LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Shemot

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

Lehrhaus Over Shabbat for the month of Tevet is sponsored by Lauren & David Lunzer to commemorate the 80th Yahrzeit of USAAF Pilot 1LT Frank B. Solomon, killed in action when his heavy bomber was shot down over Berlin on 6 Tevet, 1944. Mistakenly buried under a Latin Cross in an American Military Cemetery, Operation Benjamin reconsecrated LT Solomon's grave under a Star of David in 2019, representing a true Kiddush Hashem.

AN ISHBITZ-RADZYN READING OF THE JUDAH NARRATIVE: BINAH BA-LEV – AN UNDERSTANDING HEART

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This piece is dedicated in memory of Sergeant Efraim Jackman a"h*, a holy soldier who fell fighting in Gaza on Tuesday, Dec. 26th.*

R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner, (b. 1800), founder of the Ishbitz-Radzyn dynasty, offers an innovative reading of the famous story of the baker and the steward at the end of the book of Genesis. He suggests that the dreams told to Joseph in great detail by these two minor characters are meant to be understood as God's way of communicating with Joseph, imparting to him vital information about himself and his flaws, and offering him guidance on his path towards spiritual refinement, known in Ishbitz-Radzyn terminology as *beirur*. He taught that God, like every king, has two ministers: one is like the baker who shares Joseph's prison cell, and the other, like the wine-steward. If the baker represents Joseph – cautious, watchful, always following the rules, the

wine-steward – less exacting, who flows with the rhythm of life, represents Judah.[1]

Judah, unlike Joseph, is fully engaged in the moment, spontaneous, intuitive, and bold. While Joseph approaches life primarily through reason and devotion to pre-established principles, Judah approaches life through intuition. Judah's dominant trait is an understanding heart, *binah ba-lev.* Joseph analyzes, protects, and plans. Judah, in contrast, encounters life events as they present themselves. With no visible map in hand other than his innate sense that God resides even in the darkest of places, he sins, falls, and then rises to unexpected heights. As we shall see, according to the worldview of the Ishbitz-Radzyn Masters, life is not neat and linear; religious devotion comes in many forms.

Judah, as he is portrayed in this tradition, embodies the spiritual mindset that relies on the heart that aims directly towards God for guidance.

"The vital life source of Judah," writes R. Mordechai Yosef, "is to continuously look towards the Holy One, Blessed be He, in every circumstance."[2]

In Ishbitz-Radzyn thought, the religious ideal is to align one's actions with God's will, to obtain a discerning heart. Judah's *binah ba-lev* matures over the course of his long, difficult life.

Judah's Beginnings: Selling Joseph – Faltering Leadership

In the first chapters of the lengthy saga of Joseph and his brothers, two figures are prominent: Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son, and Judah, his fourth. Exhibiting the seeds of contrasting leadership qualities, each one tries to dissuade the brothers from their murderous plot against Joseph. But it is Judah who prevails.

Reuben, with the best intentions, invokes impersonal, legal principles: Why should you dirty your hands? he implies, "Cast him into this pit…and lay no hand upon him" (Genesis 37:24); that way, he will die of his own accord, and you won't be guilty of murder.

Judah, however, appeals to their sense of brotherhood. Four times in the space of two verses the Torah uses the word "brother," specifically mentioning that "his [Judah's] brothers listen to him." He commands their attention as he appeals directly to their emotions: "How can we kill our brother…for he is our brother, our flesh and blood?" (Genesis 37:26-27). Having their ear, we might have expected Judah to rescue Joseph entirely and save his father years of agonizing misery.

But Judah, at this point in the story, has not yet reached his full moral potential, and instead offers a compromise. Suggesting that they sell him, he saves Joseph's life, but does not go as far

[1] This article is a modified version of a chapter of my forthcoming book, *Opening the Window: Hasidic Reading for Life – The Teachings of Rabbi Ya'akov Leiner of Ishbitz-Radzyn* (1818-1878). My deep appreciation to my dear friends and *havrutot,* Judy Taubes Sterman for helping me edit this article and for her invaluable support in elucidating Ishbitz-Radzyn ideas for a broader audience, and Professor Ora Wiskind for her encouragement and inspiration in fleshing out their delicate thought.

[2] *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, Vayeshev, s.v. "*Vayeshev Ya'akov.*"

as to return him safely to his father. True, he shows the strength to convince them of a different path, yet he fails to uphold clear ethical principles as a genuine leader should. Judah ultimately abandons Joseph, resulting in long years of suffering for all involved.

In this traumatic opening scene, Judah is a figure of ambiguous, if not negative, moral fiber. The next stages of his life story chart a journey downward until he hits bottom. The first words of the following section of the Torah itself indicate this decline.

Judah Descends

> And it came to pass that Judah went down from his brothers. (Genesis 38:1)

On the phrase "went down," Rashi teaches:

> His brothers degraded him from his high position. When they saw their father's grief, they said, "You told us to sell him; if you had told us to send him back to his father, we would also have obeyed you."[3]

Judah was a natural leader whom others were willing to follow, but he squandered his influence and paid the price for it, losing his brothers' respect and, as we will see, his own sense of self-worth.

Blamed by his brothers for his father's inconsolable misery, Judah leaves his home and his family and remains displaced, exiled for nearly a lifetime. But the word *vayeired*, "and he went down"' foreshadows multiple phases, for Judah's descent has only begun.

Almost immediately, the Torah relates, he marries and has children. Knowing full well that his father Jacob is mourning over his loss of Joseph, R. Mordechai Yosef wonders, "Why did Judah get married at a time like this? How could he do such a thing when his family was mourning?!" R. Mordechai Yosef suggests that these actions are Judah's own response to his failed leadership. Weaving together the details of Judah's life as depicted in the Torah, R. Mordechai Yosef describes:

> When Judah saw that "Jacob refused to be comforted," and since it had fallen upon him to bring [Joseph's bloody] coat to his father, he fell into *deep despair*, and thought there was *no more hope for him*. Therefore, he went to marry a woman, as he said to himself, "Maybe I will have good sons and continuity and salvation will come from them."[4]

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef explains that at this moment Judah believed that his own life was hopeless. Because of his disgraceful behavior, he thought there was no chance for forgiveness, no way to heal and repair his soul. And so, in a desperate attempt to redeem himself, Judah wishes to bear children, placing all of his hopes on

[3] Rashi, Genesis 38:1, s.v. "And it came to pass."

