principles of Mussar and neo-Hasidism:

My child,  
hear the discipline of your father,  
and do not forsake your mother's teachings.<sup>299</sup>  
My highest aspiration is that you will be a mensch,  
a human being.  
I want you to find your own particular way because,  
as the Ba'al Shem Tov taught,  
every person must conduct themselves according to their own rung on the ladder of life.  
Otherwise,  
the one who sacrifices their climb to grasp for their neighbor's rung –

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<sup>298</sup> Schochet, Jacob Immanuel. *Tzava'at Harivash: The Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*. New York, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1998. Pg.1.

<sup>299</sup> Proverbs 1:8.

realizes neither their own potential nor the other's.<sup>300</sup>  
 To be nobody-but-yourself-  
 in a world which is doing its best,  
 night and day,  
 to make you everybody but yourself-  
 means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight,  
 and never stop fighting.<sup>301</sup>  
 However,  
 it is human nature to miss the mark.  
 We are frail and full of fault.  
 Even so,  
 our potential is limitless.  
 Rav Kook taught:  
 life itself,  
 in its natural drive for self-perfection,  
 moves us towards ultimate, unifying, universal consummation.<sup>302</sup>  
 Even when I am gone,  
 I hope that this wisdom will continue to guide you.  
 I shall stay alive,  
 because above all things  
 you wanted me indomitable,  
 and, my love, because you know that I am not only a man  
 but all mankind.<sup>303</sup>  
 Take these instructions that I charge you with today,  
 impress them upon your own children,  
 meditate on them,  
 with all your heart, and mind, and soul  
 let them live in your every deed.<sup>304</sup>  
 There is no division between God and all that is.<sup>305</sup>  
 Therefore, beloved,  
 like an illuminating flame,  
 you must endeavor to realize the inherent holiness in every moment.

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<sup>300</sup> Buber, Martin. *The Way of Man: According to Hasidic Teaching*, trans. Bernard H. Mehlman and Gabriel E. Padawer (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012).

<sup>301</sup> Cummings, E.E. "A Poet's Advice to Students." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. Vol.12, issue 2, pg.75. 1972.

<sup>302</sup> Ben Zion Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems* (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>303</sup> Neruda, Pablo. "La Muerta." Translated from Spanish by Paul Weinfield, 2015.

<sup>304</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid. 4:35.

Beyond imitatio dei,  
 know that you,  
 and all beings,  
 are imbued with divine sparks.  
 The act of lifting up these sparks is holy work.  
 But *Tikkun Olam* begins with *Tikkun Atzmi*.  
 Therefore,  
 I impart to you this *Musar*,  
 these *middot*,  
 measures which can guide you.  
 But remember, dear one,  
 every human being has one's own disposition.  
 There will be those virtues which enter your heart with ease,  
 and those which require more devoted cultivation.  
 Do not be dismayed by your own nature.  
 Like a gardener,  
 tend the soil of your soul.  
 Plant that which will sustain you.  
 Weed that which will not.  
 But, as Maimonides warns,  
 the extreme of any measure is not good.<sup>306</sup>

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*Anavah*

Companion of my soul,  
 the foundational *middah* is that of humility.  
 Humility is the virtue of virtues,  
 the most important aspect of ethical comportment.<sup>307</sup>  
 Moses, our teacher,  
 who merited speaking to God *panim el panim*,  
 is your archetype for this *middah*.<sup>308</sup>  
 If you are humble it will be reflected,  
 as the moon reflects the sun,  
 in your every action;  
 for humility is found in every divine emanation.<sup>309</sup>  
 Humility is fertile soil for compassion and tzedakah,

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<sup>306</sup> Maimonides. *Mishneh Torah* 1:6

<sup>307</sup> Moses Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah*, chapter 1, pg.184.

<sup>308</sup> Hayyim Vital, *Sha'arei Qedushah*, Part 2, Gate 4, pg.65.

