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Bringing the Bible's Commentators to Life

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Review of Avigail Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators: Biographies, Methodologies, and Contributions*, trans. Yoseif Bloch (Maggid Books, 2023).

When I began studying Humash in grade school, it was always Humash-Rashi. Even when we added other commentators, I knew nothing of the historical contexts in which they wrote or the schools of thought they represented. Believing the commentators to be of one mindset and largely making cumulative suggestions that could all be true at once, I didn't understand that they had serious methodological disagreements about how to interpret the Humash.

I discovered these differences when I studied in Israel at Yeshivat Sha'alvim after high school. I learned, for example, that Rashi (11th century France) tends to quote *midrash*, but his grandson Rashbam does not. Ramban (13th century Christian Spain) thinks thematically and considers character, while Ibn Ezra (12th century), deeply interested in grammar, tries to determine a verse's plain meaning, but can be cryptic.

Yet, I began to wonder about biblical exegetes not printed in the *Mikra'ot Gedolot*. On a trip to the basement of the Sha'alvim *beit midrash*, I discovered a volume by Rabbi Mordechai Breuer (1921-2007), who, rather shockingly, accepts the tenets of the Documentary Hypothesis but finds a way to make them more religiously palatable (more on that below). One summer during college, shelving books at the library of the

University of Pennsylvania's Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, I happened upon the 19th century Italian commentary of Samuel David Luzzatto, or Shadal. I sat with it on the floor of the stacks, riveted by Shadal's originality. Could it be that Bilam's donkey never really spoke after all, but brayed in a way that Bilam alone could understand? (Bamidbar 22:2).

I might not have been so surprised by the diversity of background and opinion among the biblical commentators had Dr. Avigail Rock already written *Great Biblical Commentators*. This 2023 volume in Koren Publishers' Maggid Tanakh Companions series was originally published in Hebrew as *Parshanei HaMikra* in 2021. Tragically, Dr. Rock passed away at a young age in 2019 before either edition was published. The work, all but two chapters of which was originally published as a series of articles on Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash website circa 2014, examines the life and work of 24 different biblical exegetes, from Targum Onkelos in the Amoraic period to contemporary scholars such as R. Breuer.[1] Each short chapter (although a few, like Rashi's, are longer) examines a different commentator, exploring his biography and unique contribution to the study of Tanakh. As noted in the introduction written by Dr. Rock's husband Rabbi Yehuda Rock, "In addition to biographical and historical details, the studies include extensive work on the commentator's exegetical methods, his interactions with his historical period and environment, and his contribution to the world of exegesis" (xiv).

The commentators' individual personalities shine through in the book's biographical portions. Sa'adia Gaon of 10th century Babylonia never missed an opportunity to polemicize against the Karaites, whether in prose or in poetry (20). Ibn Ezra was a peripatetic scholar who wandered through Christian Spain, Italy, France, and finally England (160-66). R. Yosef Ibn Kaspi, a somewhat obscure 14th century commentator from Provence in southern France (Dr. Rock wrote her PhD thesis about him), was rather proud of the fact that he was a philosopher and not a halakhic expert (274).[2]

Rock mentions Shadal's poverty and how he lost his wife and several of his children (342-43). She recounts how in the 19th century, Malbim was accused of treason by religious reformers, and

[1] Michal Dell wrote the chapter on R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, the 19th century German rabbi who composed the commentary *Ha-Ketav ve-Ha-Kabbalah*, based on her PhD thesis, and R. Yehuda Rock, Dr. Rock's husband, wrote the chapter on R. Breuer.