[4] MHS, Vayeshev, s.v. "*Vayeired Yehudah.*"

his unborn sons. Perhaps, he thinks to himself, they, unlike him, will be good, upright people. [5]

His first two sons "do evil in the eyes of the Lord" and, in quick succession, are slain by God. Judah's wished-for future, that his sons might restore his worth, fades away. He compromised, sold his brother Joseph, deceived his father, and hoped in vain that his sons would transcend his flaws, but to no avail.

From Compromise to Deception

After his two sons die, Judah tells his daughter in law, Tamar, to wait for his third son, Shelah, to come of age so they can marry and have a child who will "carry on the name" of his dead brother. But the Torah implies that Judah has no intention to give his third son to Tamar, as he is convinced that she is an *ishah katlanit,*[6] a black widow, the cause of his sons' deaths. Instead, he misleads her, sending her home to wait in vain for this son to grow up, condemning her to the fate of a perpetual widow.

But God has other plans.

R. Mordechai Yosef asserts that God communicates with Judah, not in dreams as He did with Joseph,[7] but through the events in his life. God's message regards the value of Judah's own life and the work he must do on himself. R. Mordechai Yosef portrays God as challenging Judah:

> "If, heaven forbid, you truly believe there is no hope for you, and that you have no life at your root, then even if you have a hundred children, they will never have any more 'life' (true vitality) than you."[8]

In other words, God says to him: "You, Judah, like all people, are a channel through whom God provides life.[9] But as of now, that channel is blocked. Until you repair yourself, no number of children you have will ever live or bring about relief."[10]

Judah must learn not to despair; he must overcome his feeling of futility, for there is always the possibility of repentance. He must have faith that things can change; that *he* can change. Only then will he be able to contribute anything

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[5] *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*'s commentary traces the long process in which Judah repairs (*mevareir*) himself.

[6] *Yevamot* 64b.

[7] *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, Vayeshev, s.v. "*Vayeshev*."

See Batya Hefter, "An Ishbitz-Radzyn Reading of the Joseph Narrative: The Light of Reason and the Flaw of Perfection," *The Lehrhaus*, 2023.

[8] MHS, I, Vayeshev, s.v. "*Vayeired*." In this reading, God's voice, which offers a hopeful alternative narrative to Judah's despair, is the inner voice Judah is meant to hear. R. Mordechai Yosef understands this to be implicit in the biblical narrative, in a similar way to midrashic texts, and thus his reading integrates that understanding as if it was explicitly part of the biblical narrative.

[9] Judah as a channel is paraphrased from this source. MHS, I, Vayeshev, s.v. "*Vayeired*."

[10] MHS, I, Vayeshev, s.v. 'vayered'.

everlasting to this world.

Judah will learn to interpret the events in his life. But for now, desperate to save his future, he cannot see the present clearly, looking everywhere except to himself. As in Greek tragedy, where the hero, anxiously seeking to avoid his fate, ends up meeting it head on, so Judah encounters his fate in the most unlikely of circumstances. Seeking comfort after the death of his wife in the arms of a woman he is led to believe is a harlot, Judah unknowingly impregnates his own daughter-in-law.

Oblivious to his sin, and to the depths to which he has sunk, Judah now reaches a turning point in his life.

The First Stage of *Beirur*: The Moment of Reckoning

Tamar's pregnancy is soon discovered. The assumption is made that she had illicit relations with a man out of wedlock, and the death sentence is promptly pronounced by none other than Judah himself. Rather than produce the evidence, publicly and clearly proving Judah's involvement, Tamar chooses to wait in silence until the last moment and confront her father-in-law with the objects he had pledged in place of payment.

Even as she confronts him, she does so subtly, never accusing him outright:

> She said, "If you would, *hakeir na*, recognize [these objects]…" (Genesis 38:25)

Will Judah deny the truth, avoid public humiliation, and send Tamar to her death? Or will he own up to his actions, save Tamar, redeem himself, and become the leader he is meant to be? He could act as if those items which he had given as collateral have nothing to do with him, easily contriving elaborate excuses and explanations for his actions. If so, what began as his tendency towards compromise would now degenerate into total corruption.

Judah's life hinges on his response to this utterly unforeseen moment.

Unlike the moment Judah sold Joseph into slavery, this time he knows there is no room for compromise. As he beholds the objects in his hand, negligence gives way to conscience, deceit to integrity.

His response is immediate, unfaltering, and direct:[11]

> "She is more righteous than I am!" (Genesis 38:25-26)

By publicly admitting his guilt, Judah not only saves Tamar's life, but restores her innocence and dignity. Undaunted by repercussions, he validates

[11] When King David, his biological and spiritual heir, is similarly confronted with a grave crime that he had thought he could get away with, he too offers a direct, unadorned confession: "I have sinned against God" (Samuel II 12:13).

her; she is righteous and he is the sinner. Humbling himself before this truth, Judah admits that, by withholding his son Shelah, he had deceived her.[12]

Tamar's words *hakeir na*, "recognize please," echo the very words that Judah himself uttered when he deceived Jacob. Bearing Joseph's bloody coat in his hands, Judah held it before his father and said, "*hakeir na*, "recognize please," whether it be your son's coat or not" (Genesis 37:32-33).

Her words, familiar and painful, pierced Judah's heart, stripping him of layers of protective armour that hid decades of his guilt and shame. Vulnerable and exposed, he now stands receptive, ready to take responsibility not just for his negligence of Tamar but for his repressed past, his maltreatment of Joseph and his father.

Transformed, with a clear conscience and an honest heart, he begins to re-evaluate his life.

It is at this moment that Judah embodies two opposing qualities: paradoxically, his greatness, dormant until now, is specifically his humility, his vulnerability. Now, he rises to show himself to be the worthy progenitor of the kings of the Jewish Nation. The union between Judah and Tamar results in the birth of twins, one of whom will become the forefather of King David.

Deeper Meanings of Kingship and Humility

The Ishbitz-Radzyn traditions contemplate this essential paradox: *malkhut,* kingship, which we naturally associate with initiative, leadership, nobility, and authority, requires the very opposite traits of utter receptivity and humility. The quality of *malkhut,* according to the mystical tradition, is conceived of as a vessel which both receives and reflects divine abundance. For that reason, *malkhut* is compared to the moon. Having no light of its own, the moon reflects and reveals the bright light of the sun.[13]

Similarly, the role of the mortal king is to reflect the exclusive values of the Divine King and not those fashioned by his own, limited mind. This can be done by emptying himself of his own self-interested agenda, so that he may reflect something "other," something transcendent and holy beyond himself. As the Ishbitz-Radzyn masters teach: "The tribe of Judah is like the moon which has nothing of its own. All of its light is only from the sun which shines upon it and gives it light."[14] Just as the moon, which has no light of its own, reflects the light of the sun, so too Judah's heart, empty of his own interest, reflects the will

[12] Judah's very name derives from the term *odeh*, said by his mother Leah at the moment of his birth. While she used the term to mean "I will thank," it also means "I will admit" or "I will acknowledge." Biblical names signify one's essence; Judah's capacity to acknowledge and admit is the realization of his core, his destiny.

