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PARSHAT KORAH

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**CAN ONE DELEGATE HOLOCAUST
METAPHORS? [EXCERPTED FROM TALMUD
TRACTATE PSEUDO AVODAH ZARAH,
PEREK AOC]**

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MISHNA

A Gentile who makes a Holocaust metaphor is obligated to death.

But a Jew who does not make a Holocaust metaphor is cut-off.

GEMARA

The sages asked

Can one delegate Holocaust metaphors?

On the one hand, it was taught that "all are obligated to regard themselves

as though they were personally liberated from [alternative manuscripts read: abandoned in] Auschwitz."

But it was also taught that one can hire a scribe to write a Torah scroll even though the verse teaches "And you shall write for *yourself* a scroll."

Yourself—this means a fellow Jew.

What do we learn?

Marx says that money turns the other into an extension of oneself.

But Anderson says this only works within an imagined community.

As people say, "one cannot hire a turtle to say Kaddish for one's cat."

Thus, the sages concluded that one can delegate Holocaust metaphors

provided the one hiring and the one being hired both have the intention of fulfilling their obligation.

But what about in the case where one purchased a Holocaust metaphor online

or through a third-party?

Rav permits and Shmuel forbids.

What's the reasoning?

Rav says the relationship itself is essential to the act and Shmuel says the content stands (independent of the relationship).

By Shmuel's reasoning, though, I should be able to purchase a Holocaust metaphor from a Gentile?

Yes. That's true.

But Shmuel forbade this?

Yes, lest the money from the transaction support BDS.

But if that were so, then let Shmuel forbid all transactions with Gentiles?!

Rather, the reason must be that Shmuel held that we are dealing only with a case of political foes, not with Gentiles as a general class. [The Meiri notes that in our time the category of political foe is purely theoretical and totally inapplicable.]

Or if you want, say that Shmuel was concerned with job creation and wanted to ensure that even the poor might be able to support themselves through this hobby.

But isn't making Holocaust metaphors a craft?

As it says, "And Bezalel assembled the dolphin wood?"

Shmuel held that it is not a craft. As it says, "Let each person bring a half-shekel."

A poem is not a thesis statement but an argumentative journey, a search for that which could not be revealed were the poem not written, and, through reading, rewritten. How's that for a thesis statement? In this, it resembles the Talmud. Or rather, we can say, Talmud is poetry in a fundamental sense.

Charles Olson writes that the units of the poem are the breath and the line. A line break is a visual representation of a change, a turn, not just in sonic velocity but in the attitude or stance of the poem. A poem is a coherent series of disruptions, a curated gathering of dissonances, what David Antin calls "radical coherency." While there are no deliberate line breaks in the Vilna Shas—making the Talmud read as a kind of prose poem—Talmudic form also reads as a series of

disruptions. Yes, one can find thematic and logical coherence between words, phrases, and arguments, but this coherence is an emergent property that grows out of a finer and subtler sense that the ground on which the Talmud stands is a dark abyss. According to legend, when the Vilna Gaon praised Reb Zusha for knowing an obscure sugya in the Yerushalmi Talmud, Reb Zusha's response was that he didn't know the text, but that he got his knowledge from the same place the Yerushalmi got its knowledge. If Reb Zusha's example is paradigmatic, and I believe it is, then Talmud is, above all, a way of being, a way of thinking, and only secondarily a calcified text, a leather bound book. It is, after all, oral Torah. Poetry, too, in its origins was oral, and like Talmud, now occupies the strange position of often being page-bound.

Dramatic dialogue accounts for about 30% of the Babylonian Talmud, but the glue that makes Talmud what it is is the disembodied voice of the stamm[aim], the narrator[s], a literary conceit by which the Talmud talks to itself, recasting the historical, diachronic dialogue of earlier Tannaitic and Amoraic sages as a synchronic and deliberately anachronistic discussion in which later voices talk to, with, and back at their predecessors. I offer a mash-up here of Talmudic satire and cultural commentary, above all, not to convince anyone of anything prosaic (for that you can read my twitter), but rather to delight in Talmudic form and language and to show its relevance for bringing criticism and self-criticism to discussions that are too often one-dimensional, overdetermined, and stale. Talmud Torah is a way of life, a high calling. But Talmud Torah, I believe, should be expanded to include not just the study of ancient texts but also the production of our own. While it may be the case that we moderns or postmoderns can only parody and imitate the past, it may also be the case that irony and parody are themselves traditional forms. Or as Bruno Latour used to say, "we have never been modern." *Tzarich iyun*. Fictive Sugyot are not necessarily endorsements.