[2] In his ethical will, Ibn Kaspi tells a humorous anecdote about his lack of halakhic knowledge. When preparing for a large party he was hosting, the "luckless handmaid put a milk spoon into the meat pot." Not knowing what to do, Ibn Kaspi went to a rabbi, but the rabbi was eating, and Ibn Kaspi "waited at his door until the shades of evening fell, and my soul was near to leave me." When Ibn Kaspi finally got his answer and went home to his guests, he "related all that had happened, for I was not ashamed to admit myself unskilled in that particular craft. In this I lack skill, but I have skill in another craft. Is not the faculty of expounding the existence and unity of God as important as familiarity with the rule concerning a small milk spoon?" Israel Abrahams, ed., *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (JPS, 1926), 151-52.

when the authorities sentenced him to death, he was saved only by the involvement of Sir Moses Montefiore (359). Rock explains that, unlike other Eastern European *rashei yeshiva* of the late 19th century, Netziv accorded the study of Tanakh a place in the Volozhin Yeshiva's curriculum (374-75). I found Rock's chapter on Prof. Umberto Cassuto, an Italian biblical commentator who taught at the Hebrew University, particularly fascinating. In 1944, the Hebrew University sent Cassuto to Aleppo, Syria, to study the Aleppo Codex—which is one of the oldest and most accurate manuscripts of Tanakh in existence—in preparation for preparing a new edition of Tanakh. Although he was not allowed to photograph the Codex, Cassuto's notes allowed for the reconstruction of some portions of the Codex that are presumed to have been destroyed by riots in Aleppo in 1947.

Great Biblical Commentators not only brings its subjects to life, but it zeroes in on what makes each of their approaches to studying Tanakh unique. R. Yosef Kara, also known as Mahari Kara, was a student of Rashi, but, unlike his teacher, he almost never cites *midrash* in his commentaries on the books of the Nevi'im. To the contrary, he suggests that those who seek out midrashic interpretations do not know the simple meaning of the verse (91). R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, another medieval exegete of the northern French school, strove for the most naturalistic explanations—when Lot's wife looked behind when fleeing Sodom, she did not miraculously become a pillar of salt, but simply failed to outrun the wave of salt and sulfur emanating from the ruined city (144).

Dr. Rock explains that Abarbanel, who was expelled from Spain in 1492, structured his biblical commentary differently than most others before him: he did not comment on individual verses, but instead divided the text into larger narrative units. Each unit begins with a list of questions that are resolved in a free-flowing narrative discussion that often touches on issues of *peshat*, theology, and philosophy (288-290). Seforno, from Renaissance Italy, was a humanist, believing in the centrality of humankind and in an individual's ability to perfect oneself, although he acknowledges that God is the source of that perfection (302). He is also a great defender of biblical heroes; Rock notes that Seforno is the only commentator who defends the brothers for selling Joseph into slavery, arguing that they believed he was plotting to kill them and that therefore his life was forfeit (308-09).

When discussing the commentators of the modern period, Rock takes note of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's (19th century Germany) inventive approach to etymology, in which roots that sound the same are related at a deeper level. For example, according to R. Hirsch, nun-sin-aleph, to "lift," is related to nun-samekh-heh, to "test," because being tested helps one ascend to a higher spiritual level (324). On the other hand, Malbim, who was a contemporary of R. Hirsch's in Eastern Europe, believed that there are no synonyms in Tanakh. Much of his commentary is devoted to arguing—against the views of *maskilim* (those influenced by the Enlightenment) and Reformers—how there are no superfluous words in the Torah and that it is anything but ordinary literature (361-62). R. David Tzvi Hoffman also

responded to those questioning the Torah's integrity. His commentary—which grew out of his lectures at the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin at the close of the 19th century—was centered on defending the divinity of the Torah against the arguments of biblical critics, and shows his grounding in his critics' arguments and the scholarly literature (388-91).

The volume does not shy away from highlighting exegetes' controversial views. Rock compares different versions of Ibn Ezra's commentary and suggests that he—always the great concealer—believed that Rachel stole the *terafim* (idols) from her father Lavan, not to wean him off idol worship, but to use them. Rock explains that Ibn Ezra only alludes to this view cryptically because otherwise it might have led to the "removal of [his] commentary from the Jewish library"; still, he did not want to hide it completely (198-99). Rock also mentions Radak's (12th century southern France) provocative opinion about the origins of *keri* and *ketiv*—the places in Tanakh where the text is written one way but pronounced a different way. According to Radak, the Men of the Great Assembly reconstructed the text of Tanakh following the Babylonian exile, and were sometimes unsure which version they found in the scrolls was the correct one, so they used one as *keri* and one as *ketiv* (208-09).

