The Development of Neo-Hasidism: Echoes and Repercussions
Part II: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky

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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.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was one of the leading theologians and philosophers of religion in twentieth-century America.[1] Born and raised in the heart of the Hasidic world of interbellum Warsaw,[2] Heschel was descended from *tzaddikim* on both sides of his family. He witnessed the great spiritual riches of pre-War Hasidism, but was also aware of its shortcomings. Disappointing family hopes that he would himself become a *rebbe*, he left Hasidic Warsaw in his late adolescence, arriving in Vilna and eventually completing doctoral work in philosophy and religion at the University of Berlin. Yet although Heschel never again lived in a Hasidic community, Hasidism permeates the entire range of his theological writings.[3] He left Hasidic society because of its intellectual blinders, but remained committed to the devotional practices and teachings of Hasidism throughout his life. Indeed, Heschel was to devote his career to fostering a revival of post-war American Jewish life grounded in the spirit of Hasidism.

It is noteworthy that, like Buber and Zeitlin, Heschel did not himself invoke the term "neo-Hasidism" in describing his works, nor were the sources and subjects of his writings

[1] See Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998); and Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

[2] Heschel's uncle, in whose home he was reared from an early age, was the prominent Novominsker Rebbe. See above.

[3] This is true of even those areas that do not deal explicitly with Jewish mysticism; see Arthur Green, "God's Need for Man: A Unitive Approach to the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel," *Modern Judaism* 35:3 (2015), 247-261.

confined to Hasidism.[4] His goal was to present an interpretation of Judaism—and religion—to an American readership, with the aim of inspiring deeper spirituality and a higher level of commitment. Inherent in this was a two-fold critique of American Judaism. Heschel felt that the community was largely apathetic and complacent, totally ignorant of the fiery passion of the true religious quest. But in America, as in Germany, Heschel was confronted by a Jewish community obsessed with issues of praxis rather than theological depth. In response he fought to refocus their attention on matters of the inner world. To heal these deep-seated malaises, Heschel creatively marshaled a wide array of sources: the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic literature, medieval philosophy, and Kabbalah, as well as the classics of Western thought.[5] Yet Heschel's interpretation of these earlier texts and his project of renewal, including the inchoate sparks found among his Yiddish poetry and then his first writings on American soil,[6] were guided by the aim of translating the ethos of Hasidism to the Western world.[7]

Heschel, who saw himself as an insider to the world of Hasidic spirituality, was deeply troubled by popular and scholarly misunderstandings of Jewish mysticism. In a stirring essay published in the year of his death, Heschel offers a key portrait of Hasidism:

> Most things that have been said about Hasidism, Hasidism is not. To an average superficial writer, Hasidism means to be gay, to drink a little vodka. Hasidism is not that. It is true that it is important to understand that the

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[4] Cf. Samuel Dresner's introduction to *Circle of the Baal Shem Tov: Studies in Hasidism*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), xx, where the author claims that Heschel should "not be labeled a neo-Hasid, though he forsook the Hasidic enclave for the broader Western society." Already in 1956, however, he was so designated by a prominent Orthodox rabbi and professor of sociology; see Joseph H. Lookstein, "The Neo-Hasidism of Abraham J. Heschel," *Judaism* 5:3 (1956), 248-255. Rabbi Lookstein defines neo-Hasidism, including Heschel's formulation thereof, as follows: "An origination to life which enables man to feel the unfailing presence of God is Neo-Hasidism. It is, incidentally, the only genuinely Jewish variety of Existentialism."

[5] See Michael Marmur, *Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Sources of Wonder* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016). For an excellent study of the philosophical aspects of Heschel's corpus, see Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[6] A collection of these poems was recently republished in a bilingual edition as *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, trans. Morton M. Liefman (New York and London: Continuum, 2004). The short book *The Earth is the Lord's* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1949), one of Heschel's first American publications, was a eulogy for the world of Hasidic spirituality that had been turned into smoke by the Nazi death machine. This early work emphasizes several key aspects of Hasidism found throughout Heschel's writings: the centrality of joy, the ongoing quest for newness in service and in spirit, and the positive attitude toward the physical world.

[7] Arthur Green, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: Recasting Hasidism for Moderns," *Modern Judaism* 29:1 (2009), 62-79. In this article Green identifies five elements present in many of Heschel's writings that reveal the influence of Hasidism and its relevance to the modern world: (1) divine immanence in the physical world; (2) the notion that God's presence cannot be proven in rational or philosophical terms, but must rather be witnessed; (3) the central importance of charismatic religious leaders; (4) insistence on love, kindness, and joy as the heart of religious life; and (5) God's self-imposed need for human actions. The exigencies of space will restrict our focus to Heschel's presentation of Hasidism, not the degrees to which Hasidic themes permeate the rest of his scholarly and theological oeuvre.