FROM KAYIN TO KORAH: THE FELLOW FOUNDERS OF FOMENT

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The insurgency of Korah and his followers against Moshe and Aharon is halted by the earth itself, which opens its mouth to devour the rebels. As remarkable as this physical phenomenon is, the Gemara in [Sanhedrin 37b](#) points out that this is neither the first nor the only place in the Torah where the earth opens its orifice.

Indeed, the first killing in history, Kayin's murder of Hevel, also features the ground opening up. God informs Kayin ([Genesis 4:11](#)) that he will be cursed "by the [very] land that opened its mouth to accept the blood of your brother," condemning him to a life of toil and wandering." As Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Hiyya puts it, the land opens its mouth "for good," receiving Hevel's unjustly spilt blood and softening its metaphorical screams ([Genesis 4:10](#)). The very earth that provided respite for Hevel could offer no rest for his murderous sibling.

The Gemara there asserts that "from the day the land opened its mouth and accepted the blood of Hevel, it never again opened." But, asks the Gemara, what about the famous story of Korah, in which the earth opened wide to quash the rebellion? The Gemara concedes

that, indeed, the earth opened again in the Korah episode. But the opening of the earth for Korah was "for bad," serving as a punishment, while the opening for Hevel's blood was "for good," its purpose to bury Hevel's blood.

It is no coincidence that, in this [foundational underground narrative](#), the earth opened its mouth to both swallow Hevel's blood and devour Korah's body. Their very names attest to their association with the earth's open mouth, indicating their destiny to be swallowed. *Hevel* means "open air," and *hevel peh* refers to breath. Hevel's blood, his very life force, was taken in by the earth, subsumed into its breath, the air of its mouth. (Incidentally, we know from Jewish law that *hevel*, or subterranean air such as that present in trenches, can be lethal; see [Bava Kamma 51b](#); this is a continuing echo of Hevel's death, preserved in nature.) Korah means "bald" or "empty"; the patch of land cleared away and replaced by the Earth's mouth was a fitting place for Korah to call his permanent, desolate home.

The Gemara's juxtaposition of the Kayin and Korah episodes is not accidental. These are the two cases where, in an extraordinary deviation from nature, the earth opens its mouth. The Gemara obviously didn't "forget" about the Korah story, only to come up with the distinction that the Kayin-Hevel story was "for good" while the Korah story was "for bad." The oft-repeated swallowing of Korah's rebellion by the earth ([Numbers 16:30,32](#), [26:10](#), [Deuteronomy 11:6](#)) would not have escaped Rav Yehudah's attention. Rather, Rav Yehudah is drawing a connection between these two stories of men whose actions motivated that same reaction by the earth.

Kayin's murder was the first purposeful destruction of a living human, and it was carried out by one sibling against another—the destruction of a family. Korah's rebellion was the first effort to destroy the fledgling peoplehood of *am yisrael*, perpetrated by one member of the nation-family against his brethren—the destruction of a people. In a sense, Korah's rebellion aimed at murder, an attempt on the life of the body politic, targeting the personified republic and everything it stood for. The Gemara therefore gestures at the parallel between the originary actions of each of these categories: the first murder and the first rebellion.

The actions of Kayin and Korah share more than the crime of "attempted murder." Each aggressor experienced a certain confusion as to how best to carry out his destructive act. That [same Gemara](#), and the same Amora, Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Hiyya, assert that "Kayin inflicted multiple wounds, multiple gashes, in his brother Hevel, because he did not know where the soul exits the body, until he reached his neck."

Korah's rebellion was similarly confused. The rebellion was not a single, focused campaign, but a disjointed coalition of malcontents rising together against the status quo. That's why the leadership was so fractured, including not only Korah but also Dan and Aviram, as well as On ben Pelet and 250 leaders from across the Jewish people. Each faction needed its own opposition leader.

Their claims were also disparate: some factions decried the leadership of Moses and Aaron ([Numbers 16:3](#)), other groups believed they were going to die in the desert ([Numbers 16:13](#)), and still another group wanted priesthood for all Levites ([Numbers 16:10](#)). Was the purpose of the rebellion to usurp spiritual leadership from Moses and Aaron, or was it to improve the nation's physical circumstances?