Dr. Rock studied with Prof. Nehama Leibowitz (51), one of the most important *peshat*-focused Tanakh teachers of modern times. Rock's choice of which commentators to include in the book seems related to their significance to the *peshat* school of Tanakh study foreshadowed by Leibowitz and pioneered by Yeshivat Har Etzion (Gush) and its affiliate Herzog College. This revolution in Tanakh study—which I'll call the "Gush school"—focuses, among other things, on reading Tanakh on its own terms without jumping directly to its interpreters (particularly those of the midrashic bent), using sophisticated literary tools, and interpreting Tanakh thematically rather than verse-by-verse.[3] Thus, Cassuto, who did not believe that the Torah came from heaven (407), gets a chapter in *Great Biblical Commentators*, presumably because he is often quoted by Leibowitz and also because of his importance to the literary study of Tanakh. For instance, Cassuto breaks up the text into literary units and identifies how a *leitwort* (leading word) repeated in a passage can allude to the passage's central theme (414-15), an important feature of the way the Gush school studies Tanakh. R. Yehuda Rock writes that he included the final chapter on R. Mordechai Breuer because Breuer influenced many devotees of the Gush school (417). Moreover, he explains that Breuer's *shitat ha-behinot*—which acknowledges that God put parallel, and sometimes contradictory, narratives and laws in the Humash to express different aspects of truth—provides "a fundamental tool for revealing structure and significance in the

[3] See Ezra Bick & Yaakov Beasley, eds., *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach, Bereishit* (Maggid Books, 2011), xiii-xxi; see also Yaakov Beasley, "Review Essay: Return of the Pashtanim," *Tradition* 42:1 (2009): 67-83.

biblical text" (426).

Dr. Rock's affinity for Leibowitz's and the Gush school's commitment to *peshat* also seems to have dictated whom she left out of the book. While there are chapters on more obscure medieval *pashtanim* such as Mahari Kara, Bekhor Shor, Ralbag, and Ibn Kaspi, there is a 300-year gap from Seforno in the 1500s to R. Hirsch in the 1800s. Rock understandably did not include the many supercommentaries on Rashi published during this period (such as Gur Aryeh and Siftei Hakhamim), but she also omitted original commentators such as R. Moshe Alshikh (16th century Safed), Kli Yakar (R. Ephraim Lunshitz, 16th century Prague), and Or Ha-Hayyim (Hayyim ibn Attar, 17th century Morocco). I suspect that Rock left these commentators out because, despite their stature and influence, they are more homiletical or kabbalistic in their approaches. Yet, their omission leaves a substantial chronological gap, and one wishes that Rock had at least included a chapter or two explaining how biblical commentary developed and changed during this centuries-long period.

Great Biblical Commentators is still a masterpiece. Rabbi Yonatan Kolatch's ongoing series of books, *Masters of the Word*, which also explores the historical contexts and methodologies of a variety of biblical commentators, is comparable in some respects. But Kolatch's three volumes (so far) only cover the period from the Talmudic Sages to Rabbeinu Bachya and Ralbag in the 14th century. Rock's survey is complete in one volume. Whether one is looking for biography, methodology, or just a survey of how multifaceted our tradition of Tanakh study has been, *Great Biblical Commentators* has it all. Sadly, Dr. Rock's passing means that we will not see other works from her in the future. Let this volume stand as a testament to her erudition, her masterful pedagogy, and her love of Torah.

Considering The Changing Landscape in Modern Orthodox Israel Education

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There have been many post-October 7 articles and essays looking at how the horrific and tragic events of that day, and the subsequent year-plus of war, hostage rescues, killings, and negotiations have set new courses in Jewish life and thought. But the first page of my Google search for "Israel education after October 7" yielded few relevant results—only a couple of blog posts from Unpacked and Lookstein, and an article from Hadassah Magazine focusing broadly on non-Orthodox Jewish schools. The other links were focused on university campus life - understandable given the attention that issue has received. What I have not seen is a detailed discussion focused specifically on Modern Orthodox Jewish Day Schools which, I believe, are a unique category as it relates to Israel education. Modern Orthodox Day Schools, often unlike their Community Day School counterparts, will draw from an already committed and mostly

untroubled pro-Israel constituency, to borrow Donniel Hartman's terminology. So the purpose of this essay is to consider, from my standpoint as Principal of a Modern Orthodox, Religious Zionist high school, the changed landscape of Israel education since October 7.

