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Israel's Light: A Response to Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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After lying dormant for over a quarter century, nationalism again occupies a central place on the international agenda. The signs of its rise include the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., the Brexit vote in the UK, and its resurgence in Italy and Eastern Europe. Global elites are struggling to understand these sweeping new challenges to their desired post-national world. The particulars of each nationalistic movement differ from country to country and some of its manifestations are surely negative. The overall issue of nationalism vs. globalism, however, is an important one to Jews and Torah. A new book by Israeli philosopher and Bible scholar Yoram Hazony, and the critical response of New York Rabbi and theologian Meir Soloveichik, has brought the dispute between globalists and nationalists into the heart of the Modern Orthodox Jewish community and raises pressing questions about what role Jews and Judaism should play in an increasingly disordered political reality.

Hazony, who is President of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem (where I serve as Executive Director), recently published *The Virtue of Nationalism* (Basic Books, 2018), seeking to show that the Early Modern idea of a world order based on the principle of national freedom and self-determination arose historically from the writings of Moses and the Israelite prophets, and arguing that this biblical ideal is still our best option for world order today. This approach follows from his earlier work by bringing to bear the tools of philosophy and political theory in elaborating a traditional ethos of Judaism and Zionism for the contemporary era.

One might see Hazony's book, which shows that Jews and Jewish sources can contribute much to the non-Jewish world, as a straightforward example of *or goyim* (a "light of the nations"). But Soloveichik, an eloquent thought leader for America's Modern Orthodox community, sees the matter quite differently. In a lengthy critique published in *Commentary Magazine* ("Saving American Nationalism From the Nationalists," October 2018), Soloveichik rejects the possibility that the Bible and the Jewish people offer a useful political model for America, Britain, and other modern countries.

The political ordering of the nations and Israel's relationship with other nations are two foundational questions in the Bible. The independence and uniqueness of the nations precedes God's call to Abraham (*Genesis* 10:1-11:9), and Israel's impact on the nations of the world is part of God's initial speech to Abraham (*Genesis* 12:3). It is therefore worth considering how Soloveichik arrives at his conclusion, the consequences that flow from his position, and the shortcomings that plague his perspective.

Soloveichik acknowledges that "there is no question that the most utopian proponents of European assimilation propound a perspective in tension with the biblical approach," and that when the Bible "preached an eschatological vision, in which all nations recognize the God of Israel, it did so without
assuming the assimilation of these nations into Israel." He argues, however, that "Israel's founding was noticeably different from the origins of other nations," and that "if there is a

central political message for Israel throughout the Bible, it is this: For Israel to deserve independence, it must remember that it exists for a calling more important than independence itself."

To his initial question of, "Does the story of biblical Israel teach us that the independence of nations is an inherent good?" Soloveichik answers that it does not, since "Biblical Israel is a nation, but it is constantly reminded that the nation exists for the covenant, or *brit*, not the other way around." He therefore concludes that since other peoples do not have such a covenant, "Israel's story is thus not easy to compare to that of other nations," thereby severely limiting Israel's ability to be a model for other nations.

In order to define Israel's national independence as just "a means to a covenantal calling," Soloveichik claims that when Israel "enters the land, and takes on the trappings of a standard polity, it still has a calling higher than the state itself." To emphasize that Jewish government officials are just "trappings," Soloveichik claims that "the leaders of the tribes do not participate in the selection of their leader," and that "Saul and David are anointed not by the people but by God." Soloveichik similarly detaches Israel from its homeland. He accomplishes this by using the observation of theologian Michael Wyschogrod that Israel becomes a people by "pledging a loyalty to the God of Israel and to His Torah" in "Sinai *before* entering the Holy Land," while for other nations "a people is born out of a soil which is its mother. The people does not pre-date the land."

Moreover, Soloveichik doesn't just disqualify biblical Israel as a model for the United States and other nations. He proposes that instead of learning from Israel and its Torah, America should rely on the teachings of the English Enlightenment philosopher John Locke. For Soloveichik, Locke's universal-rights theory, as reflected in the American Declaration of Independence, is the "theory at the heart of the American idea" and "the covenant of America," giving the United States its own "higher calling," making it an "almost chosen people."[1]

For Soloveichik, Abraham Lincoln is the exemplar of the Lockean-American ideal and the originator of the "almost chosen people" phrase. He cites Lincoln to the effect that America must bring its "great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come" by promoting the Lockean political system. Soloveichik concludes his essay with a prayer, in which he invokes not the vision of the prophets, but that of Lincoln: "In this time of national fragmentation and fevered debate, it is this vision—Lincoln's vision—that, please God, may help us 'achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.'"

Israel's Covenant

Soloveichik's narrow understanding of Israel's covenant leads him to deny the relevance of biblical Israel's international vision to the other nations of the world. In similar fashion, his depiction of Israel's freedom, polity, and homeland also stems from his conception of the covenant. Let's see how these considerable difficulties flow from this one source.

[1] Soloveichik acknowledges that the Declaration is not purely Lockean, but adds that "the Founders remedied what was lacking in Locke by adding biblical concepts to the Declaration."

Soloveichik spends little time explaining how he sees Israel's covenant, which he describes as Israel "pledging a loyalty to the God of Israel and to His Torah." God's promise to Abraham that his descendants will play a universal role is only vaguely and tersely addressed in the following lines, in which Soloveichik notes that "Israel existed and exists not only for itself, but for the unfolding of God's plan on earth, so that all the families of the earth will be blessed."

But Soloveichik does not tell us anything about what God's plan is or *how* the other nations become blessed because of Israel. It seems that through fidelity to God and His commands, Israel will somehow enable the fruition of God's plan for all of humanity. However, the process is left mysterious, even magical, as though working on an unseen metaphysical plane. For Soloveichik, the covenant seems to enjoin a set of commands that Israel must obey, but has little correlation to actions and events of humankind on Earth. This allows him to downgrade the very human elements of national freedom, government, and homeland.

In fact, however, the *way* in which Israel realizes its universal role is essential to Judaism. As many of our sources emphasize, Israel is meant to serve as a model nation for all others. Descriptively, the historical experience of Israel may differ from other nations. Prescriptively, however, impacting the nations of the world is precisely the purpose of Israel. Israel's calling is to bring recognition of God and teach righteousness to other nations through influence and by example.[2]

Israel's covenantal obligations are part of God's initial promise to Abraham that "all the families of the earth with be blessed" through the "great nation" that his descendants would establish (*Genesis* 12:2-3). God repeats this universal promise to Isaac (*Genesis* 26:4) and Jacob (*Genesis* 28:14). Each time, the promise assumes the existence of other nations. Israel will have a universal impact, but since the various nations will exist, the implementation will be different and particular for each nation, as will be described below.

How Israel is to become a blessing is made explicit by Moses as the Jewish people arrive at Mt. Sinai and prepare to enter into their covenant with God. In the first step of their initiation, God tells Israel that they will be a special nation, whose purpose is to be God's "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*Exodus* 19:6). As the descendants of Aaron are priests of God for the Israelites on the national level, the nation of Israel are, in the words of R. Ovadia Seforno, "to serve as priests of God internationally to teach the peoples of the world

[2] The overall approach in this essay is largely based off of and is elaborated in Rabbi S.R. Hirsch's *The Nineteen Letters* and *A Letter in the Scroll* by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. One can certainly find the metaphysical view in the rabbinic sources. See, for instance, *Midrash Rabba Genesis* 12:3 s.v. *ve-nivreu* (both). Further, a number of commentators believe that Israel is supposed to impact human thought and action, but do not describe the process by which this occurs. For examples, see Malbim *Genesis* 12:3 s.v. *yevorkhu* and Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Command 9. Soloveichik himself in *Azure*, Winter 5765/2005, p. 59 accepts the interpretation of Seforno that is quoted below. Soloveichik then adds that Israel is charged with "communicating the monotheistic idea and a set of moral ideals to humanity." The remainder of that essay focuses on God's love for Israel, but does not describe the process by which Israel fulfills its covenantal obligations according to Seforno.

to call in God's name."[3] Israel's laws and actions should inspire the admiration of the other nations who "upon hearing these laws shall proclaim, 'Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people'" (*Deuteronomy* 4:6). Israel's covenant should lead to the approbation of the other nations, who will then be drawn to follow the wise and discerning life that they witness in Israel,[4] and will therefore be blessed with their own flourishing lives.