SELFLESSNESS AND THE SELF IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE

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My dear friend and *havruta* offered to play me a song How does one access their soul? How does one bring to the fore the spiritual essence of one's being that on the one hand "permeates the whole body," but simultaneously is elusively concealed and "unseen."¹ This question is central to the theory and practice of Hasidism, and the Hasidic masters developed an array of techniques to help people experience their souls. In addition to the 'ordinary' regimen of Torah and *mitzvot*, these methods include a complementary mixture of contemplation,² visualization,³ experiences of joy,⁴ sadness,⁵ music⁶ and the study of mystical texts.⁷

For R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994), this question was relevant not only for the texture of the individual's religious experiences, but also for the very redemption of the world. The Rebbe referred to his era as "the last generation of exile and the first generation of redemption,"⁸ and declared that the generation's *sui-generis* historical mission was nothing less than ushering in the messianic reality.⁹ In Chabad thought, a major component of the utopian era is the revelation of the true divine nature of the material world and all that exists therein.¹⁰ As the soul is described in *Tanya* as "truly a part of God,"¹¹ the process of creating redemption requires each person to strive to reveal their own soul and the souls of others. The more the soul is accessed and revealed, the more divinity is revealed in the world.¹²

¹ *Berakhot* 10a.

² See, for example, *Sihat Malakhei Shareit*, chapter 3, s.v. "u-kemo be-ruhani."

³ See, for example, *Haksharet ha-Avreikhim*, chapter 4.

⁴ See, for example, *Sefer ha-Ma'amarim* 5657, s.v. "Same'ah Tisamah," 223-224.

⁵ See, for example, *Likutei Moharan* 1, 22:5.

⁶ See, for example, *Hayei Moharan, siman* 340.

⁷ See, for example, *Orot ha-Kodesh* Volume 1, *piska* 76.

⁸ See, for example, *Torat Menahem* 5747:2, 353 and *Torat Menahem* 5748:2, 295.

⁹ The Rebbe stated this mission in his opening *ma'amar* as the leader of Chabad. It is excerpted below.

¹⁰ *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 36.

¹¹ *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 2. Translation is from R. Yosef Wineberg, *Lessons in Tanya*, available at https://www.chabad.org/library/tanya/tanya_cdo/aid/6237/jewish/Lessons-in-Tanya.htm.

¹² See *Likutei Sihot* 29, *Hosafot – Simhat Torah* 5746, *se'if* 4-5, where the Rebbe describes the collective redemption as being built from the aggregate of personal redemptions. For the relationship between personal and collective

As [Ibn Ezra](#) (to Numbers 16:1) describes it, the rebellion comprised all of the above: an amalgamation of people upset about the ascendancy of Moshe and Aharon, the leadership of Kehat among the Levites, the replacement of Reuven with Yosef as the tribe with the rights of the *bekhorah*, and the replacement of the firstborn with the Levites. Different individuals upset about different things (including some mutually exclusive complaints) banded together to launch simultaneous attacks against different targets in their society. The disjointed nature of this rebellion might be why some interpretations of [Avot 5:17](#), including [Malbim to Numbers 16:1](#), see Korah and his followers as pitted against one another as well.

Both the first murder and the first rebellion, then, aimed to achieve their destructive goals through "death by a thousand cuts." Lacking any precedent or "how to" guide for fomenting rebellion, both Kayin and Korah threw everything they could at their target, hoping their violent actions would find success. Thus, both the body of Hevel, and the body politic of Israel, were riven with cuts and divisions as a result of these primal attacks.

These attacks – one more successful than the other – constituted more than just a glitch or a divergence from normal functioning. They represented no less than a fundamental break in the natural order. By definition, murder and rebellion aim to destroy humanity and society, and the attendant trauma reverberates far beyond its immediate target. Such actions, when lacking necessary justification, tear at the very fabric of civil society and obliterate the harmony necessary for human flourishing. Not all violent actions have such negative consequences; in some cases, such as Pinhas' zealous act against Zimri (appearing several chapters later in Numbers), an act of violence can be deployed in service of a [greater restorative end](#). Kayin's and Korah's actions, however, had no such redeeming value.

So consequential were Kayin and Korah's actions that the natural order itself rebelled. In each case, the earth ripped itself open, gaping its mouth as if in a primal scream. The foundations of the world could not continue their usual function amid such violent personal and communal rifts. That fissure in the ground – the opening of the earth's "mouth" – represents that fracture and the thousand cuts that spurred it. These consequences of these violent acts extended far beyond the wildest dreams of their authors.

And, at the same time, the earth did what it could to regain its grounding. Whether that meant swallowing Hevel's blood, to minimize the atrocity that had already taken place (acting "for good"), or consuming Korah's rebels and averting the carnage before it could happen (acting "for bad"), the earth did what was necessary to restore some degree of equilibrium.

As the Gemara tells us, "From the day that the land opened its mouth and accepted the blood of Hevel, it never again opened its mouth... until it swallowed Korah."

The destructive actions of Kayin and Korah, the founders of foment, shook the very foundations of the world. Both Kayin and Korah had their genealogical lines wiped out: Kayin's descendants perished in the flood, and Korah's progeny may well have been wiped out in the aftermath of his revolt (see [Megillah 14a](#); but see [I Chronicles 6](#)).