Let's begin with the educational landscape in a pre-October 7 world. When I began teaching twenty years ago, I taught a course at the Ramaz Upper School called "Survival Judaism." It was developed by Rabbi Dr. Jeffrey Kobrin and was meant to advance student learning in specific ways that would benefit their journeys on secular college campuses—in particular the challenges to Zionism they might encounter. At the time, our conversations about Israel education were taking a particular turn toward a more nuanced posture, supported by a sense that traditional *Hasbara* was not a sufficient approach, with its focus too heavily-weighted on a "rainbows and sunshine" telling of Israeli history, as Ron Schleifer detailed in a 2003 paper. I distinctly remember a former student who was attending Columbia in the early 2000s sharing how he felt betrayed by his Jewish education when the first time he heard about the Deir Yassin massacre was from an anti-Israel college professor. If we were going to help educate robustly Zionist young adults, the thinking went, we would need to effectively take advantage of the bubble of Jewish day school to encourage young people to do the hard work of grappling with the historical narratives and identity that defined Palestinian history and culture, thus enabling the students to understand their Zionism in full view of its opponents.

This seemed right on every level at the time. An increasing number of students seemed less likely to take their Zionism for granted, and, in those immediately post-second-intifada and early social media years, also wanted to learn more about what was animating the other side. I was faculty advisor for a school club that attempted to invite Columbia professor Rashid Khalidi to Ramaz, an invitation that was ultimately rescinded by the Head of School. Leaving aside whether or not the Head's decision was correct, the student interest in extending the invitation was itself a reflection of the time. In the subsequent years, the success of Unpacked in producing Israel education content that it proudly describes as "nuanced" and "complex" shows how expansive this desire had become. In my current role over the last decade, I would often enthusiastically tell parents at our schools' open houses that our goal in Israel education was to ensure our students encounter no surprises in university, that their high school education would make them fully aware of what the pro-Palestinian side might offer when a class discussion breaks out or a professor asserts something they might find troubling. My impression is that the goal of Israel education in many Modern Orthodox day schools over the last two decades has been to engage fully with the story of the "other side" while operating from a place of firm confidence in "our side," and to promote our students' ability to meaningfully participate in that conversation.

After October 7, I believe, the popularity of that goal has taken a significant hit. The problem that has emerged is a challenge to the unspoken

premise of the approach: that the "other side" has a narrative worth contending with. The desire to understand the Palestinian narrative of their history has given way to an emerging perception that this narrative is not really about the historiography of certain past events but more about adherence to a historical ideology built on a dogmatic judgment of the entire settlement and colonialist enterprise, of which Zionism is the most relevant case study. For example, we can explore the Palestinian experience of the Nakba and 1948 as a historical event that can be understood from the records of that experience, and that can be considered in the context of the historical records of the Zionist experience and the story they tell. But that approach is something fundamentally different from the idea that all Western colonialism is an inherent evil that must be uprooted, starting with Israel. This is not another historical narrative to be considered with nuance as much as it is an ideology that must be adhered to.

I don't know the extent to which this ideology informs pro-Palestinian narratives as a whole, but the perception that it does has taken hold in our community, and seems to be of particular relevance for the challenges Jewish students face on campus. In his recent review of Adam Kirsch's new book *On Settler Colonialism: Ideology, Violence and Justice* (2024), Michael Walzer shares what I think represents a new awareness of this ideology and its half-baked application to Canada, the United States and Israel alike:

In principle, they want all the settlers, all of us, to be gone, or to cede sovereignty to the Native American nations (and live, presumably, as their subjects). As Kirsch sums up a key text: "America is something that should not have happened"...