Isaiah succinctly captures this mission:

> Thus said God, the Lord, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and what it brings forth, Who gave breath to the people upon it and life to those who walk thereon: I, the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light of the nations—Opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement, from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (42:5-7)

Notice, first, that God presents Himself here in universal terms, as the creator of the world and *all* of its people ("who gave breath to the people on it"). Second, Israel's covenant with God is described as inseparable from its purpose, which is to influence the other nations. Finally, Israel's influence on other nations occurs as a consequence of the modelling and education that Israel shines forth, and not through a mysterious or metaphysical process.

To be precise in our language, Isaiah says *le-or goyim*, as a light *of* the nations, and not the commonly misquoted and mistranslated *or la-goyim*, a light *to* the nations. The latter implies a paternalistic relationship, which devalues free choice, while the actual text means that Israel will embody the best of humanity to then influence humanity. The very purpose of Israel's covenant is to bring universal recognition of God to all peoples of the world, so that their actions are shaped by a consciousness of God, while Israel also respects their liberty. Isaiah 49:6 concludes that God "will also make you a light of the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth," when all humans will then act in a more moral and holy manner.

Monotheistic belief and morality go hand in hand as Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes, "Monotheism, by discovering the transcendental God, the God who stands outside the universe and creates it, made it possible for the first time to believe that life has a meaning, not just a mythic or scientific explanation" (*The Great Partnership*, 9).[5] For Israel's prophets, kindness, generosity, comradery, fidelity, truth, justice, purity, and sanctity constitute the central elements of walking in God's ways (*Shabbat* 133b, *Sotah* 14a). These messages are everywhere in the Bible. Israel must relate to and galvanize "the other nations to walk by [its] light" (*Isaiah* 60:3). Otherwise, it will fail in its covenantal mission.

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[3] S.v. *ve-atem.* This idea is stated explicitly by R. Abraham ben Ha-Rambam s.v. *mamlechet* on this verse, Rabbi S.R. Hirsch to *Genesis* 12:2-3, Netziv in *Ha-Emek Davar* to *Exodus* 12:5, Radak to *Isaiah* 42:6 s.v. *livrit.* A similar formulation on the individual level is made by Rashi *Genesis* 12:3 s.v. *ve-nivrehu* and 26:4 s.v. *ve-hitbarkhu.*

[4] R. Abraham ben Ha-Rambam *Exodus* 19:6 s.v. *mamlechet* cites his father Maimonides, who connects the priestly role of Israel and the Deuteronomic description of the nations viewing Torah law as wise, with Isaiah's (2:1-4) vision of the nations coming to learn from God in Jerusalem, cited below.

[5] This is why the Bible describes ethical action as "*yirat Elokim*," "fear of God." See *Genesis* 20:10-11, 42:16-19, and *Exodus* 1:16-17.

In this respect, national independence is not just a "means," and the branches of government are not just "trappings" of power. Rather, Israel's higher calling is achieved through the national entity that it creates. When God promises Abraham and Jacob a nation, He includes a promise of a polity (*Genesis* 17:6, 35:11). This is exactly why the prophets, such as *Isaiah* 2:1-4, envision the other nations coming to Jerusalem, Israel's capital, to learn from God.[6] It is not sufficient for Jews to be spread out amongst the nations, influencing people from within. Rather, Israel needs to establish an independent state in which its people, religious teachers, and political leaders uphold the covenant.

To fully appreciate the purpose of Israel's covenant in influencing the nations of the world, we should note that Isaiah's framing of Israel's election echoes God's call to Abraham, which is preceded by *Genesis* 1-11. After God creates universal man with minimal rules, man descends into anarchy, leading to the Flood and Dispersion. The disastrous catalyst in both the Flood and Tower of Babel stories is human success. The powerful people kidnapped women as they pleased (*Genesis* 6:2), fueling the violence and chaos that lead to the Flood, while the invention of brick-making (11:3) enables the construction of the self-glorifying tower meant to keep all people in place. God's punishments do not lead humanity back to the proper path. Instead, humans continue to create and abuse power. The explicit kidnapping of women by powerful men occurs three more times in *Genesis*. Egypt's discovery of bread leads it to form feelings of superiority about their race, and they therefore abhorred breaking bread, their discovery, with peoples they considered inferior (*Genesis* 39:6, 43:32).

While God will punish humanity for their errors, He is unwilling to permanently alter their creative capacity or free choice. He won't turn men into beasts or angels. These Divine gifts can be used to build a good society or a corrupt one, a generous one or a decadent one. This is where Israel comes in. Their mission is to demonstrate for all of humanity the outcomes of an elevated life with the hope that the nations will learn and emulate their ways.

The Bible, especially as represented in the Noahide covenant, obligates all peoples to live with a moral minimum. Instead of human choice, creativity and power being used to destroy others and engage in debasing immorality, humans are charged to use these capabilities for ethical and holy ends. This brings out human potential, which has still not peaked, and it can make the lives of millions more dignified, beautiful, and holy. Humans using their creativity and choice through a moral lens is a central component of how the nations of the world become blessed through Abraham's descendents.

Israel's covenant contains both expansive and restrictive elements to ensure the accomplishment of its purpose. While Israel shines forth its light, it is prohibited from forming an empire. Not only is Abraham told that other nations will exist, he is also told that his descendants will inherit a (small) country, not the Earth (*Genesis* 16:18-21). The borders limit their settlement because empires enslave and suppress the freedom of peoples. The Bible never commands the Israelites to proselytize, and non-Jews can attain a share in the World to Come by living a virtuous life (Maimonides, *Laws of Kings and their Wars*, 8:11).

[6] See also, for example, I *Kings* 8:41-43, *Isaiah* 56:7, and *Zekhariah* 14:16.

God wants the diversity of nations, "according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations" (*Genesis* 10:20, 31) to exist and flourish.

Israel can therefore only play its role by living in this world and living in it better. The human creative capacity uses the basic moral principles to develop its philosophy about the right and the good of life and implement it.[7] This is in fact a central part of the virtue that Hazony ascribes to nationalism, a political vision that conceives of each nation "pursuing the truth according to its understanding" (p. 129). The competition among nations compels them to imitate "that which they regard as wise and useful and beautiful" (p. 132). In calling upon Israel to maintain the distinctions of nations, the Bible suggests that nationalism, a world of free peoples each living on its own land, is the best way for humans to achieve elevated existence. This is a universal message, and Israel is the messenger.

While Israel is charged with discharging a priestly role of service to God on behalf of others, the insights developed by each nation are unique and stand to benefit all nations, including Israel. As nations develop their own conceptions of the virtuous life, Israel is also supposed to learn from their wisdom (*Eikha Rabba* 2 s.v. *Sareha*). Israel is intended to catalyze and nourish this process.

In the Bible, the only nation that is recognized as having already developed worthy life aims, independent of biblical influence, was ancient Greece. It is for this reason that Greece, through its Biblical ancestor Japhet, receives preeminent status and blessing (*Genesis* 9:27). The Talmud relies on this biblical status to allow a holy Torah scroll to be written in an ancient Greek script, in addition to Hebrew (*Megillah* 8b), and this is codified in Jewish Law.[8]

We should reflect on this for a moment. The holy Torah scroll, which portrays God's revelation and commands to the Israelites, and if dropped obligates fasting, attains its holiness when written in Israel's native Hebrew or just one foreign script, ancient Greek. Written in any other language, the scroll lacks inherent sanctity. The Talmud thus indicates its approval of something in the character of Greek culture (*Megillah* 9b). While we cannot know for certain which aspect of ancient Greece was viewed so positively, we should note in broad strokes, that of the ancient civilizations, Jerusalem and Athens have made lasting impacts on Western Civilization, while Egypt, the Hittites, Assyria, and Babylon have not.