<sup>309</sup> Fine, Lawrence. *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety: The Beginning of Wisdom* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984). Pg.117.



and the deference you show for your fellow is ascribed as if it was shown to the Divine.<sup>310</sup>

One who humbles one's self, the Holy One, blessed be, exalts.<sup>311</sup>

If you wish to cleave your individual will to God's universal will,  
you must practice the same *simsum* which made room for you in the first place;  
therefore, know that humility is a prerequisite.<sup>312</sup>

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (whom Maimonides would describe as a Hasid) says:  
the general matter of humility is for a person not to attribute importance to one's self.<sup>313</sup>

Know,  
humility is dependent both on thought and deed.<sup>314</sup>  
For an action without the proper intention is vapid.<sup>315</sup>  
In order to help you find your middle path towards humility,  
I remind you of the teaching of Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Peshischa:  
every person should carry two pieces of paper,  
one in each pocket.

In one pocket the note should read,  
“for my sake the world was created.”

In the other pocket,  
“I am but dust and ashes.”  
In moments of haughtiness,  
remember the words of the latter pocket.  
In moments of self-doubt,  
recall the letter of the former pocket.<sup>316</sup>

Be humble,  
for the Holy One created the world in total equality.<sup>317</sup>

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*Tzedakah*

Dear one,  
the world was left unfinished for your sake.  
It is full of need,  
material and otherwise.

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid. Pgs.118-120.

<sup>311</sup> Babylonian Talmud. Eruvin 13b.

<sup>312</sup> Krassen, Miles. *Isaiah Horowitz: The Generations of Adam* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1996). Pgs.14-16.

<sup>313</sup> Moshe Chaim Luzzato, *Mesillat Yesharim*, 22:2

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. 22:3

<sup>315</sup> Israel Ben Eliezer. *Tzava'at Harivash: the Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*, trans. Jacob Immanuel Schochet (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2016). Pg.26 (section 43).

<sup>316</sup> Buber, Martin. *The Way of Man: According to Hasidic Teaching*, trans. Bernard H. Mehlman and Gabriel E. Padawer (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012).

<sup>317</sup> Israel Ben Eliezer. *Tzava'at Harivash: the Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*, trans. Jacob Immanuel Schochet (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2016). Pg.6 (section 12).

Therefore, I say to you,  
 justice, justice shall you pursue.<sup>318</sup>  
 Unlock the fetters of wickedness,  
 untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free;  
 break off every yoke.  
 share your bread with the hungry,  
 take the needy into your home;  
 when you see the naked,  
 clothe them,  
 and do not ignore your own kin.<sup>319</sup>  
 Do not be dismayed by the enormity of the work,  
 for it is not upon you to complete it –  
 but remember –  
 neither are you free to desist from it.<sup>320</sup>  
 Celebrate your opportunity to engage in it,  
 for when the Holy One puts one who is in need on your path,  
 you are in the meritorious position to repair the world.<sup>321</sup>  
 As it is said:  
 humanity was born into the world an individual, Adam,  
 so as to teach us,  
 that one who saves a life,  
 saves the world entire.<sup>322</sup>  
 The middle path for this *middah* is clear.  
 Every day,  
 in every way you are able,  
 endeavor to make the world better according to your station and abilities.  
 The arc of the moral universe is long,  
 but it bends towards justice;<sup>323</sup>  
 but only if there is a steadfast commitment to see the task through to completion.<sup>324</sup>  
 Happy is one who takes on this mantle with a kind face!<sup>325</sup>

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*Chesed and Rachamim*

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<sup>318</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20

<sup>319</sup> Isaiah 58:6-7

<sup>320</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:16

<sup>321</sup> Fishbane, Eitan P. *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018). Pg.308. *Zohar* 1:104a

<sup>322</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

<sup>323</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. “*Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.*” (Speech given at the National Cathedral, Washington D.C. March 31, 1968.)