Settlement is the original sin, or, better, the settlers' insatiable desire for more land, more wealth, more power is the original sin. All the evils of exploitation, racism, misogyny, and homophobia follow from the everlasting settler moment. Redemption comes only with decolonization: some secular mix of a return to Eden and the advent of the messianic age…

"Israel is much younger and smaller than the United States," Kirsch writes, "and it is easier to imagine its disappearance." Similarly, the number of Jews, all of them defined as "settlers," is small enough to allow the anti-settler militants to plan their subjugation, exile, or elimination. The leading ideologues argue only for the end of Jewish sovereignty; what comes after that is, as usual, more vaguely described. But Kirsch, who has read

> more extensively in the literature of settler colonialism than anyone I know would willingly do, concludes that its effect is “to cultivate hatred of those designated as settlers and to inspire hope for their disappearance.” Israel is accused of genocide—and threatened with genocide.
>
> So the radical theory of settler colonialism became “the theory of a massacre,” the ideology that justified Hamas’s atrocities of October 7 and inspired the response of too many American professors, students, and activists. The Israeli settlers were taken to be rapacious and domineering; the native Palestinians were innocent and oppressed, and October 7 was an exhilarating example of a struggle for liberation, as a Cornell historian infamously told rallying students.

In this context, it becomes much harder to see a value in engaging or grappling with the “other side” when even the secular version of the other side’s narrative seems ideologically invested in your side’s destruction. The “conversation” on campus is no longer an actual conversation—that is, a respectful but heated classroom debate on historiography where Jewish students want to feel they have a strong position rooted in understanding their opponent’s perspective. It is a zero sum loyalty test where a Jewish student either declares her allegiance or attempts to slip through the fray undetected. Whatever she decides, it no longer seems all that important to have a nuanced view of the other side. If the history that drives the Palestinian narrative insists that the Jewish nation must disappear for Palestinians to realize their national aspirations, what point is there in understanding and engaging with that story? It almost has the same feel as engaging with Holocaust deniers, where there is not a point of view that is valid enough to be understood deeply and considered empathetically.

My wife attended York University twenty years ago and there was plenty of anti-Israel sentiment then. But there were also big debates in the classroom with professors, Jewish and Palestinian students all engaged. In contrast, I recently spoke with a student attending Columbia University who suggested in a literature class having nothing to do with Israel that the story being examined should be seen through a sympathetic lens toward 19th century European values, and was summarily called a "Zio-bitch" by a classmate, and the professor had nothing to say to that. The discussion was over. When I asked her why she didn't pursue a complaint she answered that the result would be a public record of the incident that could be seized on by Jewish activists on campus for their purposes, and that it would eventually

lead to her name being outed and then her being doxed by anti-Israel activists.

Put simply, I don't believe we are in a place where our young people are feeling challenged by their interlocutors on campus the way they were in the past. Our young people feel hated on campus and see nothing particularly nuanced about engaging with a conversation that no longer exists.

So how are we to respond to this sentiment as educators? My colleague Rabbi Eddie Shostak recently suggested to me that this is an important opportunity to turn inward, to focus on the nuance and complexity within Jewish society in Israel, an area of learning often overlooked in Modern Orthodox day schools. While the divisions in Israel over the Judicial Reform prior to October 7 were only beginning to permeate the North American Jewish community, those divisions are emerging again, along with new ones surrounding the ongoing hostage crisis and the Haredi draft. Maybe the most important learning we can engage with is to learn about each other. That is, to understand the unique divisions within Israeli society that don't map neatly onto North American Jewish demographics, and to discuss the difficult challenges they present. For example, what are we to make of the mainstream North American Orthodox instinct to support both Israeli soldiers and the Haredi Torah leaders who encourage refusing the draft?

Or perhaps we should keep our focus external, and consider doubling down on understanding the Palestinian narrative in all its complexity, both the concrete historiography and the half-baked ideology. On the one hand, we should keep refusing to consider the dogma of Settler Colonialism. On the other hand, we need to maintain a nuanced approach to Palestinian historiography. After all, in the diaspora we are on the front lines of *that* discussion. It does not seem that many university professors are bothering to challenge our alumni on Israel's internal divisions. Perhaps we should be articulating our educational goals to parents and students in terms of a David vs. Goliath battle for the soul of higher education, and for the future of Zionism in the academy. And, at the same time, we should ask them to recognize that, at some point, Israelis and Palestinians will have to hear each other's stories, however fanciful and distant that currently seems. Is it reasonable to expect our students to be brave warriors against some parts of the pro-Palestinian side while keeping the faith in the importance of nuance toward others?