In sum, nationalism rejects empire and embraces particularism. It promotes a diversity of cultures and wisdom, which need to be kept within the bounds of biblical morality in order to lead to elevated lives. Israel's covenant binds it to serve as an example to the other nations of a framework for a life well lived. Soloveichik's critique of *The Virtue of Nationalism* stems from a description of Israel's covenant that excludes its most important feature: Israel's impact on the peoples of the world.

Covenant and Leadership

[7] Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* elaborates on how our underlying moral axis shapes our vision of the virtuous life.

[8] Maimonides, *Laws of Phylacteries and Mezuzah*, 1:19.

In light of the above, we will demonstrate how the issues of leadership, polity, and land are mischaracterized by Soloveichik, and we will describe them in light of the covenant outlined above.

In understanding the role of leaders in upholding Israel's covenant, Soloveichik only highlights the times that leaders are anointed by a prophet. But he ignores the many more times that leaders are appointed by the people or emerge from amongst them without divine selection. Soloveichik does not grapple with the political teaching of the Book of *Judges*, in which most of the leaders arise without explicit divine appointment, vanquish the enemy, and bring peace to the land. In contrast, the divinely chosen Samson was the only leader to not bring salvation. While Samson kills many important Philistines, the Philistines continue to rule over Israel, as we see from the beginning of the book of I Samuel. Samson is the book's final judge and its failure. Israel cannot override God's divine appointment, but being hand-picked by God does not guarantee success, as demonstrated by the failures of Samson, Saul, Solomon, Jerobaam and Jehu.

If Israel's existence and polity is purely for the sake of a mystical covenant, as Soloveichik seems to believe, and is not meant to serve as a model for the other nations, then the divine appointment of every leader would have been an optimal way of continually demonstrating Israel's "loyalty to the God of Israel and to His Torah," so that "it is constantly reminded that the nation exists for the covenant, or brit, not the other way around." If, however, Israel's covenantal calling is meant to inspire other nations, then it makes sense that its anointed leaders succeed or fail based on the choices of their own making, and most of its leaders will attain their position through the normal course of political events. In fact, Maimonides (*Laws of Kings and their Wars*, Chapter 11) does not require the Messiah to be selected by God. Rather, the Messiah's religious and military successes give him the status of presumptive redeemer. Even the leader who ushers in the final, elevated state of human living emerges through normal political affairs.

The Nobility of Freedom

Soloveichik's metaphysical view of the covenant leads him to misunderstand the inherent value of Israel's independence. His view that Israel's "liberty as a nation was and is not an independent end, but a means to a covenantal calling" is hard to square with the Jewish tradition. The Bible, especially *Deuteronomy*, warns Israel over and over that failure to uphold the covenant will lead to destruction and exile, which denotes the end of political independence. Israel's political liberty, however, may not be an entirely "independent end," but it is not just a "means" either. A number of the Jewish holidays celebrate liberty separately from Israel's covenant, because of freedom's inherent goodness.

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a) expresses this tension between Israel's freedom and its covenantal charge in depicting God as declaring to the Israelites that, "if you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial." Accepting the covenant was a do-or-die moment in Israel's history. The Exodus from Egypt needs to lead to Israelites accepting the covenant. Yet, instead of just celebrating the anniversary of the Israelite covenant with God, we celebrate the achievement of our freedom separately. Passover celebrates Israel's freedom; *Shavuot* celebrates the creation of the covenant (*Pesahim* 68b).

In a similar vein, the poem *Dayenu*, sung by Jews at the Passover Seder, lists different aspects of freedom and our covenantal acceptance distinctly. Each is separately worthy of praise. Hazony points out that the Song of the Sea, which the Israelites sing after the parting of the waters, is a breathtaking celebration of national freedom. Soloveichik objects that in the song, "what Israel celebrates is God, who has made His power manifest to the world." But this hardly challenges Hazony's point. At the Reed Sea, Israel praises God for intervening in history by giving them freedom. God's miracle threw the Egyptian horses and cavalry into the sea, fully freeing the Israelites. We should also note that at this point in the biblical narrative, Israel has not yet accepted the covenant.

The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, which celebrates the successful Jewish revolt under Judah Maccabaeus against the Seleucid Empire in 167 BCE, is likewise a grand celebration of the inherent value of national liberty. On the one hand, Hanukkah marks the first time that the Israelites gained complete independence in the Second Temple period. But on the other hand, these same Hasmoneans went on to install a non-Davidic descendant as the ruler of the nation, combined the priestly and political branches of government, led religiously corrupt governments, and ultimately invited the Romans to resolve the intractable civil war between the brothers Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus, effectively ending their hard-won Jewish independence.

The independence achieved through the Maccabean revolt did not end up upholding the covenant, but Jews worldwide still celebrate Hanukkah. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 21b) highlights that the miracle of the only remaining flask of oil lasting for eight days instead of one inspired the holiday. Maimonides gives that reason (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Chanukah,* 3:2) but first adds that that the reason for the holiday is that "Israel's kingdom was restored for a period of more than two centuries" (3:1).[9] National independence, even when it is impermanent and does not fulfill the covenant, is nonetheless worthy of being celebrated throughout the generations, even after the dissolution of that state. This addition by Maimonides would be irrelevant in Soloveichik's formulation that Israel's liberty is nothing but a "means to a covenantal calling." Israel's freedom and every nation's freedom is inherently valuable.[10]

Freedom from tyranny is the removal of evil and is not the same as living successfully. No freedom can ever be a final end in itself. We are always required to use our freedom to pursue positive action afterward. National independence, whether that of Passover or Hanukkah deserves a distinct celebration because it recognizes humanity's exclusive status in creation. Humanity's search for wisdom and its ability to act with moral integrity ultimately depend on this freedom. A strictly political deliverance, even without subsequent success, is

[9] See Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishna, Yoma* 1:3, where he shows that he is aware of the Hasmonean deficiencies. This is based on a 1996 speech by Rabbi Yehuda Amital, available at https://etzion.org.il/en/religious-significance-state-israel.

[10] Rabbi Amital applied this opinion of Maimonides to buttress the significance Yom Ha'atzmaut. While other Jewish thinkers have emphasized other positive aspects of the modern State of Israel, such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his Kol Dodi Dofek, none of the Rav's "knocks" would be pertinent to a view that only emphasizes covenantal fullment. It is difficult to know the compatibility of the Rav's view with that of R. Meir Soloveichik.

therefore something to be grateful for—and so something that religiously attuned persons will thank God for.

This is not only true of Israel, but of all nations. Once free, all peoples need to make choices to live out their destiny. Some nations will make good choices and others bad ones. To paraphrase Emmanuel Levinas, freedom is difficult, and many societies have used their freedom toward decadence and barbarism. Peoples can lose their freedom through their poor choices. Israel's covenantal shortcomings led to two exiles and it is now being given another opportunity to fulfill its covenantal mission. Freedom is unfulfilled, but still worth celebrating.

Israel and its Land

Soloveichik separates Israel's land from its peoplehood in order to reduce the role of Israel's land and polity in favor of its covenantal obligations. The Bible, however, goes out of its way to emphasize the centrality of the land to the people of Israel and the covenant. God's continual promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is nation and land (*Genesis* 13:14-17, 15:16-21, 17:7-8, 26: 2-5, 28:12-15, 35:12). Sometimes the Bible places land before nation and vice versa. The covenants in *Leviticus* 26 and *Deuteronomy* 28 assume the centrality of the land in the covenant.

