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What Sons Receive: A Collection of Poems

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What Sons Receive

What sons receive from their fathers:
A sharp chin, a flat nose,
a knowledge of the wind,
a good mind, the skill to find or
lose, a leaning towards drink,
the ability to think or forget,
an arrogant heart, sips
from grandfather's brew,
a million gold coins,
a carved flute,

or
tongue lashings, beatings
from a belt, the violence and silence
that soils daily the masculinity
of a half-grown man, stains his
humanity.

I received a coat
given in exchange for my innocent laughter.
Soon after, they claimed I came to gloat,
switch my blood with that of a goat,
and I became a beast, penned
up in pits and prisons,
mumbling to myself by rote:
"I am Joseph, son of Jacob, Isaac, Abraham,"
Holding to the memory of my father's hand
as he, so loving and proud,
wrapped me in the coat
that became my shroud.

Indeed I died and was reborn
as the man of God, a deep burden of joy.
Yet, sometimes recalling that naïve young boy,
I fall on the ground
and weep. I mourn.

Joseph's Pendulum
Swinging at breakneck speed
from high to low,
goodbye–hi–farewell–hello,
up and down in a dizzying vertigo
of success and spurning,
soft bed, hard flooring,
completely unmooring,
bouncing back, returning,

and always, like a brain fog, the yearning, the yearning
for cruel people who have long forgotten
and surely do not remember me,

but I remember,
I well remember,
in my heart still burns an ember.

Binyamin
It's utterly infuriating,
I who am ravenous for life
am wrapped in cotton wool.
My brothers always mediating
between me and all kinds of strife,
preventing my living to the full.
So I sit here, stagnating,
while twisting inside me, a knife;
a slavering yellow-eyed wolf
lies impatiently waiting
with heart ripe and rife
to spring, and seize my rule!

Reuven
I didn't ask to be born first,
born of the thirst of my mother
to have a son – not sufficing with one
she did not tarry, had Shimon and Levi,
as if children are little cakes that
you bake, sweet and heavy.

It's an odd home we live in,
there are disconnects; there's
bartering plants for sex; intrigues, jealousy;
my brothers violently vying for
my father's legacy,
willing to commit a felony
to undermine the coat-wearer's supremacy.

And in the middle of this turbulence,
in the storm's eye,
I try to be good, to get by.
But sometimes, when no one's
looking, I curl up, confused,
and just cry.

Coherence, Contradiction, and the Philosophy of Chabad

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Review of Yosef Bronstein, *Engaging the Essence: The Torah Philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (Maggid Press, 2024).[1]

The enormous number of printed books filled with the teachings of R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, represents an expansive and sometimes bewildering ocean of ideas. His homilies, letters, and public addresses explore every element of Jewish life, from the spiritual meaning of the weekly *parashah* and the granular details of Jewish law to soaring theoretical reflections on the nature of faith and religious values such as unity, love, and joy. Schneerson's works offer a compelling vision of what it means to be Jewish in our time of dramatic social change, of how to yearn for redemption while striving tirelessly to improve the world through kindness, compassion, and devotion. Such themes, however, are often developed across an enormous number of texts or sermons; diving into Schneerson's writings, therefore, is a daunting task. While Chabad Hasidim have, over time, developed some recommendations regarding where to begin, for those outside of the Hasidic community, finding one's way into Shneerson's spiritual path is no simple matter.

Yosef Bronstein's thoughtful new book, *Engaging the Essence* , presents Schneerson as a captivating religious intellectual whose teachings have much to offer contemporary readers of all stripes. In broad strokes, the author seeks to place Schneerson within the "canons of great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century" (ix). He thus seeks to expand the lists of what "counts" as modern Jewish thought, a category that is often reserved for non-mystical philosophers, political theorists, and writers. In this work, Bronstein surely succeeds. He examines Schneerson's teachings as a holistic philosophy, seeking to present "the overall structure" of his "system of thought"(x) on a wide range that includes ethics, theories of leadership, the nature of Torah and its spiritual dimensions, the land of Israel, conceptions of redemption and messianism, and the complex interface of universalism and particularism. *Engaging the Essence* depicts Schneerson as a brilliant teacher who was at once deeply, indelibly rooted in tradition—and in the specific traditions of Chabad—but who also "deepened the wells and expanded the frontiers of Hasidic thought and developed strikingly innovative formulations and ideas" (6). Bronstein's analysis of Schneerson's thought benefits from his willingness to draw upon both university research and Chabad scholarship. Overcoming this fissure, one that is common in the study of Hasidism,

[1] All parenthetical citations are to this work unless otherwise noted.

enabled him to combine contemporary academic work with the narratives and modes of interpretation found within the Hasidic community.