[13] *Beit Ya'akov*, Vayeshev, 40.

[14] *Beit Ya'akov*, Vayeshev, 40, s.v. "*Vayehi ba'eit ha-hi vayeired Yehudah*." *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, II, Shemini. The notion that one's heart, when refined, reflects the will of God, is a central idea to *hasidut* in general and Ishbitz-Radzyn in particular. It also appears in works of *musar* and in the thought of R. Kook and R. Soloveitchik, *Be-sod Ha-yahid Ve-hayahad*, [Hebrew], pg. 199. See introduction to my Lehrhaus article "Peshat and Beyond: How the Hasidic Masters Read the Torah."

of God.

The hasidic masters note that this quality is hinted at in Judah's name.[15] The Hebrew letters of YeHUdaH, in that order, imply that Judah embodies divinity [Y-H-V-H] and that he is aligned with God's will. The extra letter *dalet*, which appears in the middle of Judah's name, teaches us about his unique capacity: it comes from the root *dal*, meaning impoverished, or lacking, empty. Judah epitomizes humility; he is able to rid himself of self-interest as he holds the needs of another. He becomes a vessel to reflect God's will, which in this instance is mediated through his encounter with Tamar.[16]

Judah's submission before Tamar extends beyond moral accountability. The Sages of the Talmud hint that Judah's relinquishment of all control is transformed into a spiritual capacity. "When [Judah] confessed and said, 'She is more righteous *mimeni* - **than I**,' a heavenly voice came forth and said '*mimeni* – **from Me**, God, and by My agency have these things happened.'"[17] By tuning into this innate receptive faculty, Judah finds that he has become a vessel of God's will.

In the Ishbitz reading, this is more than a nuanced psychological ability of ethical refinement: Judah's moral path also shows the way to encounter the infinite God.

The challenge for Judah as he moves forward will be to choose, consciously and proactively, to discern the will of God.

Cultivating an Understanding Heart

Judah, through his experience with Tamar, learned to react to events with a receptive, fully engaged heart.

In hasidic thought, *binah ba-lev*, or understanding, means attempting to ascertain the divine will at each turn of events. To be so open and adaptable requires subtle attunement to every circumstance as it arises, and the humility and flexibility to react appropriately and authentically in each instance.

Whereas Joseph's way is rational and measured, following a set plan to which he strictly adheres, Judah's way is intuitive; his attuned, sensitive temperament takes him on a fluid and more spontaneous path.

In R. Mordechai Yosef's words:

> The vital life source of Judah is to always look towards the Holy One, Blessed be He, in every

[15] *Sefat Emet*, parshat vayigash, 1887, *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, Vayehi, s.v. "*vayikra*."

[16] King David is seen as the ultimate reflection of "noble humility." Michal, the daughter of King Saul, born into privilege, cannot grasp this paradoxical quality. She scorns her husband, King David, for degrading himself, leaping and dancing with utter abandon before the Holy Ark. But David rebukes Michal for her misjudgement of his behaviour as he reveals his inner state of mind, the essence of the *middah* of *malkhut*: "I play before the Lord, and I will yet be more lightly esteemed than this, holding myself lowly…' Our mystical tradition calls this "having nothing of his own."

[17] Rashi, Genesis 38:26; *Sotah* 10b.

> circumstance, and not to act by rote.

Such spontaneity means constantly renewed receptivity:

> Even if today there is a circumstance similar to yesterday, he still would not want to rely on himself [on his decision from yesterday]; rather the Holy One, Blessed be He, will enlighten him anew as to His will.

For R. Ya'akov Leiner, (b. 1818), the son and heir of R. Mordechai Yosef, Judah is the paradigmatic example of *binah ba-lev,* seeking each day to attune his heart, never relying on what he did yesterday, for each day we are not quite the same as we were the day before, and each moment brings different challenges.

But a person's heart, as we know, is a tricky, subtle organ. As the seat of desire, it can feast on self-interest and self-deception, justifying unreflective and even corrupt behavior. The Torah warns, "do not follow your heart" (Numbers 15:39). And yet, it is the heart, that very seat of desire, properly directed, that yearns to intuit God's will, to be illuminated by the Source of all life.[18] What ballast may we give the capricious heart to intuit God's will?

Michael Fishbane, in his book *Fragile Finitude*, describes how a spiritual seeker might "find the right balance," in order to bring herself to that highest level of receptivity. He suggests repeatedly asking ourselves,

> "Am I open to reconsideration of the evidence, or have I blocked proper receptivity because of self-interest?"... The ideal is to cultivate a heart of wisdom… Turning inward, the seeker wants a *lev nakhon*, a "heart rightly attuned" to life and its challenges.[19]

Judah is able to rid himself of all self-interest and candidly look at the events of his life. At this transformative moment, his "rightly attuned" heart opens. He wins an understanding heart – *binah ba-lev.*

This is surely the first step in his process of *beirur.* But other than humiliation for the incident involving Tamar, Judah suffers no repercussions. It will be an entirely different matter to choose to take responsibility in the future, to take a step into the unknown when the personal stakes are high.

To enter the unknown with confidence, Judah, as we saw, must strip himself down to nothing, remove all self-interest, and pray that his efforts to make space will allow him to be a recipient of God's will. This humility will unfold and expand

[18] The Torah also directs one to "love God with all of your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

[19] Fishbane, *Fragile Finitude*, 96.

with the progression of the narrative.

Second Stage of *Beirur:* Judah's Pledge

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Joseph has set in action an elaborate plan to fulfil his dreams and bring his brothers before him. As the plan unfolds, the brothers, who had gone down to Egypt to bring back food during the famine, are accused by Joseph of being foreign spies. To save their family from starvation, they must convince Jacob to send Benjamin, his beloved, youngest son, with them to Egypt to be presented before the viceroy. Jacob, who is still mourning his loss of Joseph, is reluctant to part with Benjamin. Once again, it is the same two brothers, Reuben and Judah, who step forward, each one asserting himself as the figure of authority that Jacob can rely on to safeguard Benjamin.