We are enjoined "not to be like Korah and his congregation" ([Numbers 17:5](#), [Sanhedrin 110a](#)), and instead to build a world of peace and stability. And, in doing so, we are charged to redeem the very earth that swallowed Kayin's and Korah's carnage, to restore a harmonious natural order.

This essay will briefly outline one technique for accessing the soul that the Lubavitcher Rebbe underscored as being crucial for his generation. Characteristically, the Rebbe built his idea from earlier Chabad texts and yet, both conceptually and programmatically, his final formulations stand as surprisingly innovative.

The first section of *Tanya*, the foundational work of Chabad Hasidism, is roughly organized around the verse: "For [the service of God] is exceedingly near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do."¹³ This verse raises serious questions that are very pertinent for the average Jew. Most importantly: in what way is the service of God, and particularly the elusive religious emotions of loving and fearing God, within the grasp of every Jew? In the title page of *Tanya*, R. Shneur Zalman, the founder of Chabad Hasidism, arguably states that he will offer two explanations for this verse.¹⁴

The first 17 chapters of *Tanya* comprise one general approach to the "nearness" of religious emotion. R. Shneur Zalman begins with the assumption that the average person is not naturally in a state of deep religious fervor due to the unceasing battle waged by the animalistic soul. Accordingly, R. Shneur Zalman's objective is to teach his readers how to generate *new* religious emotion. Famously and foundationally, *Tanya* recommends a person to focus their cognitions on God's greatness and this contemplation will eventually "give birth"¹⁵ to powerful religious emotions.

Chapter 18 of *Tanya* opens a new section of the book and a complementary approach to how the proper service of God is attainable for each Jew. R. Shneur Zalman now shifts his language from generating/creating to revealing/extracting. Thus, we read that even a person "whose understanding in the knowledge of God is limited"¹⁶ and therefore cannot produce love and fear of God through intellectual focus, is still "exceedingly close" to God and his service. This is by virtue of the nature of the Jewish soul which innately "desires... to unite with its origin and source in God."¹⁷ Accordingly, the *modus operandi* is to excavate the external ego which will eventually reveal a root soul that is naturally utterly united with God.

While R. Shneur Zalman bases this conception of the Jewish soul on kabbalistic sources, he famously offers a tragically not uncommon occurrence in Jewish experience as a proof that this love is indeed innate:¹⁸

redemption in Chabad thought see Naftali Loewenthal, "The Neutralisation of Messianism and the Apocalypse," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996): 59-73.

¹³ Deuteronomy 30:14.

¹⁴ For a clear description of the two general answers in *Tanya* to this question, see R. Yoel Kahn, "Mahutam shel Yisrael" *Ma'ayanotekha* 15 (Kislev 5768): 3-10, available at <http://www.toratchabad.com/files/maynotecha/machshevet/15.pdf>. However, see *Likutei Sihot* 34, *Nizavim* #2 where the Rebbe raises another possible interpretation of *Tanya's* title page.

¹⁵ *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 3.

¹⁶ *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 18.

¹⁷ *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 19.

¹⁸ *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 18.

Even the... transgressors of the Jewish people, in the majority of cases sacrifice their lives for the sanctity of God's Name and suffer harsh torture rather than deny the one God, although they be boors and illiterate and ignorant of God's greatness. [For] whatever little knowledge they do possess, they do not delve therein at all, [and so] they do not give up their lives by reason of any knowledge and contemplation of God. Rather [do they suffer martyrdom] without any knowledge and reflection, but as if it were absolutely impossible to renounce the one God; and without any reason or hesitation whatever.

Ignoramuses and sinners do not sacrifice their lives due to their intellectual understanding of God's greatness and the emotional derivatives of such cognitions. Rather, there is something embedded within the Jewish psyche, referred to as the *yehidah*¹⁹ or the "*pintele Yid*," (the Jewish core) that is always definitionally bound with God. The irrational choice of a self-proclaimed atheist to selflessly give up his life for the sake of God is a revelation of the deepest recesses of the Jewish soul.

Importantly, in this passage R. Shneur Zalman describes the revelation of the soul as the result of an extreme degree of external pressure. It is when a non-Jewish enemy points a sword towards the Jew's throat that the latter's hidden core becomes revealed. Bereft of such external pressure, it is possible for a Jew to live his entire life with his inner divine core remaining concealed under layers of the petty and selfish ego.