Because of its thematic emphasis, Bronstein's book might be fruitfully read in tandem with Elliot R. Wolfon's magnificent *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision* (Columbia University Press, 2012), a tour-de-force of erudition exploring Schneerson's paradoxical understanding of redemption and the rich phenomenology of religious experience portrayed in his teachings on revelation. *Engaging the Essence* may also be compared to *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Transformative Paradigm for the World* (Herder and Herder, 2019), by Philip Wexler, Eli Rubin, and Michael Wexler. *Social Vision* is another enormously impressive work of scholarship that considers Schneerson's teachings with an eye to concrete social, economic, and theological problems such as climate change, mass incarceration, and education. As a sociologist and philosopher of education, Wexler's aim was to explore the synergies between critical social theory and Schneerson's teachings. He and his co-authors posit, correctly in my estimation, that the mystically inflected vision of communal life found in Chabad Hasidism offers an alternative to the alienating and highly individualist trends that define so much of modern society. They suggest that Schneerson's teachings ought to be taken seriously by a wide range of social scientists, activists, policy-makers, and academics, who are among the book's target audience. Bronstein's work, by contrast, is primarily interested in exploring the theoretical dimensions of Schneeron's writings – on themes such as providence, divine unity, human agency, redemption, and personal spiritual growth – and their importance for the many religious Jews who live *beyond* the Hasidic community.

The syncretic nature of Bronstein's project means that he is often forced to stitch together – and occasionally to harmonize – texts as if they are a part of a single, comprehensive philosophical vision. While certain elements of Schneeron's public teachings remained stable across some sixty years, others transformed in response to communal need and historical circumstances. Unlike Chaim Miller's *Turning Judaism Outwards: A Biography of the Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (KOL Menachem, 2014), a book that masterfully tracks the evolution of Schneerson's theology across the decades of his life, Bronstein's work generally ignores the dates and historical contexts of the homilies and texts he is analyzing. He leaves us with little sense of Schneerson as a dynamic thinker whose ideas and philosophy developed over time. Bronstein elides some of the internal tensions that characterize Schneerson's teachings. Enamored with science, physics, and engineering – his personal notebooks discuss the relationship between Pascal's Law and the inner life – Schneerson nonetheless refuted scientific accounts of creation and evolution on theoretical grounds. Bronstein notes the complexity of Schneerson's attitude, but he neither probes its ideological roots nor interrogates the implications of this strain. Consistency is rarely counted among

the hallmarks of homiletics, and, perhaps more importantly, within the landscape of Hasidism, contrasting mystical ideas can be held together through paradox and creative tension – modes of thinking outside the purview of rationalist or analytical philosophy.

The treatment of Schneerson's thought as if it must be a holistic and coherent "system," as the author often argues, may be the result of the fact that Bronstein is well-versed mostly in the canon of Jewish sources, and in the modes of thinking and textual analysis, available to Modern Orthodox Jews – a point that the author concedes in his introduction. To some degree, Bronstein is continuing the good work of figures such as Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, a Modern Orthodox rabbi who served as the Chancellor of Yeshiva University and was also a noted scholar of Hasidism. But Lamm's studies of Hasidism – and *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (Hoboken, NJ: Yeshiva University Press, 1999), his beloved anthology of Hasidic sources – reveal a much broader understanding of this polychromatic spiritual phenomenon and its many shoots, branches, and schools. There are unwelcomingly few significant references to the primary sources of other streams of Hasidism, past or present, in Bronstein's book, nor does he afford ample space to the complex and variegated kabbalistic teachings that undergird Schneerson's thinking on subjects such as *dirah ba-tahtonim* ("a dwelling place in the lower worlds") or the nature of redemption.

Bronstein correctly points out that, while Schneerson did not accept Zionism, per se, he intimated that it may play a role in redemption, and he was willing to acknowledge the State of Israel as long as it remained distinguished from the religious destiny of the Land of Israel. The boldness of this revision, however, is hidden, because Bronstein neither compares Schneerson's thinking to other Hasidic rabbis of his time nor carefully contrasts his position to earlier Chabad leaders. This decision to focus solely on Schneerson is not necessarily a fault, but, as a result, his work fails to grapple with the fact that the religious teachings of Hasidism, including those of Schneerson, are a much bigger theological conversation that has evolved across the past 250 years. The jump from examining the ideology of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady's *Tanya* (ch. 2) to Menachem Mendel Schneerson's first discourse as the leader of Chabad (ch. 3), for example, is abrupt and unscaffolded. It lacks any discussion of what happened in the intervening centuries. Bronstein occasionally argues for Schneerson's creativity without being able to fully demonstrate that innovation or to place it into relief through carefully calibrated comparison.

But attentive focus in works of scholarship also has its payoff. Bronstein's work succeeds in drawing together and explaining a massive number of written sources around key subjects, translating the technical vocabulary of Schneerson's majestic spiritual and social vision into categories that will be readily legible to an enormously wide

readership with little previous exposure to mysticism. The result is an interesting book that will, I suspect, serve as a gateway for seekers who wish to "engage the essence" – for individuals yearning to broaden their intellectual horizons and to deepen their spiritual experience through encountering the teachings of one of the greatest spiritual luminaries of our time.