Reuben's good intentions again miss the mark. Trying to guarantee Benjamin's safe return, he rashly declares, "Slay my two sons if I bring him not to you!" (Genesis 42:37). As in the scene with Joseph at the pit, Reuben's heart is in the right place; he feels stirred to lead, but his efforts are misguided. Needless to say, Jacob does not feel assured.[20]

At this point, Judah, intuiting just what is required at this moment and filled with a vital sense of responsibility, reacts. Putting aside concern for his own welfare, he steps forward to fill the void of leadership:

> And Judah said to Yisrael his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go; that we may live, and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be surety for him: of my hand shall you require him…" (Genesis 43: 8-9)

On the face of it, Judah offers nothing concrete to Jacob, nothing tangible to assure Benjamin's safety. Judah offers no plan, no strategy or specific details to explain how he will fulfil his courageous pledge.

And yet, in Judah's words there is an inexplicable quality, something difficult to define, yet palpably felt, that convinces his father. That quality, on the 9asidic master's reading, is Judah's inner resolve, his bold confidence coupled with his modesty and simplicity. His powerful presence is what reached Jacob's heart and awakened within him the confidence to part with his youngest son. It was Judah's authenticity that Jacob responded to. For, in R. Ya'akov's words, somehow, Jacob "knew that the spirit of God was speaking through him (Judah), and his heart was strengthened."[21] He was now ready to entrust Benjamin to Judah.

Judah Approaches Joseph

Yet, in a series of bewildering events detailed in the narrative, the very worst that could have happened indeed happens. Benjamin, whom Judah vowed to protect at all cost, is

[20] The Midrash envisions Jacob reprimanding Reuben, saying, "Fool, are not your sons mine too?" (*Tanhuma*, Miketz).

[21] *Beit Ya'akov*, Miketz 39.

accused of being a thief and taken hostage by Joseph, leaving Judah utterly distressed.

Joseph's plotting effectively thrusts Judah into the very situation where he was long ago. Once again, a brother's life hangs in the balance; once again, Judah is stirred to come to his aid.

At this climactic point, what follows is a rather lengthy monologue. Strikingly, throughout his speech, however, Judah does not offer any new information; he approaches Joseph without a single shred of evidence proving his brother's innocence. How then, does Judah hope to reach Joseph's heart? How will he convince him?

Exposed, vulnerable, and yet completely self-possessed, Judah ventures into the depths of uncertainty. In Ishbitz-Radzyn tradition, this encounter facilitates his final stage of *beirur.*

Judah's Final *Beirur*

> And Judah approached **him.**
> (Genesis 44:18)

As Judah draws closer, he is indeed standing physically before Joseph, but in his inner world, loyal to himself, he stands alone before God. With his pledge, and with his devotion to his father held firmly in his mind, he is certain of one thing only, and that is that at this moment he is doing the right thing.

Judah's confidence does not come from certainty of the outcome; that no one can have. Rather, cleansed of self-interest, he is devoted with every fiber of his being to the safety of his brother. With nothing else to hold on to, he steps into the unknown.[22]

Judah's heart breaks open and the words spontaneously pour out from his innermost depths: "'Let me be a servant instead of the boy… For how can I go to my father and the boy not be with me?'" (Genesis 44:33-34).

This time it is Joseph who finds himself unprepared for the moment, for Joseph does not know the Judah who stands before him now.

He knows Judah's former self; the charismatic leader with natural abilities and who, at the crucial moment, did not come through.

He knows the Judah who saved his life but didn't have the moral grit to save him from slavery and bring him back to his father.

He does not know the Judah who became "one who contains nothing of himself," a humble vessel emptied of his own self-interest who can now reflect something "other," something beyond himself.

When confronted by this very different Judah, all of Joseph's defenses fall away. The erstwhile master of self-control, who does not put himself at risk and does not take chances, breaks down in tears, and finally reveals himself to his brothers.

Judah's deep humanity overwhelmed Joseph. But more than that, the peculiar power of Judah's

[22] This spiritual stance became famous in the words of King David who said, "Even when I walk into the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for I know that You are with me" (Psalms 23:4).

presence, his understanding heart, his *binah ba-lev*, and his deep-seated awareness that he "contained nothing of himself," were foreign to Joseph. Yet they called to a hidden part of Joseph, a part that was concealed even from Joseph himself. Judah became like a mirror reflecting to Joseph his own compassion. When Judah approaches Joseph, the transformation within Judah ushers in a transformation within Joseph as well. The power of Judah's presence rushed through Joseph's veins, flooding him with an unfamiliar surge of emotion.

In a nuanced reading of the opening words of the chapter, "And Judah approached him," R. Mordechai Yosef, in his work *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, suggests: "He penetrated into the depths of Joseph's heart until he had no choice but to reveal himself to them [his brothers]." Such is the overpowering strength of Judah's character that Joseph becomes helpless to resist.

Conclusion

For *Mei Hashilo'ah*, Joseph and Judah represent two divergent, even contrary, paths to serve God, both of them legitimate in the eyes of God. What is significant for the Ishbitz-Radzyn masters is that they represent two legitimate paths for us to follow as well.

But in the tradition, the paths of Judah and Joseph do not enjoy a peaceful co-existence; their relationship is more complex.

> In truth, these two paths are always in conflict with one another, since the vital path in life that the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave to [Joseph's offspring] Ephraim is to always know the judgement and the law for every circumstance with no exception… However, the vital life source of Judah is to always look towards the Holy One, Blessed be He, in every circumstance and not to act by rote. (*Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, Vayeshev)

Joseph and Judah are archetypes for two divergent paths of *avodat Hashem*, and two different ways of interacting with others in the world. This reading of the narrative views the coming together of Joseph and his brothers as nothing less than a redemptive moment. It is a moment when individual biases, adaptive ways of being, and intellectual, spiritual, and emotional preferences expand to recognize the "other" as a legitimate path. This is not an analytical intellectual decision one makes; rather, it is the awareness born of realizing that different life circumstances require one path or the other.

But in a deeper application of Ishbitz-Radzyn's teachings, both attitudes co-exist within ourselves as well, each one yielding to the other, as we aspire to a self-reflective life of personal *beirur*.

Joseph's path, a life devoted to law, discipline, structure, diligence, and loyalty, is certainly indispensable for an ethical, refined life. For this reason, it is the more conventional description of a religious path.

Like Joseph's approach, we must certainly follow the directives set out for us by the *mitzvot* and

general principles of the Torah. But so much of life is unexpected and unpredictable. How is one to navigate one's life in all other matters? For that, says *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, we must look towards Judah. We need to cultivate an understanding heart, *binah ba-lev,* an instinctive, gut feeling,[23] as R. Mordechai Yosef refers to it: the ability "to always look towards The Holy One, Blessed be He in every situation."[24] As he continues,

> Even if one understands the general direction of the law, in any event [one should] look towards the Holy One, Blessed be He, to enlighten him with the depths of the truth. (*Mei HaShilo'ah*, Vayeshev)

But perhaps all this is not really as radical an idea as it seems. In truth, most of life cannot be anticipated, and there are decisions that we need to make all the time.