So far, I don't have a firm idea of what this shifting landscape will mean, or how we might consider changing how we learn in school. But, if I am correct that this shift is occurring, I want to suggest that we consider it and discuss it just as we did twenty years ago when we shifted away from traditional *Hasbara*. Right now this feels to me like an equally important moment.

Bati Le-Gani and the Triumph of Humanity

Eli Rubin, a contributing editor at Chabad.org, is the author of Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity: An Existential History of Chabad Hasidism (forthcoming from Stanford University Press).

**An abridged excerpt from *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity: An Existential History of Chabad Hasidism* by Eli Rubin, published by Stanford University Press, **

R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn ("Rayatz," 1880-1950) spent the first 35 years of his life in the rural shtetl of Lubavitch, the ancestral seat of the Chabad stream of Hasidism. But in October 1915, following the "Great Retreat" of the Russian armies from Lithuania and Poland, the Schneersohn family relocated from Lubavitch to Rostov-on-Don, a large industrial city 750 miles to the south and within easy reach of the Black Sea. Rayatz's father, R. Shalom DovBer Schneersohn ("Rashab"), died there in 1920, shortly after the Red Army took control of the city. By this point, the "Jewish section" (Evsektsiia) of the Communist Party was setting out to systematically secularize the Jewish population of the former Russian Empire.

Not once, not twice, but three times—in the Soviet Union, in Poland, and in the United States following the Holocaust—Rayatz rallied Chabad hasidim and attracted new hasidim and supporters to the flag of Lubavitch, building new institutions and communities from scratch. His success was significantly advanced by the power of his penmanship. Rayatz was a prolific and expressive writer of letters, and creatively experimented with historiography, memoir, and narrative. He also continued Chabad's older tradition of delivering and writing formal hasidic discourses, the most famous and impactful of which is known by its opening words, *Bati le-gani* ("I have come to my garden," Shir Ha-Shirim 5:1).

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Bati Le-Gani is a series (*hemsheikh*) of four discourses that ostensibly dates to 1950, and is remembered as Rayatz's final authorized publication prior to his passing on the 10th of Shevat in that year. In truth, the roots of this *hemsheikh* reach back to the late 1890s, and its afterlife extended to the late 1980s, whence it continues onward today.

Importantly, the underlying text of *Hemsheikh Bati Le-Gani* was not originally composed in 1950. In 1923, Rayatz delivered it as a series of two discourses under different titles. Moreover, Rayatz crafted this series by juxtaposing and embellishing two previously unrelated discourses, respectively composed and delivered by his father, Rashab, in 1898 and 1920. The act of juxtaposition itself reshaped and recast Rashab's words, ingeniously and elegantly revealing the thematic resonances between two texts that would otherwise be regarded as unconnected. While paraphrasing almost everything that appears in Rashab's original discourses, Rayatz also added a great deal of material. His elaborations are so smoothly integrated that only a line-by-line comparison can tease out the new layer from the inherited one.

The old is subsumed within something entirely new.

In 1950, each discourse of Rayatz's 1923 *hemsheikh* was bisected to form a "new" *hemsheikh* comprising four discourses, subdivided into a total of 20 sections. On the first anniversary of Rayatz's death, in 1951, his son-in-law and successor, R. Menachem M. Schneerson ("Ramash," 1902-1994), began an annual custom of delivering discourses interrogating themes from Rayatz's *Hemsheikh Bati Le-Gani*. Each year, sequentially, he focused on one of its 20 sections while also expounding on the series as a whole. In these discourses he would explicitly cite teachings from each of the previous leaders of Chabad, and also teachings of their hasidic predecessors, the Maggid of Mezritch and the Ba'al Shem Tov. This continued until the death of Chaya Moussia Schneerson, Ramash's wife and Rayatz's daughter, in February 1988. Since that time, Chabad hasidim have continued the custom of studying another section of Rayatz's *hemsheikh* each year, together with the discourses by Ramash that elaborate on it.