The fact that external pressure can be a trigger for the soul's revelation is highlighted by the fact that the Rebbe associated the above citation from *Tanya* with a passage from Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.²⁰ A truism in the laws of divorce is that the husband must volitionally deliver the divorce document to his wife. Concurrently, though, in certain situations a recalcitrant husband will be corporeally beaten by the court to encourage such a "volitional" divorce. Aware of the tension between being corporeally beaten to motivate the execution of a free choice, Rambam writes:²¹

[the husband] wants to be part of the Jewish people, and he wants to perform all the *mitzvot* and eschew all the transgressions; it is only his evil inclination that presses him. Therefore, when he is beaten until his [evil] inclination has been weakened, and he consents [to the divorce], he is considered to have performed the divorce willfully.

The Rebbe understood that Rambam is making an ontological assertion regarding the nature of a Jewish soul.²² A Jew's *yehidah* is

¹⁹ R. Shneur Zalman himself does not use these terms, but in later Chabad literature it is the *yehidah*, the deepest part of the soul, which is associated with the capacity for even a heretic to give up his life for God. See, for example, *Torat Menahem* 5716:1, 6 and *Torat Menahem* 5745:2, 820.

²⁰ *Likutei Sihot* 11, *Shemot* #1, note 59; *Torat Menahem* 5750:2, 482-483;

²¹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Geirushin*, 2:20.

²² *Likutei Sihot* 11, *Shemot* #1, note 59. For a longer analysis of the Rebbe's understanding of this passage, see Yaakov Gottlieb, *Sahlatanut be-Levush*

bound with God and therefore always “wants” to choose the path of *mitzvot*. Similar to the non-Jew’s sword, the external pressure applied by the court merely cuts through the veils of concealment and enables the revelation of the husband’s true inner identity.

Prima Facie, the entire notion of external pressure as facilitating the soul’s revelation was not useful in the Rebbe’s historical and social setting. The Rebbe and the headquarters of Chabad were located in post-World War II America where the external pressures of earlier eras simply did not exist. There were no marauding non-Jews forcing Jews to choose between God and the sword. Even the notion of internal Jewish communal social pressure to remain observant was greatly reduced if not eliminated. For all intents and purposes, there was no external pressure of which to speak.

Within this context, the Rebbe made an interpretive and programmatic intervention. In his understanding, the most relevant takeaway from the above sources was not that external pressure leads to the soul’s revelation. Rather, it was a broader point: actions of self-sacrifice that transcend a person’s egoistical intuition are events of soul-revelation. At times, it takes an extreme amount of external pressure for a person to overcome the external layers of his identity and therefore R. Shneur Zalman and Rambam provide examples of violence and threats. In truth, though, any time a person succeeds in not following their initial selfish intuition for the sake of a higher purpose a little more of that person’s divine core is revealed.

For the Rebbe, this meant that *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice) and *bittul* (self-effacement) lead directly to the revelation of the *yehidah*. As the Rebbe said:

The aspect of *yehidah*, which transcends the revealed faculties, expresses itself in the service of *mesirut nefesh*, since *mesirut nefesh* is also above all of the revealed faculties, reasons, and thought. From a rational perspective there is no reason for true *mesirut nefesh* - a service not for the sake of a reward. The power of *mesirut nefesh* stems from the *yehidah*.²³

One’s service must be in a manner... of essential self-effacement (*bittul atzmi*). Through this one arrives at the revelation of the *yehidah*.²⁴

Paradoxically, it is selflessness and self-effacement that lead to the ultimate revelation of the “self.” The *bittul* leads to the revelation of the *yesh ha-amiti* – the true nature of a person in which he is shown to be utterly united with God.²⁵

Hasidi: Demuto shel ha-Rambam be-Hasidut Chabad (Ramat Gan, Israel: University of Bar Ilan Press, 2009), 164-166.

²³ *Torat Menahem* 5718:3, 194

²⁴ *Torat Menahem* 5711:2, 184.

²⁵ The Rebbe would often reflect on the fact that the classic Chabad notion of “bittul” leads not to the complete obliteration of the self or the world but the revelation of the “true reality.” See, for example, *Torat Menahem* 5713:1, 235-236; *Torat Menahem* 5746:3, 245. It is important to note that this differs from the way that some scholars understand R. Shneur Zalman’s understanding of reality which they describe as acosmic and entirely an illusion. For these descriptions, see Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey Green

In a setting which lacked external pressures the Rebbe realized that such acts of *mesirut nefesh* and *bittul* and the resulting revelation of the soul can only be achieved through a radical educational and programmatic shift. Simply put, people must be educated towards lives of constant self-sacrifice on behalf of other people. All throughout his forty-plus years as the leader of Chabad, the Rebbe unceasingly exhorted his hasidim and anyone else who would listen to prioritize other people’s material and spiritual needs before their own.²⁶ Complementary to the time-honored motive of simple altruism, the Rebbe taught that the very act of sacrificing what is important to oneself for the sake of another person reveals the divinity that lies at the core of each human being.²⁷ In the aggregate, such actions reveal the divine core of all humans and ultimately of the world itself.