Seen from this perspective, the special significance that Wyschogrod attributes to the fact that the Israelite people predate the land is flawed because it only looks at historical unfolding and ignores the place of the land in the covenantal promises. There is no such thing as fulfilling the covenant without the land, and some Biblical commentators (Rashi to *Deuteronomy* 11:18, Nahmanides to *Leviticus* 18:25) even suggest that performance of the commands outside of the land is just to maintain practice until the people return to the land of Israel, where the commandments "really count." While these might be minority opinions, they highlight the indissoluble link between the land and the covenant. Covenantal fulfillment is never presented without Israel living on its land. The land and the covenant are not separate entities that can be split apart.

Due to the unity of covenant and land, the Bible describes the land of Israel in active terms to highlight its centrality to Israel's definition and purpose. The land needs to make up its missed Sabbatical years (*Leviticus* 26:34-35), requires retribution (*Deuteronomy* 32:43), can become disgusted with and spit out its inhabitants (*Leviticus* 18:25-28, 20:22), and will remember its missing people (*Leviticus* 26:42) as a factor leading to the people's return from exile.

For Israel, the land, and each year's uncertainty of bounty, serves as an indicator of their relationship with God (*Deuteronomy* 11:10-12). In this sense, Israel's relationship with its land is not just a unique covenantal feature of Israel. The motherland of each nation is integral to the formation its unique identity and wisdom. All land is different, and a nation's empirical understanding of life and its search for wisdom will be impacted by the geography, weather, climate, abundance or scarcity of water, bountifulness of the land, and type of food that grows on the land. Egypt's land, dominated by the Nile as a reliable source of water, conditioned a preference for farming and its attendant ethos, as opposed to the nomadic, shepherding one (*Genesis* 46:34). With a moral base, Egypt would have developed a better

philosophy.[11] Land conditions the body, mind, and spirit of its people, and by definition it is particular and local.

This is exactly why Hazony's description of each nation "pursuing the truth according to its understanding" is based on their experiences in their own lands, as a nation's land plays a central role in creating a nation's perception of reality. While an empire can provide security and economic prosperity, national freedom allows for the development of wisdom and better free living. This is why the Bible, even prior to Abraham, envisions each nation living distinctly on its own land (Genesis 10:5, 20, 31).

The Faultiness of Locke

Hazony sees the American founding as combining ideas from the Bible, English Common Law tradition, and thinkers such as Montesquieu, Hume, and Locke, whereas Soloveichik seems to see the United States as essentially a Lockean enterprise. I will not try to settle the historical aspect of this disagreement here. But regarding the substance of the issue, I do think it is worth thinking carefully about how closely Orthodox Jews should want to wrap themselves in Locke's Enlightenment philosophy. After all, the Bible firmly rejects Locke's notion that the human individual is by nature able to arrive at universal moral and political truths by means of autonomous reason alone. From the moment that man is created in *Genesis*, he is commanded to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, a commandment which could not have been deduced from reason.[12]

Similarly, at the same time that man is commanded not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, man is also taught that it is not good to live alone, and for this reason God creates Eve to be Adam's wife. Conceptually, God imposes heteronomy and community on him. The autonomous individual, Locke's vision of man, is precluded at the very beginning of the Bible, and therefore cannot be a proper foundation for building sustained wisdom and human flourishing.

Conclusion

While seeking to critique Hazony's book, Soloveichik ends up making startling assertions about Judaism: he eliminates Israel from its aspiring status as a model to the nations of the world, denies the inherent nobility of national freedom, and downplays Israel's connection with its homeland. These arguments run counter to some of the most central principles of the Jewish tradition. In contrast, Hazony's book comes at a moment when the peoples of the world are searching for better understandings of, and organizing principles, for life. The biblical vision promotes a positive and constructive nationalism. This may actually be an opportune historical moment for delving more deeply into the political wisdom of Jewish tradition and for Israel to fulfill part of its covenantal role to be a light of the nations.

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[11] For a fuller treatment of the ethic of the farmer, particularly its positives and negatives, see Yoram Hazony's *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, chap. 4.

[12] God does maintain, in a Lockean sense, that Cain is wrong to murder his brother Abel, even though he has received no explicit instruction against murder, since that should have been reasoned. This also lies behind God's punishment regarding the Flood, the Dispersion, and the destruction of Sodom.

The Development of Neo-Hasidism: Echoes and Repercussions
Part I: Introduction, Hillel Zeitlin, and Martin Buber

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Editor's note: This article, presented in four parts, is a revised version of a paper presented at the Orthodox Forum convened March 15-16, 2015. It will appear in the forthcoming volume, Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut, ed. Shlomo Zuckier (Urim, 2019), as part of the Orthodox Forum series. It is intended to spark a conversation about the origins of neo-Hasidism and to consider its contemporary relevance. After some preliminary notes, the first three installations are devoted to exploring in brief the works of foundational neo-Hasidic writers, thinkers and leaders. This intellectual genealogy paves the way for the fourth part of the series, considering the impact of neo-Hasidism, and particularly its liberal forms, upon Orthodox Jewish life and examines how such liberal neo-Hasidism may continue to influence Orthodox religious thought.

"No renewal of Judaism is possible that does not bear in itself
the elements of Hasidism."
— Martin Buber

"The Reformation continues."
— Friedrich Schleiermacher

The quest for renewal dwells at the heart of Hasidic spirituality.[13] As a pietistic and mystical revival movement, Hasidism sought to infuse traditional practices and religious concepts with devotional significance that is at once both old and new.[14] The ideal Hasid strives to perform all deeds with total devotion, yearning to fulfill the divine command with focus and intensity rather than out of rote obligation. The Baal Shem Tov interpreted the Psalmist's words, "Do not cast us into old age" (Psalm 71:9) as a soulful petition: may our service never become stale, and may our sacred actions and words never fade into old shells empty of meaning. The inimitable Kotzker Rebbe is said to have demanded that his students cultivate not *frumkeit* ("external piety"), but rather *frishkeit* ("freshness"), in their service of God. This tireless quest for perpetual newness, held as an aspiration for communities as well as private individuals, is as old as Hasidism itself.

[13] I wish to express my gratitude to Shlomo Zuckier for inviting me to contribute this article, and to Sam Berrin Shonkoff, Mindy Schwartz Zolty, and Yehuda Fogel for their insight and helpful editorial comments.

[14] The interested reader is invited to turn to the forthcoming two-volume collection *A New Hasidism: Roots* and *A New Hasidism: Branches* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2019), edited together with my teacher and friend Arthur Green. *Roots* features key texts by the founders of neo-Hasidism together with biographical essays, including versions of the sketches of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Shlomo Carlebach, and Arthur Green appearing in the present series. *Branches* offers a wide range of essays by current neo-Hasidic writers and teachers from across North America and Israel.

But history has proven that it is difficult for energetic renewal movements to maintain their initial burst of vital spontaneity.[15] Such was the case as Hasidism matured, expanding from small fraternities and circles of disciples into a mass movement. Attempts to revive the intellectual and spiritual life from *within* the Hasidic world have a long history.[16] Hasidic masters such as Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1810), Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859), Rabbi Aaron (Arele) Roth (1894-1947), and Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno (1889-1943) sensed that the Hasidism of their day had lost its devotional intensity. They sought to combat the malaise of spiritual complacency by reclaiming the traditions of the Baal Shem Tov, but each of these thinkers developed a new Hasidic approach to religious life. Modern neo-Hasidism springs as a fresh branch from these roots of continuous growth and renewal.

No single definition of neo-Hasidism will comfortably stretch to include all of the various individuals and groups that lay claim to this inheritance, embodying very different approaches to fundamental questions of tradition and practice.[17] The present study traces the development of neo-Hasidism as defined in religious terms: an approach to Jewish life and practice grounded in the belief that the spiritual legacy of Hasidism can inspire a contemporary spiritual renewal. Neo-Hasidism emerges, first and foremost, from written teachings of Hasidism, which range from complex homilies to pithy tales, as providing both challenge and encouragement. These sources demand continuous growth commitment in the intertwined realms of personal devotion, theological reflection, and ethical performance. While one's study may not be restricted to Hasidic texts alone, neo-Hasidism is defined by the way that all elements of the religious life are infused by the Hasidic sources and their ethos of inwardness, joy, and a unitive vision of God.