The hasidic masters relate to biblical figures as archetypes who embody the abstract quality of their particular character traits[25] and who therefore can serve as examples of how it is possible to refine these traits. Judah's capacity of *binah ba-lev* is not necessarily the exclusive territory of spiritual masters. Rather, in Ishbitz-Radzyn teaching, Judah's way of being is recast as a fundamental spiritual consciousness every Jew needs to cultivate and live by. Like Judah, if we dare to be fully engaged in life, we may often fail, overreach, and sin. After all, cultivating an attuned heart is not an exact science.

The story of Judah offers guidelines that point the way. We saw the unexpected union of certainty and humility that Judah possesses at the end of his path. We saw how, paradoxically, only when one removes self-interest and becomes receptive like an empty vessel, can one leave oneself open to other possibilities, to the possibility of aligning oneself with God's will.

For Judah, that means knowing that when he has exhausted the bounds of what the mind can grasp, when it seems that there is absolutely no alternative, he will cry out from the depths of his heart, and that, at times, an aperture may open and new light will flood in. This new light is the possibility that neither he nor Joseph could foresee. For what is unknown is infinitely greater than what is known.

We too may have our "Judah" moments, those occasions when necessity emboldens us to take a risk. If we cultivate a humble heart and hopeful spirit, then, as we enter into the dark, unknown places, we may uncover hidden caverns of truth, unexplored avenues for relationships, even love and fellowship, in the most unlikely of places.

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[23] *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, I, Emor, s.v. "*Va-haveitem et ha-omer*": "**understanding in the heart…** This means that he has a **deep and instinctive feeling** for where he needs to draw his boundaries, knowing how to recognize the boundaries of God's will, and that any further is not God's will."

[24] *Mei Ha-Shilo'ah*, I, Vayeshev, s.v. "*Vayeshev Ya'akov.*"

[25] In psychological terms, we may think about it as our real self being driven by our ideal self.

NEO-HASIDISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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Review of Shlomo Zuckier (ed.), *Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut* (New York: Yeshiva University Press and Ktav Publishing, 2022).

> *"There's a certain humility I've seen among the Modern Orthodox, especially the youth … they are prepared to acknowledge a sense of spiritual desolation that they're experiencing. There was and still is a readiness to hear more about Hashem, to find out more about Hashem and develop a personal relationship with Him, as opposed to just keeping a finger on the place in the Gemara and, in a more robotic way, observing the rituals of Judaism; to seek a living relationship with God. This is not to say that's only possible within Chassidus. But it certainly resonated hundreds of years ago, and it certainly resonates now, especially with young people."*
>
> - Rabbi Moshe Weinberger

Neo-Hasidism (alternatively Neo-Hasidut or Neo-Chassidus) is spreading across the Jewish world, investing both Orthodox and non-Orthodox ways of life with renewed fervor and passion. Rabbi Dr. Ariel Mayse has noted that both sides are united in their conviction that "the insights of Hasidism are too important … to be left to the Hasidim alone." Such insights, however, could not easily be shared with a modern audience. Hasidic teachings that find their way into modernity are often "presented in universalized fashion, and the Hasidic wisdom … shared selectively."[1] Hasidic views on the value or lack thereof of a Western education, perception of women's roles, and views toward non-Jews are seen as "relics of an earlier era" and conveniently left out of many contemporary conversations about the values of Hasidism. According to Mayse, this has led to a paradoxical reality in which "we too are active participants in shaping [Hasidism's] contemporary expression—based on our own religious personalities and moral compass. But we also allow the traditions of Hasidism to shape us and make claims upon us; the encounter with these sources is a relationship of mutuality."[2]

Of particular interest to Orthodox thinkers, such as Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Zuckier, are "recent movements over the past twenty years or so, in Israel and America, in which Dati Leumi and Modern Orthodox individuals and communities incorporate aspects of Hasidut for the purposes of spiritual inspiration and revival" (33-34).[3] Rabbi Yitzchak Blau identifies several elements in this trend:

[1] Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds., *A New Hasidism: Roots* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), xvii.

[2] Ibid, 425.

[3] All in-text citations are to the volume under review.

1. The growth of Carlebach *minyanim* and the expression of ecstatic enthusiasm in prayer and ritual.
2. A greater interest in the study of Kabbalah and Hasidut.
3. An assumption that learning should incorporate more of a quest for existential meaning.
4. An interest in the experiential and the emotional that at times displaces the cognitive and intellectual.
5. A discourse that prizes *hithabberut* (attachment) more than *hithayyevut* (obligation). (483)

Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut, the latest entry into the *Orthodox Forum* series, examines this phenomenon from multiple vantage points, aiming to "provide sociological information regarding this trend, offer historical context, explore relevant Hasidic theology and praxis, and take stock of our community's directions in *avodat Hashem*" (19).[4]

One need not look very far to identify how Neo-Hasidism has impacted the Modern Orthodox community. In his contribution to the volume, Rabbi Yehuda Turetsky identifies three categories of Modern Orthodox gap-year students meaningfully impacted by the trend:

1. A small minority of students is overtly and fundamentally influenced by neo-Hasidut. They undergo significant changes, often accompanied by clear external manifestations, such as growing beards and *peyes* (sidelocks) and wearing *gartels* (ritual belts). The style of dress often overlaps with that of hipsters, as does their contrarian worldview. Members of this group often attend Yeshiva University upon their return, but some enroll in yeshivot or universities that afford them more flexibility and independence. A significant portion of their Torah learning involves Hasidic texts.[5]
2. The second group is significantly larger in size. This group may also undergo some form of external change, such as growing *peyes*, but they by and large remain part of the mainstream Orthodox yeshiva system. The majority of their day is spent in yeshivot that have standard curricula, and the casual observer would be

[4] While most of the collected articles focus on areas that are unambiguously Hasidic or Neo-Hasidic, three of the opening ones locate the mystical and Hasidic underpinnings in the thought of Rabbis Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, Yitzchak Hutner, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

[5] Turetsky goes on to note that "although no formal data is available, informal interviews suggest that out of all the mainstream yeshiva programs in Israel, fewer than five to eight males per year undergo such an intense form of change. Several educators report that even fewer, if any, women experience this kind of transformation."

unable to discern a fundamental difference between these students and those uninfluenced by neo-Hasidut. What establishes this group as unique is their internal sense of connectedness to Hasidic teachings and the role that Hasidut plays for them as a primary source for their spirituality.