The Rebbe highlighted this theme in his opening address as the leader of Chabad. He began his very first *ma’amar*²⁸ with an extended analysis of various rabbinic texts which led him to define the generational mission as nothing less than revealing the divine core of reality and ushering in the messianic era.²⁹ The Rebbe then transitioned to discuss specific strategies that the generation would need to employ to complete this historic mission. One theme the Rebbe highlighted was that of *mesirut nefesh*.

(Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 49-57 and Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Jewish Publication Society, 1998). However, other scholars such as Ya’akov Ya’akovson, “Torat ha-Beri’ah shel R. Shneur Zalman mi-Li’adi,” *Eishel Be’er Sheva* 1 (5736): 307-368 and Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 96 argue against the view that classical Chabad philosophy sees the world as entirely illusory. This latter approach is affirmed by the internal Chabad tradition as reflected in the above statements of the Rebbe. For the statements of earlier Rebbes about the “realness” of the world despite the Chabad notion of *bittul*, see *Derekh Mitzvotekha* 54b from the Tzemah Tzedek and *Sefer ha-Ma’amarim* 5629, 143-151 from the Rebbe Maharash. For more on the relationship between *bittul* and *yesh* in earlier Chabad thought and particularly in the Rebbe’s teachings, see Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 144-147.

²⁶ For the Rebbe, sacrificing for the other is a form of sacrificing for God. See, for example, *Ha-Yom Yom* for the 12th of Av, where the Rebbe records that the Ba’al Shem Tov taught that one’s love for his fellow is a derivative of one’s love for God, as a spark of divinity is found within each Jew.

²⁷ This article focuses on one effect of such actions for the benefactor. A more complete understanding of the Rebbe’s thoughts on this matter, though, would include the notion that the revelation of the soul of the benefactor performs reveals his unity with the recipient of the kindness. This is based on the fact that the soul is a part of God who is the single true substance of reality. Therefore, in truth, acts of *mesirut nefesh* and *bittul* help overcome the dualistic and binary notion that each person is a completely autonomous and independent entity. For an expression of this idea see *Torat Menahem* 5748:2, 401-402. For more elaboration and analysis, see Philip Wexler, Eli Rubin and Michael Wexler, *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe’s Transformative Paradigm for the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019), 124-130.

²⁸ *Bati le-Gani* 5711, printed in *Torat Menahem* 5711:1, 192-203. Translations are adapted from https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/115145/jewish/Bati-Legani-5711.htm.

²⁹ *Bati le-Gani* 5711, se’if 3.

The Rebbe explained that while Jews were always enjoined to sacrifice for the sake of God, this final generation would be required to be totally mission-focused and ready to forgo anything and everything for the sake of others. One acute manifestation of this form of self-sacrifice is the need to forfeit, at times, not only one's physical life, but even one's spirituality and *feelings* of closeness to God for the sake of helping others. Foreshadowing the *Shelihut* initiative, the Rebbe prescribed that people may need to leave their safe, spiritual and familiar environments in order to engage even the "lowest" elements of the world. This endeavor is counterintuitive to even many religious individuals who would naturally prioritize staying close to the Rebbe and to the community. Nonetheless, only such persistent acts of self-sacrifice are able to disclose the divine core of reality.³⁰

As models for this behavior, the Rebbe pointed to, among others, Avraham Avinu and R. Shneur Zalman. The Rebbe recounted how R. Shneur Zalman once interrupted his prayers in order to chop wood, cook a soup, and feed it to a woman who had just given birth, because there was nobody else to do it.³¹ Elsewhere, the Rebbe elaborated that this story actually occurred on *Yom Kippur*.³² While R. Shneur Zalman would have probably *felt* closer to God by staying in the synagogue and praying, he sacrificed this experience to feed a poor woman.

Similarly, Avraham is the paradigm of a person who took his spiritual state very seriously and yet dedicated his life to helping others. The Rebbe highlighted a specific Talmudic passage's description of Avraham's work. Following Avraham's treaty with Avimeleh, the Torah describes that Avraham settled in *Be'er Sheva*, where "he called (*Va-yikra*) there in the name of the Lord, the God of the world (*El Olam*)."³³ Using a midrashic hermeneutical tool, the Talmud comments:³⁴

Do not read it as "he proclaimed" (*Va-Yikra*), but rather "he made others proclaime" (*Va-Yakri*).

This teaches us that Avraham caused every passerby to proclaim the name of God. Avraham not only proclaimed God for himself, but self-effacingly engaged the passerby of the world to act in kind.