Neo-Hasidism incorporates lessons from a range of different Hasidic masters. Commitment to a particular Hasidic leader (or dynasty), and thus to a single spiritual path, has long been a defining element of Hasidism. It was possible for a Hasid to transfer his primary allegiance from one *rebbe* to another, particularly in the early decades of the movement's history. But dynastic loyalty emerged as an extremely important social force in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and, since then, to be a Hasid has generally meant submission to

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[15] Stephen Sharot, "Hasidism and the Routinization of Charisma," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19:4 (1980), 325-336.

[16] See Arthur Green, "Hasidism and Its Response to Change," *Jewish History* 27:2-4 (2013), 319-336.

[17] Literary figures such as Y.L. Peretz, Micha Josef Berdyczewski, S.Y. Agnon, and Elie Wiesel incorporated Hasidic themes into their writings. These authors did so not in order to satirize or parody mysticism, but because they understood that creatively adapting Hasidic motifs could serve as a powerful tool for cultural revival. Their interest in Hasidism, however, was primarily for its literary potential. See Nicham Ross, *A Beloved-Despised Tradition: Modern Jewish Identity and neo-Hasidic Writing at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010) [Hebrew]; idem, "Can Secular Spirituality be Religiously Inspired?: The Hasidic Legacy in the Eyes of the Skeptics," *AJS Review* 37 (2013), 93-113; and Arthur Green, "Wiesel in the Context of Neo-Hasidism," in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 51-58. On the phenomenon of neo-Hasidism more broadly, see also Tomer Persico, "Neo-Hasidic Revival: Expressivist Uses of Traditional Lore," *Modern Judaism* 34:3 (2014), 287-308.

one spiritual teacher or rabbinic family. Neo-Hasidim, by contrast, find inspiration in a wide variety of Hasidic sources and teachers, though many are drawn to or inspired by one particular Hasidic thinker or book. And the leaders at the heart of neo-Hasidism do not generally live within the highly regimented quarters of a traditional Hasidic society. Some may have visited the Hasidic world from time to time, and they may indeed share a connection with one or more Hasidic leaders, but at some point most have made an active decision not to live in a Hasidic community. This choice reflects their target audience, but also reflects their own zone of comfort.

Of course, neo-Hasidic readings of Hasidic sources are selective and creative. Certain elements of the Hasidic tradition are amplified, whereas others are ignored or actively rejected. For example, Hasidic attitudes toward gender, secular thought, and non-Jews are consciously rejected or heavily reinterpreted. Most expressions of neo-Hasidism have included elements of universalism, for these writers have long envisioned a reawakening of Jewish life that will inspire a similar revival of the spirit among the rest of humanity. They see the legacy of Hasidism and the wisdom of Jewish spirituality as too expansive and valuable a treasure to be restricted to the Jewish people alone. But neo-Hasidic writers and teachers also display their creativity by linking Hasidic and non-Hasidic texts together in new ways, and by translating traditional terms or concepts expansively, such that they speak to modern issues of the spirit and existential meaning. Neo-Hasidism may thus be described as an interpretative moment; it is a mode of reading texts through "Hasidic" eyes, through a lens of devotional or spiritual engagement.

Elements of neo-Hasidism are truly novel, but these innovations should, in a sense, be construed as new expressions emerging from the theological core of Hasidism. Some neo-Hasidic thinkers see themselves as a continuously creative element of Hasidic teachings, updating and reapplying the spiritual traditions of Hasidism without fundamentally altering its central teachings. From a different perspective, however, neo-Hasidism is also a project of radical cultural and religious reclamation. It seeks to unearth a lost (or buried) spiritual message, now present only as glowing embers or kernels embedded in the chaff of ossified Hasidism. The very notion of neo-Hasidism is thus predicated on a historiographical assumption: the great spiritual vitality that characterized Hasidism in its formative years eventually diminished.[18] While Hasidism generated interesting and audacious thinkers into the twentieth century, conflicts with the *mitnaggedim* and modernity forced Hasidism to retreat on many fronts. Neo-Hasidim thus seeks to reanimate the central teachings of Hasidism's early period.[19]

Neo-Hasidism emerges from a twofold disappointment with the contemporary world. It reflects a lack of confidence in the secular world and the ideals of progress and

[18] See, for example, Simon Dubnow, in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present*, ed. Gershon David Hundert (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 25-85.

[19] Neo-Hasidism thus reflects several different meanings of the prefix "neo." See the discussion of the term in a very different context in Scott Simpson and Mariusz Filip, "Selected Words for Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 32.

modernization. Literature, philosophy, science, and technology hold wisdom and can greatly improve our lives, but these fields do not provide sufficient answers to the deepest questions of religion and existence for the seekers drawn to neo-Hasidism. This ironic "disenchantment" with the secular is all the more profound in the post-Holocaust world. But neo-Hasidism is also a response to the lack of spirituality or lack of intellectual and theological openness in the modern Jewish religious world.

The aim of this series of articles is to contribute to our understanding of neo-Hasidism and its contemporary importance from three interrelated vantage points. We will begin by tracing the development of neo-Hasidism, profiling the work of its foundational writers, thinkers, and leaders. Although their teachings do not cohere into a single doctrine or interpretation of Hasidism, the variety of ideas held in common by these neo-Hasidic thinkers is noteworthy. All are committed to translating Hasidic spirituality into a contemporary vernacular in order to spark a renaissance of Jewish spirituality. In the concluding section of this series we will then bridge to a discussion of the impact of neo-Hasidism, and particularly its liberal forms, upon Orthodox Jewish life, both acknowledged and unacknowledged. Stepping away from the historical analysis, we will also reflect upon a few ways in which liberal neo-Hasidism may continue to influence and invigorate the Orthodox world.

Hillel Zeitlin

Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942) was a tireless author, a soul-stirring poet, and a deeply introspective mystical writer.[20] He was raised in White Russia in a Chabad family, steeped in the Hasidic contemplative tradition. Zeitlin enjoyed an energetic devotional life in his youth, a period that he later described as being filled with a rich, mystical intoxication with the divine Presence. Yet in his adolescence Zeitlin became increasingly troubled by philosophy and higher criticism of the Bible, and his confrontation with modernity led Zeitlin away from the world of Hasidism. He immersed himself in the study of Western thought, publishing books on Spinoza and Nietzsche, and he read the works of thinkers ranging from William James to Oscar Wilde. Zeitlin's single-minded engagement with Western culture was, however, relatively short-lived. By the early 1900s he returned to the religious quest, and devoted his considerable literary talents to what he now saw as his life's work: preserving the legacy of early Hasidism and rearticulating a vision of Jewish spirituality that was compelling to contemporary (and future) seekers.

Zeitlin is a neo-Hasidic writer because he interpreted and combined a wide variety of early Hasidic sources, and because he neither lived in a Hasidic community nor committed himself to a particular Hasidic path. He sought to return to the spiritual vitality at the root of Hasidism, but Zeitlin also felt compelled to reinterpret the sources of the Hasidic tradition. His works, peppered with references to Western philosophy, were written in Hebrew and in Yiddish for highly secularized Polish Jews, hoping to provide them with a compelling spiritual alternative to the balkanized, intensely political Jewish intellectual world of

[20] On Zeitlin's life and times, see Arthur Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012); and Shraga Bar Sella, *Between the Storm and the Quiet: The Life and Works of Hillel Zeitlin* (Tel Aviv: 1999) [Hebrew].

Warsaw, and to the ultra-Orthodox (and also highly politicized) Hasidic world of the early twentieth century.