3. In the third group, members undergo no external change during their year in Israel, and they may not even learn Hasidut at all. However, they are the product of a world significantly influenced by neo-Hasidut, even if they are largely unaware of that reality. Activities and events that were once perceived as exclusive to the Hasidic or Carlebach movement have become extremely commonplace in many mainstream Orthodox institutions. For example … Carlebach services on Friday night, *tisches* following the Shabbat meal, and inspirational singing at the conclusion of Shabbat (355-56).

One need not even open this volume to know that Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm saw Hasidism as "a preferred theological grounding for the concept of Yeshiva University" and "worked in multiple ways to include Hasidut as a part of the YU curriculum."[6] Despite that, as David Landes *z*"*l* notes, it is far from obvious that Neo-Hasidut should have found a hospitable environment within Modern Orthodoxy given its non-rationalist emphasis on "[m]ysticism, charismatic miracle-working rabbis, visiting graves of *tzaddikim*, ecstatic forms of prayer and *hitbodedut*" (403). Moreover, "[t]he emphasis on the ontological distinctiveness of the Jewish soul in Hasidut conflicts with the Enlightenment principle of the equality of man that is commonly upheld by Modern Orthodox Jews and which underlies American political and social life," and Hasidut brings "new authority figures and a whole new library of sacred texts" that are often anti-modern, with no "notion of a neutral secular space outside the reach of religion" (403-04).

Even further, Landes explains that Hasidism is far less interested in grappling with theological issues that often are part of a Modern Orthodox identity, such as "the relationship of science and religion, the standing of secular studies, gender distinctions in *halakhah*, biblical criticism and scientific or academic approaches to the study of sacred texts, and the nature and substance of rabbinic authority." Hasidut instead assumes a "bedrock faith" that "negates the urgency and relevance of these issues" (405).

[6] Shlomo Zuckier, "Study (of Hasidut) is Great, for It Leads to Action: Two Generations of Hasidut at Yeshiva University," *Tradition* 53, no. 3 (September 2021): 297.

Part of this gap between Hasidism and Modern Orthodoxy is naturally covered by the "neo" in Neo-Hasidism. Landes notes, for example, that "people regularly combine non-modern and modern attitudes and beliefs, the practical and mundane with the miraculous and supernatural, without a sense of dissonance." Indeed, "Modern Orthodoxy, as its name testifies, has always been a hybrid phenomenon" (406). Furthermore, the form of Neo-Hasidism that is being accepted within Modern Orthodoxy "does not appear to challenge the neoliberal capitalist and consumerist values of American society that are shared by the Modern Orthodox, despite the strong anti-materialist ascetic values found in much classical Hasidut" (404).

But what, exactly, does Neo-Hasidism offer? There are several perspectives presented in the volume. Rabbi Yitzchak Blau highlights its counterbalance to Modern Orthodoxy's dry intellectualism and hyper-rationalism. "Especially in today's intellectual climate," he writes, "a discourse highlighting the value of intuition and experience in shaping our world view becomes crucial" (485).

Similarly, Rabbi Zev Reichman offers that Neo-Hasidism fights on two fronts. On one hand, it combats the idea that "[p]ermissiveness is good, moral relativism is chic, and religious people are sometimes presented as backward and benighted individuals" (467). It also helps observant Jews who "find their observance to be sterile, … struggle to extract any religious meaning when they study God's Torah or perform His mitzvot," and "are certainly at a high risk of abandoning their faith entirely … reconnect to soulful practice by bringing out the religious meaning and spiritual connection that other Jewish movements don't always emphasize" (467). Indeed, Reichman writes that "in an age of materialism and hedonism, only a great spiritual light—Torah refracted through kabbalistic insights—can serve as an antidote" and that "Hasidut is able to transmit kabbalistic teachings in a way that is accessible and spiritually edifying to the common person, not just the specialist" (461-62).

This accessibility, however, can be perceived as a bug as well as a feature. Rabbi Yehuda Turetsky, for example, points out that if "Hasidut is perceived as a body of works from which people can select the ideas they find to be most relevant, meaningful, and inspiring" while avoiding demanding passages, it can lead to "a decrease in intellectual rigor among many of today's students" where they "prefer to attend *shiurim* that are shorter and less intellectually demanding" (352-53).

A watering down of intellectual demand, though, is not the only thing that worries some about Neo-Hasidism's apparent encroachment into Modern Orthodox spaces. *Yirat shamayim* can also be at risk. Rabbi Yaakov Nagen paraphrases Micah Goodman as saying that spirituality without religion is like love without marriage, while religion without spirituality is like marriage without love. Nagen adds that "we must be careful that the discourse of spirituality will be of love that inspires marriage and not of love that makes marriage seem unnecessary … Within the religious community, the focus on spirituality must also stress *yirat Shamayim* and be balanced by a stress on *halakhah*" (435). Reichman even

notes that "by focusing [too much] on spirituality, we risk forgetting that mitzvah observance is paramount" and that "excess talk about belief in *tzaddikim* might lead to individuals believing in the wrong people with disastrous ultimate results" (466-67).

The most sustained voice of hesitation in the volume comes from Rabbi Yitzchak Blau. He notes that "ecstatic singing and dancing can lead to an emphasis on externals" and that "the absolute need for a feeling of exhalation may lead people to foolish measures in their desperate search for an emotional charge." "[T]he desire for immediate excitement," he suggests, "often stems from the negative character trait of impatience" (486, 488).[7] Blau also cautions that "an intense focus on self can lead to an indifference to others" and that "making performance contingent on a present feeling of personal connection can obscure the immense value of responsibility, commitment, and obligation" (489). The insistence that learning must provide a sense of meaning in addition to giving over information also "leads some students to follow their own daily learning schedule without valuing participating in study of the same material as the rest of the yeshiva" (448). This may lead one to "devote most of their study time to kabbalistic and Hasidic texts, even though they lack basic knowledge of Tanakh or even of Hebrew literacy" (492).