According to the Rebbe, this is the model for the entirety of the last generation:³⁵

This kind of service of God [called for in this generation] resembles that of Avraham: arriving in places where nothing was known of Godliness, nothing was known of Judaism, nothing was even known of the *alef beit*, and while there setting oneself completely aside [and proclaiming God's Name] in the spirit of the teaching of the Sages, "Do

³⁰ *Bati le-Gani* 5711, *se'if* 6-7.

³¹ *Bati le-Gani* 5711, *se'if* 6.

³² *Torat Menahem* 5744:2, 627-631. See, *ibid*, for the halakhic justification for such an act.

³³ *Genesis* 21:33.

³⁴ *Sotah* 10a.

³⁵ *Bati le-Gani* 5711, *se'if* 8.

not read 'he proclaimed,' but 'he made others proclaim.'"

The generation that is charged with the mission of revealing the divinity in the world perforce needs to self-sacrificially place other people before themselves. Only through *bittul* can the veils of concealment be peeled away, ultimately revealing the true divine *yesh* that lies within.

It is important to note that this technique of the Rebbe for revealing the soul stands in marked contrast to the ones outlined in the introductory paragraph to this essay. Techniques such as contemplation and music are more intuitive manners of accessing the soul as they are often felt to foster the kind of spiritual experience that we normally associate with the soul. However, as the Rebbe emphasized, spending one's time helping others often does not *feel* spiritual and will, in fact, require one to initially sacrifice the frequency and depth of ordinary religious experiences.³⁶ But it is precisely the fact that social activism requires a sacrifice of the experiences that the religious individual intuitively holds most precious that makes it the ultimate expression of *bittul* and *mesirut nefesh*, leading to the revelation of the deepest recesses of the soul.³⁷

The Rebbe understood that the freedom granted to most of world Jewry (with the exception of Jews under Soviet rule) was not a disadvantage to be shunned but an opportunity to be embraced. In several talks he described that even though external pressure leading to self-sacrifice can reveal the inner-soul, a deeper and more lasting revelation of divinity occurs when a person has options but actively *chooses* a lifestyle of self-sacrifice.³⁸ It was for this reason that God placed the last generation in the challenging but messianic-like

³⁶ See *Igrot Kodesh* 18, letter 6510 (available at <https://chabadlibrary.org/books/admur/ig/18/6510.htm>) where the Rebbe describes the gap that often exists between what provides *nahat ru'ah* to a person and what creates *nahat ru'ah* to God. He encouraged his young interlocutor to contemplate this lesson and not feel that he was missing out by moving to Australia to help the Jewish community there.

³⁷ For an antecedent in Chabad literature, see *Igrot Kodesh Admor MohaRa'ayatz* Volume 15 letter 5114 (available at <https://chabadlibrary.org/books/maharyatz/ig/14/5114.htm>) where R. Yosef Yitzhak, the Rebbe's father-in-law and predecessor, argued that a person who focuses his efforts on helping others will eventually rise to greater heights in the service of God than a person who focuses primarily on his own learning and prayers. More generally, the role of seemingly non-spiritual physical actions in Chabad thought has piqued the interest of practitioners and scholars alike. See, for example, Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer "Anti-Spiritualism be-Hasidut: Iyunim be-Mishnat R. Shneur Zalman mi-Li'adi," *Molad* 20 (1963); "The Apotheosis of Action in Early Habad," *Da'at* 18 (1987): V-XIX and this author's "Sof Ma'aseh be-Mahshavah Tehillah: Torah Study and Actional Mitzvot in the Philosophy of Habad Hassidism" in *Kol HaMevasser* 10:2 (Fall, 2016): 4-7. This is of course not to say that the Rebbe downplayed the importance of emotional religious experiences. For two of the many places where the Rebbe treated the relationship between religious experience which can stem from other layers of the soul and the revelation of the imperceptible core of the *yehidah*, see *Likutei Sihot* 4, *Korah*, *se'if* 5-8 and *Kuntrus Inyanah shel Torat ha-Hasidut*, *se'if* 17.

³⁸ See, for example, "Ve-Atah Tetzaveh 5741, *se'if* 9-10" *Sefer Ma'amarim Melukatim* Volume 3, 39-41. For an elaboration on this theme, see Eli Rubin, "Emancipation, Multiculturalism and the Perpetual Passover: Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson's Vision of Modern Progress as Religious Opportunity," available at https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1816231/jewish/Emancipation-on-Multiculturalism-and-the-Perpetual-Passover.htm.

setting of freedom from external restraints. It is only within a free society that true religious choice can occur.