<sup>324</sup> Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Oral dissent in Supreme Court Case, *Shelby County v. Holder*, pg.24

<sup>325</sup> Fishbane, Eitan P. *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018). Pg.309. *Zohar* 2:198a

Beloved,  
 when God passed before Moses he proclaimed:  
 Adonai, Adonai!  
 God of compassion and grace,  
 slow to anger,  
 abundant in loving-kindness and faithfulness,  
 extending loving-kindness to all,  
 forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.<sup>326</sup>  
 Dearest,  
 incorporate these Godly attributes into your life.  
 Be like our ancestor Joseph,  
 despite everything,  
 it was not enough for him to resist the urge to do evil to his brothers –  
 he had compassion on them –  
 he behaved towards them with goodness and righteousness.<sup>327</sup>  
 Know that compassion and loving-kindness are never-ending.<sup>328</sup>  
 They are wells which never run dry.  
 Care for one another – we are one.<sup>329</sup>  
 Rabbi Moshe Cordovero teaches:  
 in every one is a piece of the other,  
 therefore, your fellow's happiness and honor should be as dear to you as your own.<sup>330</sup>  
 Love your neighbor as yourself,<sup>331</sup>  
 and, that which is hateful to you, do not to another  
 Our sages teach that these are the central tenets of the Torah.<sup>332</sup>  
 If there should be *middot* with which your cup runs over,  
 let it be these.  
 See what is needed,  
 and give it in such a way so as to lessen the burden of its acceptance.<sup>333</sup>  
 For then goodness and steadfast love will pursue you all your days,  
 and you will dwell in God's house evermore.<sup>334</sup>

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*Kedushah*

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<sup>326</sup> Exodus 34:6-7

<sup>327</sup> Fishbane, Eitan P. *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018). Pg.291. *Zohar* 1:201b

<sup>328</sup> Lamentations 3:22

<sup>329</sup> Alan Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day: 365 Days of Teachings and Practices from the Jewish Tradition of Mussar* (Boston, MA: Trumpeter, 2010). Pg.113.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid. pg.114

<sup>331</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>332</sup> Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a and Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 30b

<sup>333</sup> Shlomo Wolbe. *'Aleí Shur*, chapter 14

<sup>334</sup> Psalm 23:6

You shall be holy, for Adonai your God is holy.<sup>335</sup>  
 But, be wary not to espouse yourself as holier than any thou.  
 For every thou is an emanation of the Eternal Thou.<sup>336</sup>  
 Through your complete presence, your sanctification of Thou,  
 you yourself are also sanctified.<sup>337</sup>  
 Presence transcends the physical,  
 you must cleave to God at all times.<sup>338</sup>  
 This is the service of God as laid out in the 5<sup>th</sup> gate of the Duties of the Heart.  
 Your motives should all be for the sake of heaven,  
 equanimity, *hishtavut*, will guide your way.<sup>339</sup>  
 Learn from Bahya ben Asher's commentary on *Kedoshim* and Plato's allegory of the  
 chariot,  
 Master, but do not exile, your *Yetzer*.  
 Holiness is a process.  
 It begins with the self,  
 and ends with the self.  
 It is not transformation but rather acknowledgement,  
 of that which is inherent to all that is.  
 Recognize that the nature of all things tends towards unification.  
 Acknowledgement of this fact is the highest form of praise.  
 Transcendence of the self is fleeting,  
 it is not in our nature to sustain consciousness beyond our own.  
 Therefore, set a time every day to meditate,  
 train yourself in nature's dependent co-arising.<sup>340</sup>  
 Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,<sup>341</sup>  
 make it meaningful in your own way.  
 You are a piece of the cosmic puzzle,  
 unique and wholly consequential to the broader picture.  
 Rabbi Israel Salanter, may his memory be for a blessing,  
 is your role model for the middle-path for this middah;  
 in 1848, during a cholera epidemic,  
 on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur,  
 he put *pikuach nefesh* above ritual,  
 and publicly ate so as to enable others to do so.