Bati Le-Gani begins with a premise, drawn from midrashic sources, that places God's manifestation in the physical world at the center of cosmic purpose: At the beginning of time, God's "primary indwelling"—*ikar shekhinah*—was manifest within the physical world, but "she ascended" (*nistalkah*) therefrom as a result of the primordial sin of the tree of knowledge. Thereafter, seven generations of righteous individuals iteratively drew the *shekhinah* back into the world, culminating with the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the construction of an earthly sanctuary (*mishkan*) for God, through Moses (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:1; *Bereishit Rabbah* 19:7).

Incorporated into Chabad literature, this midrashic teaching is implicitly understood to transcend biblical time and to extend its significance into the present. Thus, the burning questions that animate the *hemsheikh*: How shall the *shekhinah* be returned below? How shall this lowly realm be made into a dwelling place for God?

The answer is introduced with an aphorism rooted in several Zoharic texts, but crystallized by Chabad's founder, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi ("Rashaz"):

> When "the other side" (*sitra ahara*) is subjugated, the glory of the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends in all the worlds. (Tanya 27)

While this aphorism specifies "subjugation" (*itkafya*), Rashab and Rayatz added that this leads to "transformation" (*ithapkha*) too. Subjugating and transforming the (apparently) un-Godly aspects of reality—such that their fallacy and concealment give way to truth and revelation—facilitates the indwelling of God's most ascendant manifestation even in the lowest of all worlds.

The first half of *Hemsheikh Bati Le-Gani* (based on Rashab's 1898 discourse) examines the practical nature of this subjugation and transformation. The work of pivoting from "unholy folly" to "holy folly" features as a prominent example. From the

Chabad perspective, to sin is to act irrationally. This is unholy folly. An irrational commitment to God, however, is not subrational but superrational. This is holy folly. After all, of God's transcendent infinitude it is said, "no thought can grasp You at all" (*Tikkunei Zohar* 17a). Accordingly, God is most truly embraced when religious practice exceeds thought, wisdom, and rationale.

The second half of the *hemsheikh* (based on Rashab's 1920 discourse) takes up the theme of divine victory. The Supernal King's inalienable will to triumph—the divine attribute of *netzah*—is to be emulated and realized by the Jewish people, who are referred to in the Bible (Exodus 12:41) as the "hosts" or "armies" of God (*tziv'ot Hashem*). Spiritual victory is achieved through revealing the "hidden" strength that transcends ordinary consciousness and ordinary activity. Such holy triumphalism on the part of the Jewish people—born not of complacent presumption, but of a faith in the impossibility of impossibility—elicits the triumphalism of God. To elicit the triumphalism of God is to receive the innermost riches of the Supernal treasury, the essential concealment that even transcends the primal concealment known as *tzimtzum*. Indeed, this otherwise unarticulated reserve is nothing less than the interiority and essence of the Infinite (*atzmut ein sof*), whose unprecedented articulation within this lowest world realizes the original purpose of creation.

Through combining these two discourses, Rayatz elegantly brings two distinct strands of Rashab's oeuvre into dynamic conversation. The first half of the *hemsheikh* focuses on the practical dimensions of personal spiritual work and transformation. The second half is much more esoteric, probing the theological and cosmological implications of divine infinitude and transcendence. Placed together, the two halves are mutually enriched. The everyday struggle to overcome worldly darkness is rendered transparent to the otherworldly luminosity that it is shown to disclose. Kabbalistic abstractions concerning the infinite light, and the undisclosed luminary from which it emanates, crystallize into the bedrock of inspired activism in the here and now.

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At the heart of *Hemsheikh Bati Le-Gani* we find an existential confrontation with *tzimtzum*: How can divinity be discovered in a world that God sometimes seems to have abandoned?