The Rebbe concluded each of his thousands of talks, even the most kabbalistic and abstruse, with a practical takeaway.³⁹ In this vein, I feel it appropriate to conclude this brief reflection with a call to continue this aspect of the Rebbe's teachings. As we individually and communally reflect on the Rebbe's multi-faceted legacy for Chabad and the world more broadly, let us take upon ourselves to do an act of self-sacrificial kindness for another person. Perhaps it will allow us to realize the divine core that exists within ourselves and within the other.

RABBI MOSHE FEINSTEIN ON WHAT MAKES AMERICA GREAT

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On Wednesday, March 4, 1939, the United States celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Constitution becoming the law of the land. Back in 1789, the first Congress and the first President took office on that date. On the Shabbat after the sesquicentennial, which happened to be *Shabbat Zakhor*, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein noted the occasion in a sermon and took the opportunity to contrast the American form of government with the fascist and communist regimes of Europe, specifically Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. In time-honored rabbinic tradition, he identified those regimes with Amalek, Israel's mortal enemy, who we remember to blot out on *Shabbat Zakhor* (and on *Shabbat Ki Tetze*).

In his new work on Rav Moshe [*Ha-Rav Moshe Feinstein: Hanhagah Hilkhatah Be-olan Mishtaneh* (Alon Shvut, 2017)], Rabbi Dr. Harel Gordin points out that these regimes were not mere metaphors in 1939. The Feinstein family had fled the Soviet Union only two years prior; Rav Moshe experienced the horrors of Stalinism firsthand. Likewise, in 1939, the scourge of Nazism was well known to Jews, even if the magnitude of its evil could not yet be imagined.

Of course, fascism and communism had their adherents in America, as well. In March 1939, millions of Americans were still tuning in each week to hear Father Charles Coughlin and his angry, antisemitic, fascist-sympathizing rants. Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* is no doubt a work of fiction, but the nativist, isolationist, paranoid mood he describes was significant during those years. Perhaps paradoxically, American sympathy for Bolshevism also peaked during this era, as the "Red Decade" reached its crescendo. No one living in the United States in 1939, certainly no one who, like Rav Moshe, read the newspaper daily, could be unaware of fascist and communist sympathies in the United States. Yet, in this sermon, Rav Moshe does not praise the United States for not having fascists and communists, but for having a system of government that is particularly resistant to what came to be known as totalitarianism.

Rav Moshe writes:

Every superstition and every nonsensical opinion in the world claims to bring light to the world and creates beautiful things to deceive and win over adherents.

³⁹ For the theory behind this practice, see *Kuntras Inyana shel Torat ha-Hasidut, se'if 18* and *Likutei Sihot 32, Emor #2, se'if 2*, among other sources.

However, since many do not espouse them, they compel anyone they can, with sword and spear, to adopt their views. This is true in all times, with respect to both matters of faith and matters of ideology, past and present, and especially in Russia and Germany ... Ultimately, all that is left is wickedness, not the ideology it was fashioned to support; what need do they have for it once they have swords and spears? ... In the end, only the sword and spear remain, while the light is completely extinguished, as we see in the extremes of Germany and Russia.

Therefore, no sovereign power should accept one single faith or one single ideology, because ultimately only the power will remain, without an ideology, and this leads to destruction, as we see with our very eyes ...

This is likewise the case with the attack by Amalek, which had a mistaken view they wished to express: that [the redemption of Israel] was not miraculous and that there was no reason to fear them. Yet they should have first engaged in discussion, to prove their point if they could, or to concede the point if they could not. They did not do so, instead opting for war straightaway, and thus showing that their primary motive was not [to illuminate, but to exercise power]. We therefore memorialize them in our hearts and with our mouths, so that we know that any religion or system of beliefs that wields power and sovereignty and does not rely only on its inherent light is hollow, false, and misleading. In truth, there is no light in them. This is why we continue to remember Amalek.

It thus emerges that no national regime may espouse a single system of beliefs. Rather, it must only serve its function, which is to see that no one perpetrates injustice against another, steals, or murders, for if not for the fear of the regime, people would swallow one another alive. However, with regard to opinion, religion, and speech, everyone shall be free to do as he wishes.

Therefore, the United States, which established in its Constitution 150 years ago that it will not uphold any faith or any ideology, rather, that each person shall do as he desires, and the regime will see that people do not molest one another, is carrying out God's will. It is for that reason that they have succeeded and become great in our times.

(*Darash Moshe*, Vol. I, pp. 415-6)

Nearly eighty years later, we see that the views that brought the world to war in 1939 are still alive and well in the United States, and respect for basic freedoms has eroded in some quarters. Yet if someone as wise and astute as Rav Moshe Feinstein could think, even in the age of "Uncle Joe" Stalin and the America First Committee, that as long as the government continues to safeguard the freedoms of religion, opinion, and speech, the country will not slide into totalitarianism, then perhaps we can be somewhat optimistic as well.

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