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<sup>335</sup> Leviticus 19:2

<sup>336</sup> Buber, Martin. *I and Thou* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner and Sons Inc. 1958). Pg.48

<sup>337</sup> Moshe Chaim Luzzato. *Messilat Yesarim*, 26:1

<sup>338</sup> Psalms 16:8

<sup>339</sup> Israel Ben Eliezer. *Tzava'at Harivash: the Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*, trans. Jacob Immanuel Schochet (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2016). Pg.6 (section 12). Pg.2 (section 2).

<sup>340</sup> Buddhist concept of Pratītyasamutpāda

<sup>341</sup> Exodus 20:8

This is the matter of holiness,  
if it oppresses humanity rather than elevating it,  
it is not holiness.

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*T'shuvah*

My child,

I know that all that has preceded this exceeds your grasp,  
but it is within your reach.<sup>342</sup>

Every person is endowed with free will,  
everyone can reach out towards the good path.<sup>343</sup>

It is clear, by way of Scripture and Reason, a human being falls short of one's duty to the  
One.<sup>344</sup>

Penitence is an acknowledgement of and commitment to the never-ending pursuit of  
perfection.<sup>345</sup>

the pursuit of "absolute justice," is dependent on the perfection of all moral virtues,  
it is core to Judaism's soul and purpose.<sup>346</sup>

Rav Kook taught:

penitence emerges from the depths of being,  
from such great depths that the individual existence becomes one with universal  
existence.<sup>347</sup>

Rabbi Jacob said:

more precious is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world,  
than all life in the world to come.<sup>348</sup>

But do not delay repentance a single hour,  
for no one knows the hour of one's death.<sup>349</sup>

Rabbi Hama bar Hanina taught:

Great is repentance, for it brings healing into the world.<sup>350</sup>

Repair the world,

dear one,

and begin with repairing yourself.

Remember the words of Rabbi Israel Salanter:

"When I was a young man,

I wanted to change the world.

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<sup>342</sup> Browning, Robert. "Andrea del Sarto." Poem published in 1855

<sup>343</sup> Maimonides. *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Maddah*, Chapter 5

<sup>344</sup> Bahya ibn Pekuda. *Duties of the Heart*, Introduction to 7<sup>th</sup> Treatise on Repentance.

<sup>345</sup> Ben Zion Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems* (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 1995). Pg.25

<sup>346</sup> Ibid. Pg.50

<sup>347</sup> Ibid. Pg.56

<sup>348</sup> Pirkei Avot 4:17

<sup>349</sup> Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 153a

<sup>350</sup> Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86a

But I found it was difficult to change the world,  
so I tried to change my country.  
When I found I couldn't change my country,  
I began to focus on my town.  
However, I discovered that I couldn't change the town,  
and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family.  
Now, I am old,  
I realize the only thing I can change is myself,  
but I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself,  
then I could have made an impact on my family.  
And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town.  
And that, in turn, could have changed the country  
and we could all indeed have changed the world."

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This is my will to you,  
greater than all of my possessions.  
Should you wish to feel close to me,  
undertake the performance of these *middot*.  
Should you struggle,  
know that I also struggled.  
Should you find success,  
know that there is always room to grow.  
Life ends.  
But our souls are eternal.  
To know one,  
seek the Eternal One.  
As for me:  
look for me in the spray of the ocean;  
in every child you see with eyes full of hope;  
in the song of the wind,  
whispered by each blade of grass;  
in the quiet of the evening;  
and in the rays of the morning sun.  
I will be with you always:  
in success and failure and all the growth in between.  
Love doesn't die,  
People do.  
So, when all that's left of me  
Is love,  
Give me away.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Malloy, Merrit. "Epitaph"