Zeitlin's call for renewal, which increased in intensity and reached its peak in the 1920s and '30s, was already visible in a German article published in Martin Buber's periodical *Der Jude* in 1916. This short piece concludes as follows:

> Polish Jewry has another very great and holy task. To say it more precisely: a holy and glorious endeavor, a great and vital responsibility. It was in Poland that Hasidism was born. There it flourished and branched forth, diversified and divided. There too it dissipated and declined in various ways. But Polish Jewry needs to preserve that treasure in a strict, serious, and artful way, a treasure granted to it by the gracious right hand of the Eternal…. Hasidism in Poland must return [or "repent"], if it is not to die (and it must not die, because "an idea that comes from the highest wisdom, cannot be destroyed"), it must return to the Baal Shem and his divinely-inspired students. Hasidism first must be restored to its source. Then it can nourish the spirits and minds of all people.
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> > Far, far beyond Poland's borders, the holy Hasidic word must be taken, across the entire Jewish people. This word, with its power and interiority, will summon all people and awaken them to true love, to true justice and to the true "rule of heaven."[21]

Zeitlin felt that it was his privilege and obligation, together with the rest of Polish Jewry, to ensure that the vital spiritual message of Hasidism did not flounder. More than simply preserving and safeguarding Hasidism, Zeitlin saw his task as returning this movement of devotional renewal to its roots, returning Hasidism to its early spiritual teachings so that it might develop anew and spread forth to include all peoples. Intimated in this passage is something that was to become explicit in many of his later writings: the wisdom and spiritual vitality of Hasidism was too dear and too powerful to be limited to the Jewish people alone.

What was this "treasure" so in need of preservation and rescue? Zeitlin understood Hasidism as, first and foremost, a call to inwardness.[22] He interpreted Hasidic spirituality as relating primarily to the interior spiritual world of the mind and the heart. But, claimed Zeitlin, Hasidism also articulates a bold belief in the omnipresence and immanence of God in the physical world; the Divine saturates all elements of the cosmos, dwelling also within the heart of man. This sacred energy in each manifestation of being, often described as "holy sparks," is generally hidden from the view of humanity. The veil of *tzimtzum*, the "contraction" or "withdrawal" of God's infinite light from the world, occludes our vision of God's presence. The task of the mystical seeker is to peer beyond the phenomenal world and to gaze into the rushing wellspring of the Divine that lies within.

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[21] Hillel Zeitlin, "Aufgaben der Polnischen Juden," *Der Jude* (1916/17), 93; based on the translation in Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 33-34.

[22] See Zeitlin's summary of Hasidic theology, translated in Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 71-117.

Zeitlin described the message of Hasidism as founded upon three key "loves"—the love of God, the love of Torah, and the love of Israel—expressed in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. These themes have long been essential to the literatures of Jewish thought and theology, but Zeitlin argued that the early Hasidic masters offered a new conception of each. Zeitlin then complemented this Hasidic tradition with his own distinctively neo-Hasidic reading of the three foundational loves. The Baal Shem Tov, he said, taught that the love of God must become an all-consuming fire, the worshiper's burning passion to encounter the Divine Presence. This yearning for God is neither an intellectual postulate nor a precept to be observed alongside others. The passionate love of God is the foundation of all spiritual life.

The Hasidic approach to the love of Israel, according to Zeitlin's recasting, was deceptively simple. The Jewish people share a common root in the Divine, and each soul is a unique expression of the infinite God. True service of the Divine can only happen when Israel acts together in harmony and in unison. Only the love of others allows the worshiper to stand in the presence of God.[23] Finally, the Baal Shem Tov and his students explained the love of Torah as far more than a commitment to scholastic enterprise. Scripture is God's Wisdom cloaked within words; the Torah is divine essence crystallized within the structures of language. The scholar must uncover the kernel of divinity hidden with its every letter. The words of the Torah are apertures of infinity, gateways through which the devoted seeker may step into the ineffable beyond. Zeitlin sought to re-invigorate these traditional Hasidic "loves," universalizing and expanding them in an attempt to build an intentional community and a broader current of religious renewal.

The spiritual legacy of Hasidism, expressed succinctly in these three "loves," needed to be preserved from extinction, but it also needed to be delivered from the insipid forces of spiritual myopia. Zeitlin felt that the religious community of his day, including the Hasidic world, had become trapped in reactionary thoughtlessness. His critique of the Hasidim he must have seen around him in Warsaw was incisive and highly insightful:

> Today's Hasidim still *talk* about all these things. But they mix all sorts of incidental things in with them—fanciful interpretations, homilies, intellectual games—until the real point is obscured. Second—and this is really the main thing—for some of today's Hasidim their Hasidism has become a purely external matter. They study without a real taste for it; they pray in the same way. They pursue wealth and glory no less, and sometimes even more, than non-Hasidim. They're always busy praising their own *rebbes* and castigating all the others, along with their disciples. They've set up *rebbes*' courts and dynasties and get all involved in the politics of these.[24]

Hasidism began as a movement focused on the inner world, but it fell into obsession with

[23] See also his remarks in Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 51-55.

[24] Ibid., 39.

external trappings. But Zeitlin's trenchant criticism of the bourgeois and autocratic forms of Hasidism did not blind him to the spiritual majesty of some religious communities of his day. He notes, "there are other sorts of Hasidim present today as well: those who bear a deep inwardness, a deep attachment, a passionate love of God. They have love for all Jews, a love of truth and a longing for peace, a strong, clear understanding of all that is happening around them."[25] Zeitlin was a frequent visitor of the Novominsker Rebbe of Warsaw,[26] the uncle and mentor of the young Abraham Joshua Heschel.[27] He was also aware of the creative work of R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno, whose attempt to create an intra-Hasidic revival has been well documented in recent years.[28]

The Hasidism of Zeitlin's day was generally quite dysfunctional, no longer able to courageously inhabit its one-time theological creativity. So Zeitlin hoped to introduce his modern readership to the spiritual treasury of Hasidism. But his forward-looking project of articulating a spiritual vision for the contemporary seeker also sought to expand the world of Hasidism beyond what it had been even in the movement's formative early days:

> In the Hasidism of the future, the love of God will shine forth and burn even more brightly than it did in the days of the BeSHT. The "Love of Israel" will be transformed into a great worldwide "Love of Humanity." Nevertheless, Israel will always be recognized as the firstborn child of God, the one who has borne, continues to bear, and will continue to bear the godly light. "Love of Torah" will spread forth over all that breathes with sublime wisdom, after the inner light teaches the Jews to distinguish between that within the worldly sciences which is of the divine mind and that which is just self-proclaimed human conviction, error, and lies.[29]

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[25] Ibid., 40.

[26] See the description in Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 62: "Zeitlin arrived at twilight, almost surreptitiously, with his flowing black hair and reddish beard, wearing a cape and wide-brimmed hat...after listening intently to the speech, Zeitlin slipped out of the room and disappeared."

[27] Harry M. Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism* (Hartford: Hartmore House, 1970), 165 recalled that "Hillel Zeitlin used to say: 'Whenever I felt depressed and needed to repent I visited the Rabbi of Novominsk'."

[28] Zeitlin published a review of the Piaseczner Rebbe's book *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, which he extolled as an exemplary effort toward a new type of spiritual education as well as a remarkable prolegomenon to Hasidic spirituality and Jewish mystical thought. This essay, which first appeared in 1934, was reprinted in the posthumous and expanded version of *Sifran shel Yehidim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1979), 240-244 [Hebrew]. On Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, see Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, Inc., 1994); and Daniel Reiser, *Vision as a Mirror: Imagery Techniques in Twentieth Century Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2014) [Hebrew].

[29] Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 42.