Many passages can be cited to demonstrate this point. The following example also illustrates how Rayatz's embellishments to his father's discourses often bring a heightened acuity to the interpenetration of the cosmic and the personal. This segment of the *hemsheikh* explains that unholy folly is overcome through revealing the essence of the Godly soul. This revelation is synonymous with enacting the *mitzvot*. Accordingly, the soul itself is woven of the *mitzvot*, which manifest divine transcendence within the world, and which are 613 in number.

The quote below overlays Rashab's original text with Rayatz's rewrite. Strikethroughs indicate deletions; additions are in bold:

> It is written "Jacob is the rope of his inheritance" (Deuteronomy 32:9)… ~~and~~ **the rope is** the soul itself**, for the soul of man** is the rope **that binds him with divinity, and therefore the soul itself is woven of six hundred and thirteen threads,** and as it's ~~written~~ **stated** in *Sefer shel Beinonim* [Tanya] chapter 51, that the soul is comprised by 613~~—etc.~~**,** and ~~elsewhere it is explained that the totality of the cosmos is for the sake of the Jewish people, and this is because~~ **the reason for this is that the sages say (*Sanhedrin* 4:5) "each individual must say, for my sake the world (*ha-olam*) was created," *olam* having the connotation of concealment (*he'eleim*), that each individual must say, the concealment and primordial *tzimtzum* was created for my sake, in order to refine and clarify it, and** man is in the form of 248 limbs and 365 sinews **that together are the number 613,** ~~and~~ therefore ~~also in~~all **the stations in** the cosmos **are of that number** ~~the aspects of two hundred and forty eight and six hundred and sixty five exist~~…

Significantly, Rayatz replaces Rashab's explanation of cosmic purpose in national terms—"for the sake of the Jewish people"—with an explanation that centers the individual human being: "Each individual must say, for my sake the world was created." He also reinterprets this classical rabbinic aphorism by splicing it with a time-honored reading of the Hebrew word for "world" as a derivative of the Hebrew word for "concealment." Thereby, he arrives at a new reading of *tzimtzum* that places the individual human being at its center: "each individual must say, the concealment and primordial *tzimtzum* was created for my sake."

For Rayatz, the individual challenge of overcoming folly is not simply a personal problem, but confronts the most fundamental condition of the cosmos itself. Indeed, the personal process of overcoming and transforming folly—of cognitive clarification and transcendence—was the ultimate purpose of *tzimtzum* from the outset.

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As the first half of the *hemsheikh* draws to a close, Rayatz also takes the opportunity to introduce the themes of battle and triumph that will figure more prominently later. The messianic overcoming of *tzimtzum*, he explains, is to be attained through an existential war, a battle in which survival depends on tenacious alacrity and total triumph. Without *tzimtzum*, the struggle for ultimate clarification and transformation cannot unfold. It is through overcoming *tzimtzum* in the present that the messianic revelation of the future is constructed.

Rayatz especially links this battle with the body, and goes so far as to assert that in the messianic era "the primary disclosure of divine transcendence… will be in the body" rather than the soul.

This messianic triumph isn't simply an intellectual or spiritual endeavor, but a transformation of being in the most tangible sense. Being will openly manifest its divine nature, its true meaning, such that the body will axiomatically perceive it, secondarily communicating it to the soul as well. The assertive solidity of the body, of physical matter, will viscerally convey the essential solidity of primordial being, the essence of the divine self. This depends on the sort of bodily struggle that meaningfully transforms materiality into an essential fulcrum of luminosity.

The above examples illustrate some of the ways that Rayatz rethought his father's teachings and rewrote his father's texts, building new intellectual and literary structures that substantially exceed their foundations. In Rayatz's discourses, Rashab's cool erudition is molded into something more evocative and visceral, even as the concepts themselves are clarified, sharpened, and reshaped. Kabbalistic theorizations directly galvanize spiritual reawakening and muscular activism. Cosmic questions are constantly drawn back into the microcosmic world of the embodied individual. Practical questions of personal meaning and personal struggle are always at the fore.

Rayatz transformed Chabad's rich legacy of thinking about *tzimtzum* into a timely reinterpretation of the human experience of rupture. In an era where the ground of continuity was so violently pulled out from beneath the feet of the Jewish people, human being itself became the ground of continuity, meaning, and triumph.