### A Vision for a Neo-Hasidic Community of Tomorrow

By way of conclusion, I now set forth several key fundamental precepts of neo-Hasidism that have the potential to revitalize and revolutionize the experience of Judaism in contemporary Reform communities. First and foremost, the democratization of religious and spiritual practice. Rather than the clergy being the arbiters of religiosity, they should cultivate partnerships so that every individual has an active role in worship. This democratization is, in many respects, aligned with the primary purpose of Hasidism, to disseminate previously elitist material for the sake of the spiritual uplift of the masses. The process of doing so must honor the full spectrum of the community's diversity in a covenantal manner. Individuals in the community must be given the tools and space to engage with praxis in ways that are meaningful to them, and informed by the vast sea of tradition which is available to them. Beyond worship, the community must be enabled to see their everyday performance of mundanity as spiritual work unto itself. The holiness of every deed, from worship to whistling, should be recognized within the context of its divine potentiality.

In order to facilitate this, not only does the standard of Jewish education need to be raised, but there should also be space created for ecstatic or otherwise spontaneous worship in accordance with the particular religious desires and abilities of community members. The cultivation of these abilities is a lifelong journey of exposure to, and experimentation with, a variety of forms of religious practice which, though rooted in and undertaken towards the advancement of Judaism, should include all worthwhile 'spiritual technologies' as defined by the seekers themselves. Rather than fearing or denigrating the power of other religious traditions, seekers must be empowered to assemble their own

working conception of what spirituality looks like in their lives. This self-conception should always be placed in dialogue with others so that the community creates a living spiritual identity which is reflective of its values and aspirations. Prayer must also be honored as an individual practice—through an engagement with various forms of *hitbodedut* (solitary meditative and prayerful practices often pursued in nature)—as well as a communal one.

In accordance with Green's formulation, the synagogue must become a *beit midrash* (study house) in addition to being a *beit tefillah* (house of prayer); moreover, in addendum, the synagogue must also become a *beit knessest* (house of meeting) and provide the basic infrastructures of a community center. In order to remain relevant in the lives of young Jews, the Reform movement must meet them where they are; whether in the chapel or on the basketball court. The confluence of these functions need not be paradoxical, for each one can inform the other so long as there is dedicated commitment to the advancement of each in its own right. None of these functions should be seen as superior to the other, rather each individually serves the single purpose of addressing the spiritual needs of the community. If any one of these functions is not sufficiently embodied by the community then it will miss the mark of inhabiting a central role in the spiritual and practical lives of its members.

Furthermore, in Zeitlin's words, we must incorporate that which is "good and just in Socialism." In the political atmosphere of today, wherein many young people have rededicated themselves to these sorts of progressive politics, it is incumbent on the Reform Movement to also embrace the better angles of Socialism. Hence, the synagogue should endeavor to operate as an autonomous collective ala the kibbutz model, by



investing in the community through the efforts of the members' contributions of their particular skills and abilities. This means that the community should provide the necessary infrastructure to address the needs of its members. If done correctly, with the dedication of its members, the community could ostensibly provide for the material needs of its members. No one should go hungry, unclothed, or without the means to self-actualize.

Finally, in service of democracy and egalitarianism, the model of leadership must evolve past the notion of a singular individual as *rebbe* or *tsaddik* – which both connote a hierarchical model of spiritual leadership – rather embracing Rabbi Ebn Leader's paradigm of "Teacher as Friend" in which "commonality and vulnerability" are defining aspects of the relationship.<sup>352</sup> Beyond its leadership, if a community could grow to embody these virtues of commonality and vulnerability, then they could grow together to come to the sort of meeting imagined by Buber. If the Reform movement is to remain relevant in what Shaul Magid (building on David Hollinger's work) called "postethnic American Judaism," we must invest in communities such as these which seek to cultivate meaning-making on the terms of the meaning-makers.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Leader, Ebn. "Does a New Hasidism Need Rebbes?" Essay in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, edited by author and Arthur Green, 317-338. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019. Pgs.321-327.

<sup>353</sup> Magid, Shaul. *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013.

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