Zeitlin's dream was not a romantic return to an idealized Hasidic past. He hoped to expand the spiritual vitality of Hasidism, such that the love of God would continue to become amplified in the future to even greater heights. But his modern reinterpretation of the loves of Israel and the Torah reveals a striking universalism.[30] Zeitlin claims that what had once been restricted to an insular affection between Jews will, in the future, transform into an unbounded love for *all* humanity. At this time, the love for Torah will encompass most noble and sublime cultural works. Literature, philosophy, music, and presumably the physical sciences will all take a place within the spiritual canon, for each of them contains an element of God as well. And society itself will undergo a transformation as well:

> The Hasid of the future will live only from his own physical labor. He will exploit no one in the world, doing not even the slightest harm to anyone. He will partake of God's own holiness, living in uninterrupted communion with the Endless. He will walk through divine fire while praying, will study Torah with an inner godly light, will seek and find everywhere the light of Torah and messianic light. In all his thoughts and deeds he will strive only for true peace and unity. He will be filled with love and compassion for every Jew and non-Jew, for every creature. He will long to raise up the form of the *shekhinah* in the holy land and to spread her light through all the world. He will be a great seer and a great knower.[31]

Reflecting the discourse of class struggle and the physical reality of the terrible poverty of so many Polish Jews in the interwar period, Zeitlin explains that the Hasidim of the future will refuse to cause suffering or take advantage of workers. Taking from socialism all that is honorable and upright, Zeitlin imagined a renewal of the Jewish community in economic as well as spiritual terms. Yet this concern, we should note, extends beyond the Jewish masses. Zeitlin's ideal seeker is alert to the suffering of all humanity, and the Hasid's devotional quest to live in the Divine Presence should lead directly to an economy in which nobody is exploited.

Zeitlin aspired to be an activist and organizer in addition to a writer. Throughout the mid-1920s, Zeitlin issued a series of calls to those who were interested in creating a mystical fellowship of intensely devoted seekers.[32] This collection of exceptional individuals, described in a series of newspaper articles and privately printed booklets, would translate his spiritual vision into a lived community. In one such foundational document, Zeitlin offered a series of theological precepts and practical guidelines by which this fellowship should live their lives.

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[30] Zeitlin shared this universal aspiration with Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook; see Jonatan Meir, "Longing of Souls for the *Shekinah*: Relations between Rabbi Kook, Zeitlin and Brenner," *The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee Volume*, ed. Yehoyada Amir (Jerusalem: The Van Leer Institute, 2005), 771-818 [Hebrew].

[31] Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 42-43.

[32] See Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, "'The Great Call of the Hour': Hillel Zeitlin's Yiddish Writings on *Yavneh*," *In Geveb* (2016), available at http://ingeveb.org/articles/the-great-call-of-the-hour-hillel-zeitlins-yiddish-writings-on-yavneh (accessed August 28, 2016).

He referred to this imagined group as *Benei Heikhala* ("Children of the Palace"), *Ahdut Yisrael* ("Unity of Israel"), *Moshi'im* ("Saviors"), and, most frequently, the *Yavneh* society. In a recently discovered manuscript, Zeitlin defines the goals of this fellowship as follows:

> Yavneh wants to be for Jewry what Hasidism was a hundred and fifty years ago. This was Hasidism in its origin, that of the BeSHT. This does not mean that Yavneh wants to be that original Hasidism. It rather wants to bring into *contemporary* Jewish life the freshness, vitality, and joyful attachment to God in accord with the style, concepts, mood, and meaning of {the BeSHT. We offer these to}[33] Jews just as the BeSHT did—in his time—according to the style, concepts, mood, and meaning of *onetime* Jews. Yavneh wants especially to revive the *soul* of Jews. Yavneh seeks… to bring together those Jewish individuals who feel God in their souls, who live in Him and through Him, as God lives *within* them.[34]

Zeitlin dreamt of establishing an intentional community of seekers who would follow—and expand—the social and theological principles of early Hasidism. This would require them to rise above the politics, devoting themselves entirely to physical labor, spiritual refinement, and divine service.

But other than the small group of eclectic disciples that clustered around him, there is no evidence that his dream of founding Yavneh came to fruition. Zeitlin's writings became increasingly desperate in the 1930s. He broadcast a heavy-handed and prophetic call for national return, predicting that a terrible calamity would soon overtake the Jews of Eastern Europe. Zeitlin was murdered on a Nazi death march in 1942; he apparently met his death adorned in *tallit* and *tefillin*, and with a copy of the *Zohar* in his hands. His dream of a renewed Hasidic community was mostly buried in the ashes of the Warsaw ghetto, but Zeitlin's writings on Hasidism were rediscovered after the war. These works played a significant role in inspiring the next generation of neo-Hasidic thinkers, and in some sense Zeitlin's fire burns in the Havurah and Jewish Renewal movements, two great post-War attempts at the spiritual regeneration of North American Judaism. Zeitlin's writings have also been rediscovered--and reprinted--by a new generation of Israeli seekers who are captivated by his reading of Hasidism. Such individuals are also inspired by Zeitlin's example of one who pushes beyond the entrenched binary categorization of "secular" and "religious," a voice for a renewal that draws from the fundaments of the human spirit rather than ossified structures of institutional Orthodoxy.

Martin Buber

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was one of the most important Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century. He was born in Vienna, but after his parents' divorce he moved to the home of his grandfather, the great Midrash scholar Solomon Buber, in Galicia. He was raised in a cultured and traditional environment, but the young Martin Buber abandoned all

[33] The text is illegible, and the bracketed words represent the authors' reconstruction.

[34] Green and Mayse, "The Great Call of the Hour."

religious practice. Drawn toward the world of universal spirituality, he also studied Western and Eastern philosophy assiduously and emerged as a promising student and scholar. But in the early twentieth century, Buber took a renewed interest in the primal, lived forms of religious experience, and later came to find new meaning in the Jewish tradition. Zionism was an important part of this return to Judaism, but it was the literature of Hasidism that captured his mind and his heart. Buber's father had taken him to visit the Hasidic community of Sadagora, where he was deeply impressed, but he felt that the dynastic system had led Hasidism into degradation. Years later he would return to classical Hasidic texts from the movement's early period—rather than contemporary twentieth-century Hasidim—as a resource for enriching and critiquing modern culture.

Unlike Zeitlin, Martin Buber sought to recast Hasidism for a Westernized Jewish audience that had assimilated into the German cultural sphere. Dominated by the thought of philosophers like Hermann Cohen, and scholars of the nascent field of academic Jewish Studies (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*), German Jewish intellectuals portrayed Judaism as a rational and philosophically sophisticated faith. Buber, by contrast, presented the teachings of Hasidism in a way that highlighted the spontaneous, mystical, and devotional aspects of Jewish spirituality. At first he focused primarily on the experiential and mystical elements of Hasidism, identifying in the teachings of the Hasidic masters a reflection of the ecstatic devotion present in many different religious traditions. In his later years, as Buber turned toward a dialogical model of religious experience, he interpreted Hasidism as a mode of hallowing the mundane realm and transforming all moments into sacred encounters.[35]

Buber is known best for translating Hasidic tales, which he considered the most authentic textual sources of Hasidic spirituality. He self-consciously rewrote the stories, but that role, he argued, situated him in an organic chain of spontaneous transmission:

> I received it and have told it anew. I have not transcribed it like some piece of literature; I have not elaborated it like some fabulous material. I have told it anew as one who was born later. I bear in me the blood and the spirit of those who created it, and out of my blood and spirit it has become new. I stand in the chain of narrators, a link between links; I tell once again the old stories, and if they sound new, it is because the new already lay dormant in them when they were told for the first time.[36]

Buber thus saw himself as an active agent in carrying forward the Hasidic—or neo-Hasidic—tradition, a role taken up by storytellers in every generation. He was engaged in

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[35] This turn is best expressed in his classic work *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970). See Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); and Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to "I and Thou": The Development of Martin Buber's Thought and his "Religion as Presence" Lectures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

[36] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), x. I should note that this work, though central for understanding Buber's views on Hasidism, is from a relatively early phase in his decades-long and evolving relationship with Hasidic spirituality.

recovering elements of Hasidism that were already present, but Buber imbued his presentation of Hasidism with much of his own personality and spiritual sensibility. This type of creativity was further permitted, and even necessary, because the Hasidism of his day was essentially defunct:

> Groups of Hasidim still exist in our day; Hasidism is in a state of decay. But the Hasidic writings have given us their teachings and their legends. The Hasidic teaching is the proclamation of rebirth. No renewal of Judaism is possible that does not bear in itself the elements of Hasidism.[37]

But Buber's creativity was also linked to his desire to use the Hasidic canon to spark a cultural and religious revival amongst his Western readers.[38] In order to accomplish this goal, he knew that it would be necessary to jettison elements of Hasidism that would appear problematic or antiquated. He recast the ethos of Hasidism for modern eyes, but his reading of the tradition, though selective, was quite astute.