Blau's biggest worry about Neo-Hasidism, though, is in the implicit threat of antinomianism that it contains, as "[s]ometimes the reader cannot help but feel that Hasidic writers are allowed to take positions that others would never be allowed to express" (493). The result of this is that while Neo-Hasidism may very well "help rescue us from a pan-halakhic Judaism that reduces our entire religion to laws explicitly documented in *Shulhan Arukh*," it also "often encourages antinomian impulses of those eager to make sweeping changes in the halakhic system" (494). Those drawn toward experiencing the divine in their life may even "think they receive divine direction beyond the directives of Torah." Therefore, while Neo-Hasidism has the capacity to "create religious excitement, open up important new possibilities in Jewish life, provide a balance to previous attitudes in our world, and aid in invigorating the quest for existential meaning in Jewish learning and practice," it can also "potentially lead to shallowness, excessive emotionalism, lack of commitment, and a distortion of priorities, among

[7] A similar point is made by Rabbi Dr. Nehemia Polen, who notes that "the attempt to infuse life into synagogue services simply by adopting a few 'Carlebach *niggunim*' may not have as much impact as some hope … If there is no communal commitment to ambitious goals of personal and collective transformation, then the effort to 'add *ruah*' is less likely to have long-term success … as for every spiritual practice, *avodah* is work, demanding focus, seriousness of purpose, accountability to goals, benchmarks to measure progress, and the ability to start anew after perceived failure. Shortcuts and artificial boosts generally are of little help, and may be dangerously self-deluding" (274-75). This point has been hammered in elsewhere by Don Seeman, who wrote that "the literature of mystical rapture and divine immanence does not lend itself very well to the plodding but oh-so-important elaboration of limits and taxonomies upon which ethical life depends" and that "any religious phenomenology that is focused too closely on the immediacy of Divine Presence will tend to undervalue the complicated human multiplicity that calls for balance and adjudication" (Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds., *A New Hasidism: Branches* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019], 79).

other problems" and should thus be incorporated into Orthodoxy with caution (495).

Such a conclusion is hard to avoid given Neo-Hasidism's history. Mayse points out that earlier incarnations of Neo-Hasidism actually "found little traction in Orthodox circles where *halakhah* is the defining feature of Jewish life and its practice is considered the *summum bonum* of religious experience" and that "to some degree these feelings were mutual" (233). For Neo-Hasidic exponents like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Shlomo Carlebach, this was mostly "a matter of emphasis rather than essence." Other thinkers who were ubiquitous with Neo-Hasidism such as Martin Buber, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and Arthur Green, though, "proudly embraced heterodox forms of Jewish practice that are at odds with the Orthodox understanding of obligation." One can even make a strong argument that "the turn toward theology and spirituality at the expense of engagement with (and practice of) *halakhah* in some Neo-Hasidic circles has surely pushed members of the Orthodox community … to become more deeply entrenched in their single-minded focus on the study and practice of Jewish law" (233).

Despite this antagonism, Mayse argues that liberal Neo-Hasidism has influenced its Orthodox counterpart to a significant degree by combating assimilation among young people. Some even joined the Orthodox community, bringing "new styles of dress (including colorful and intercultural garments), approaches to food (vegetarian, sustainable), ritual objects, music, and, most importantly for our purposes, an embrace of mysticism and a non-rational spirituality. Many of these elements originated in the youth counterculture and were fused with the ideas of neo-Hasidism" (233-34).

Mayse goes on to argue that it is "impossible to imagine the contemporary interest in Hasidic thought in American Orthodox communities without the writings of liberal Jewish scholars." When students with such interest "wish to read compelling, nuanced theological works that speak to modern issues of the inner spirit, they often turn to the works of thinkers like Heschel, Buber, and, to a lesser degree, Schachter-Shalomi and Green" (235). For these reasons, and more, Mayse states that although the theological writings of liberal Neo-Hasidic thinkers have met some opposition within Orthodoxy, their influence "has indeed extended to the Orthodox community and rabbinate in ways both subtle and direct" (236).[8]

[8] One can argue, though, that Orthodox rabbis have also impacted the liberal version of Neo-Hasidism. Philip Wexler, for example, has argued that Neo-Hasidism is "a philosophical movement, a literary movement, and a spiritual movement" whose representatives include "Martin Buber, I.L. Peretz, Hillel Zeitlin, Abraham J. Heschel, Elie Weisel, Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, and Shlomo Carlebach. The last three notably, were all profoundly influenced by [Rabbi Menachem Mendel] Schneerson." Some forms of Neo-Hasidism "openly embrace and appropriate Hasidic texts and practices" while others "borrow more selectively or more surreptitiously." In every form, however, "the spirit of the Hasidic ethos continues to disseminate outward into broader culture and echoes beyond the particular confines of Judaism in the broader phenomena of new-age decentralized and non-denominational religiosity or spirituality." It is implied that this dissemination is, in no small part, due to the Rebbe *zt'l*'s influence. Philip Wexler, Eli Rubin, and Michael Wexler, *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Transformative*

Such influence, Mayse argues, is a good thing for Orthodoxy. After all, the Orthodox approach to Halakhah has "led to an exclusively practice-oriented definition of religiosity, in which performance itself is the height of spiritual experience" and many in the Orthodox world "portray *halakhah* as if it were a self-justifying system with an internal coherent logic and a matrix of values that exist untouchably beyond time and space" (238). Neo-Hasidism, though, reminds us that Halakhah is "best understood not as law *per se*, but as … a sacred path of obligation that brings us into the presence of the Divine." This approach is "grounded in the ideals of spiritual creativity, compassion, and personal integrity" and "must inform the way that we decide the *halakhah* in the contemporary world" (238). Mayse notes that Orthodox figures influenced by Neo-Hasidism have been working toward this and that "the discourse in centrist and left-leaning Orthodox communities has already begun to shift" (239).

And yet, if we look at what Mayse and others have written about Neo-Hasidism elsewhere, we can see an undercurrent that pushes toward greater halakhic change. Mayse, for example, discusses what happens when *halakhah* appears to violate moral sensitivities, writing that in his opinion, there cannot be "a situation in which every fiber of my being, including my moral barometer and my spiritual sensibility (both deeply informed by my engagement with Torah), tells me to act in one way and the halakhah commands another."[9] In such moments, Mayse writes that "either I have failed to hear correctly the values expressed by the classical halakhah or, alternatively, the halakhah as it has been interpreted is either no longer appropriate or, at the very least, does not apply to this particular situation." Put directly, "when such intolerable moments of confrontation ensue, we are obligated to change or reinterpret the halakhah in some way."

Rabbi David Hartman articulates a similar approach in which halakhah "should be engaged as an open-ended educational framework rather than a binding normative one." Hartman identifies such an approach, which advocates selective religious observance, with "powerful trends within the Hassidic tradition … interpreting mitzvot to mean 'suggestions' or 'counsel' about how most fully to experience the presence of God in one's life."[10] Hartman admits that his understanding of halakhah, if taken in its natural direction, "would undoubtedly lead to fundamental reinterpretations of the sources … and to an evolution of halakha itself."[11] Indeed, when faced in his rabbinate with the question of a *Kohen* congregant of his who fell in love with a convert, Hartman writes as follows:

> My response was immediate, drawn from a clear moral intuition. I felt compelled by this middle-age man who had finally found a

Paradigm for the World (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2019), 231.