Martin Buber's interpretation of Hasidism emphasized the power of ecstasy, focus and intention, community, optimism and joy, and sanctifying the mundane through intentional presence.[39] Hasidism, even in Buber's early reading, embodied theology in the lived experience of man and the realm of interpersonal relationships. Ecstasy is not to be found only in prayer or study, nor in withdrawing from the physical world and from other people. According to Buber, Hasidism claims that ecstasy may transpire in every moment and in all deeds. Intentional devotion is cultivated within the individual, but it expands to embrace the entire community.[40] And Hasidic spirituality, argues Buber, leads to a perpetual state of attention and open-heartedness:

> When a father complained to the Baal-Shem, "My son is estranged from God—what shall I do?" he replied, "Love him more." This is one of the primary Hasidic words: to love more. Its roots sink deep and stretch out far. He who has understood this can learn to understand Judaism anew. There is a great moving force therein.[41]

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[37] Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, xii-xiii.

[38] See Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[39] He organized an early essay on the devotional life of Hasidism into four central categories of lived spiritual experience: ecstasy (*hitlahavut*); service (*avodah*); intention (*kavvanah*); and humility (*shiflut*); see Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[40] Ibid., 47.

[41] Ibid., 57.

The religious life of the individual, defined also by humility, is expressed through unmitigated love of one's fellow.

Buber once summed up the ethos of Hasidism in the following sentence: "God can be beheld in each thing and reached through each pure deed."[42] The Hasidic belief in absolute divine immanence gives rise to an immediate religious imperative to serve God in all moments. God must be worshiped in all physical deeds, since the divine essence fills the entire cosmos. But Buber suggests that this service is more than an opportunity—it is a profound and fundamental human obligation. Each action bears immeasurable and unforeseeable consequences, and therefore in every deed one must be totally focused and attuned: "Every human action is a vessel of infinite responsibility."[43]

Buber was particularly captivated by the Hasidic notion of charismatic leadership. He invoked the idea of the Hasidic *rebbe* not as a wonder-worker, but as "the helper in spirit, the teacher of world-meaning, the conveyor to the divine sparks."[44] Judging by his first-hand experience, Buber felt that Hasidic leadership had lost this essential purpose. He was appalled by the regal style of some *tzaddikim*, and by the fact that Hasidim came to them for magic and miracles rather than for religious guidance. But even as a young man Buber had been drawn to the power of the *rebbe*, and he sensed that such leaders could—in theory—serve as a model for a contemporary spiritual and intellectual teacher.

Hasidism's ability to overcome what Buber saw as the false dichotomy of holy and mundane/secular concerned Buber throughout his career. He writes, "What is of greatest importance in Hasidism, today as then, is the powerful tendency, persevered in personal as well as in communal existence, to overcome the fundamental separation between the sacred and the profane."[45] Buber argued that the expansive Hasidic view, which shattered the boundary between holy and secular, was precisely the solution for the compartmentalized Western man. In what became one of his most enduring formulations, Buber argues that Hasidism views the world not in terms of the sacred and the profane, but rather as divided into the holy and "the not-yet-hallowed."[46]

This holistic presentation of Hasidism was quite world-affirming.[47] Buber interpreted Hasidism as a call to transform the physical realm into a dwelling place for the Divine, not as

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[42] Ibid., 17.

[43] Ibid., 30.

[44] Ibid., 19.

[45] Ibid., 5.

[46] Ibid., 7.

[47] Ibid., 8-10.

a form of spirituality that denied the importance of engagement with materiality or sought mystical transcendence at the expense of the world. His reading of Hasidism on this point, as well as his creative method of reclaiming the Hasidic stories rather than the printed sermons, led him into a bitter disagreement with the famed historian and scholar Gershom Scholem and his students.[48] Buber was taken to task for his lack of scholarly distance, for favoring the tales over the theoretical sermons, and for downplaying the world-denying aspects in favor of more world-affirming moments. Buber readily admitted his constructive project, but defended his position vis-à-vis Hasidism as a religious movement about sanctifying the everyday. Recent scholarship has confirmed that Buber's reading of Hasidism is selective, but that his presentation is entirely in keeping with elements of the Hasidic ethos.[49]

In his later years, however, Buber expressed a sense of regret at having taken such considerable artistic license in rewritten Hasidic tales. Though still faithful to the original works, he acknowledged that he was consciously retelling the stories as a Western intellectual and thus tailoring their message for a modern readership.[50] In an essay from this period, Buber also revealed why he could not himself adopt a Hasidic way of life and join a contemporary Hasidic community:

> I could not become a Hasid. It would have been an impermissible masquerading had I taken on the Hasidic manner of life—I who had a wholly other relation to Jewish tradition, since I must distinguish in my innermost being between what is commanded me and what is not commanded me. It was necessary, rather, to take into my own existence as much as I actually could of what had been truly exemplified for me there, that is to say, of the realization of that dialogue with being whose possibility my thought had shown me.[51]

[48] For example, see Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 228-250.

[49] See the remarkable work of Sam Berrin Shonkoff, "Sacramental Existence: Embodiment in Martin Buber's Philosophical and Hasidic Writings," PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2018; and see also Seth Brody, "'Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness': The Pursuit of Holiness and Non-Duality in Early Hasidic Teaching," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1/2 (1998), 3-44.

[50] Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 2.

[51] Ibid., 3.

This passage reflects Buber's complex anomian—and perhaps antinomian[52]—interpretation of Hasidism, a position for which he was criticized by many of his colleagues.[53] Unlike Hillel Zeitlin, who lived according to the rhythms of Hasidic piety in the heart of Warsaw (though still within its secular circles), Buber remained a Westernized Jew.[54] But Hasidism captured his soul, and his role in presenting the Hasidic legacy to his readers was more than that of an ethnographer, a sociologist, or a philosophical observer. Buber allowed himself to become an active party in the renewal of Jewish life and spirituality in light of the fundaments of Hasidism. He was a great theologian, philosopher, and teacher, and a practitioner in his own way, but Buber observed Hasidism from a distance.[55]

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[52] Though he refused to submit to traditional forms of *halakhah*, this passage and others reveal that Buber saw commandedness as a compelling force that is constantly regenerated; see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Martin Buber's Reception Among Jews," *Modern Judaism* 6:2 (1986), 111-126; and idem, "Law and Sacrament: Ritual Observance in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought," in *Jewish Spirituality, vol. II: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 317-345.

[53] Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Schocken Books: New York, 1955), 72-92, 111-118; Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Man's Relation to God and World in Buber's Rendering of the Hasidic Teaching," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice Friedman (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 420-421. See Buber's explanation in a letter to Maurice Friedman in *The Letters of Martin Buber*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr, trans. Richard and Clara Winston and Harry Zohn (Schocken Books: New York, 1991), no. 624, 576-577.

[54] Of course, it was unthinkably rare for Western European Jews to undergo such a transformation, and Hillel Zeitlin had been born and raised in the Hasidic world. An interesting exception is found in the case of Jiří Mordechai Langer, an assimilated Czech Jew who joined the Galician Hasidic community of Belz. His journey is detailed in his work, *Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries*, trans. Stephen Jolly (London: J. Clarke, 1961).

[55] See Arthur Green, "Buber, Scholem, and the Me'or 'Eynayim," in *Swimming Against the Current: Reimagining Jewish Tradition in the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller*, ed. David N. Myers and Shaul Seidler-Feller (Boston: Academic Studies Press, forthcoming).