[9] *A New Hasidism: Branches*, 174-175.

[10] David Hartman with Charlie Buckholtz, *The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting & Rethinking Jewish Tradition* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014), 50.

[11] Ibid, 109.

woman he loved and wanted to start a family with. Refusing marriage seemed to cause him pain unjustly. Moreover, I could not in good conscience allow the incoherent, morally problematic designation of Susan [the convert] as promiscuous to permeate the way I thought about her or influence my decision in this most delicate and meaningful moment of her life. The notion of telling these two very serious Jewish seekers that they must deny themselves the happiness of marriage because of this now-obscure, ancient principle seemed unacceptable as the ground for destroying their dream to build a new life. I told Peter that I would be honored to perform the wedding.[12]

[12] Ibid, 129. One might compare this with the famous story told by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

> The Torah summons the Jew to live heroically ... We cannot permit a *giyores* to marry a *kohen*, and sometimes the cases are very tragic, I know from my own experience. I had a case in Rochester, with a gentile girl, she became a *giyores*, the woman became a *giyores*, before she met the boy. She was a real *giyores hatzedek*; she did not join our fold because she wanted to marry somebody - *giyores hatzedek*. And then she met the Jewish boy. He came from an alienated background, had absolutely no knowledge of *Yahadus*. She brought him close to *Yahadus*, and they got engaged, and he visited the cemetery—since he came closer to *Yahadus*, he wanted to find out about his family, about his family tree, so he visited the cemetery in which his grandfather was buried, and he saw a strange symbol - ten fingers like that. So they began to ask; he thought it was a mystical symbol. So he discovered that he is a *kohen*. What can you do? This is the *halacha*, that the *kohen* is *assur b'giyores*. I know the problem. We surrender to the will of the Almighty.
>
> On the other hand, to say that the *Halacha* is not sensitive to problems and not responsive to the needs of the people, is an outright falsehood. The *Halacha* is responsive to the needs of both the community and the individual. But the *Halacha* has its own orbit, moves at a certain definitive speed, has its own pattern of responding to a challenge, its own criteria and principles. And I come from a rabbinic house; it is called *beis harav*, the house into which I was born, and believe me, Rav Chaim used to try his best to be a *meikil*. However, there were limits even to Rav Chaim's skills. When you reach the boundary line, it is all you can say: "I surrender to the will of the Almighty." There is a sadness in my heart, and I share in the suffering of the poor woman, who was instrumental in bringing him back to the fold, and then she had to lose him. She lost him; she walked away.

Hartman himself acknowledged that Soloveitchik "would have disagreed in the strongest possible terms with my decision to marry Peter and Susan. He would not have seen it as a joyous occasion, but one of mourning for the loss of something far greater than the love of two people. I can say this confidently because he once described, in a lecture, his response when a parallel case had come before him" (Hartman, 131). Hartman, for his part, felt that "notwithstanding [Soloveitchik's] profound influence on me and my profound gratitude to him as a student, I must part company with a view of halakha that takes it out of history and out of human experience. Is the price of loyalty to deny what I know to be true? Does it tell me I have to put on different eyes? I do not think that loyalty to and love for this tradition requires exiting history, or exiting life" (Hartman, 155).

In response to such concerns, Mayse goes out of his way to acknowledge that "change must employ the indigenous language and the chorus of voices in halakhah, which hold all the seeds for future evolution" and that "key to this enterprise is an expansive and penetrating expertise in classical Rabbinic literature."[13] Furthermore, he notes that Neo-Hasidic halakhah "does not always incline to leniency, and certainly does not unfasten our commitment to obligate in hearkening to the divine command."[14]

Still, given attempts at using Neo-Hasidism to reshape halakhic practice, it is hard to say that the concerns raised by Blau and others are completely misdirected. On the contrary, one may agree with a point raised by Rabbi Shmuel Hain in the preface of the volume under review, which sees Neo-Hasidism as "a potentially destabilizing force emerging from the 'outer rim' of the [Modern Orthodox] community" (18). At the same time, it is undeniable that contemporary Orthodox Jews are missing something that Neo-Hasidism has to offer, namely, "to be open to heartfelt spiritual experiences, to talking about God, and to exploring the vast richness of Jewish theology, to reclaiming the emphasis on Jewish life as a quest to stand in the presence of God."[15]

Neo-Hasidism, then, comes with both great risk and great reward. If utilized correctly, it can revitalize Modern Orthodox engagement with theology and empower greater connection with observance. If utilized incorrectly, it can very easily pull many away from traditionally accepted halakhic norms. Hain, then, is undoubtedly correct that Neo-Hasidism has "significant influence on the Modern Orthodox community" and is "surely worthy of critical attention" (18). *Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut* truly does an excellent job at empowering readers with knowledge of this fascinating, albeit precarious, world.

Thank you to Yosef Lindell and Ashley Stern Mintz for masterfully editing and copy-editing this review, to Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Zuckier for encouraging me to examine this volume, and to Rabbi Dr. Ariel Mayse for first introducing me to the wonderful world of Neo-Hasidism and continuing to guide my exploration of it.

TWO POEMS ON GOD AND THE WORLD

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On the World's Continuity Via Divine Speech

God is like a celebrity
making small talk
at a dinner party.
Everyone hangs on His words,
and if He were to stop speaking,
the evening would end.

[13] *A New Hasidism: Branches*, 177.

[14] Ibid., 178.

[15] *A New Hasidism: Branches*, 432.

Notes on the *Tzimtzum*

1.
Once, on a bus from Jerusalem to Ein Gedi,
I saw a man place his hand
over his bare head
and recite the blessing
over water.

2.
One can't use his hand
as a head covering,
the Rabbis conclude,
because one can't cover
oneself with oneself.

3.
Since the Divine hand hides
that everything stems out of the Divine,
when God looks at the world,
He sees only Divinity.

4.
The Jew without a *yarmulke*
placed the cap
on his water bottle
and resumed watching a YouTube video
on black holes.

5.
To cover an object,
a blanket's diameter
must run larger
than the object itself.

6.
In this orld, *Hashem* hides
His omnipresence, His Infinite Light.

7.
In this world,
we ride buses through a Divine concealment
whose diameter is greater
than infinity,
we sip water
beside a dam
that holds back
endless light.