> Hasidim would drink a *L'-chaim* from time to time. But how did they understand it? He who has never been present at the scene, at the moment that Hasidim drink vodka, cannot know what it means to be holding the essence of his world….
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> To Hasidim, to drink *yayinsaraf* ["burning spirits"] is to be on fire, to remember that God is a consuming fire. It is not just gaiety, it is great discipline living in a number of extraordinary relations, commitments, entertaining a number of basic convictions. It is above all the cultivation of the inner life, a complex of sensibilities.
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> Hasidism must be understood in terms of great insights and teachings. It is equally important to remember that Hasidism is preserved not only in the form of teachings but also in the language of stories, tales. Third, Hasidism can be properly understood only if one realizes its leaning upon classics, on interpretations of biblical or rabbinic texts. The most important aspect of Hasidism is that it lives in personalities; without the charismatic person there is no teaching of Hasidism.[8]

Heschel decried the simplistic interpretation of Hasidism as a mandate to joy and levity. This framing does obvious injustice to the complexity of Hasidic theology, but it also misses a defining characteristic of Hasidic spirituality: the confrontation with the world just as it is, marbled through with imperfections and problems. Some mystical movements demand that the worshiper withdraw from the physical realm, but Heschel read Hasidism as *demanding* worldly involvement: "What is exciting about Hasidism is that it faces existence as it is without camouflage. It is open to tragedy and suffering, it opens up sources of compassion and insight."[9] The Hasidic message of existential optimism does not lead to complacency or isolationist spirituality; it cultivates a religious sensibility grounded in empathy and open-heartedness.

But this passage also reveals that Heschel saw Hasidism as an approach to human experience: a fiery inward passion that infuses all deeds with new devotional significance. This interpretation of Hasidic ecstasy places Heschel rather close to Buber. However, unlike Buber, Heschel argued that the vital teachings must be witnessed and cannot be conveyed through books. We should remember that Heschel was also a scholar of Hasidism, and his privileging of oral traditions was a crucial historiographical barb aimed at scholars who interpreted Hasidic spirituality only as portrayed in texts.[10] As Heschel elsewhere claimed, the Hasid's love for God and his divine service are so intimate, so deeply personal, that they

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[8] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 35.

[9] Ibid., 38.

[10] See the studies in Heschel, *Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*; and Moshe Idel "Abraham J. Heschel on Mysticism and Hasidism," *Modern Judaism* 29:1 (2009), 80-105.

cannot be articulated in words.[11] One who works with Hasidic texts must remember that they are echoes of religious teachings once conveyed orally; the reader must become attuned to the spiritual passion held within the written words.[12]

But Heschel's point about the power of orality was not just an issue of scholarly method. The embrace of spoken words as a vehicle for religious experience, suggests Heschel, was a cornerstone of Hasidism:

> The doctrine of prayer and the doctrine of study as developed by the Baal Shem are based upon the discovery of the meaning and the reality of a spoken word. Suddenly a word became greater than the person. And he who does not know that a word is greater than a person does not even know how to pray or how to read the Torah.[13]

Hasidism is thus a revolution in the religious approach to language. Though speech had long been held sacred by Jewish tradition, and especially among the kabbalists, the theology of Hasidism offered something more. Whereas the earlier Jewish mystics saw the Hebrew language as a translation of divine speech emerging from God's name, many Hasidic thinkers expanded this vision to encompass *all* human language—even its mundane forms. The human capacity for speech is described as a divine gift, an element of God that inheres within the soul of the mystic and is revealed in the course of sacred language.[14] The contemplative quest may lead the worshiper into the deepest realms of human consciousness and toward the ineffable Divine, but, claims Heschel, the spoken word is the gateway to this encounter.

Hasidism was a revolution in the art of worship, a turn that Heschel described as the "resurrection of prayer" inspired by the living model of the Hasidic masters.[15] The shortcomings of prayer were, of course, just as acute in Heschel's day as in that of the Baal

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[11] See Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Hasidism," *Jewish Heritage* 14:3 (1972), 14-16. See also idem, *Kotsk: In Gerangel far Emesdikeit* (Tel Aviv: ha-Menorah, 1973), vol. 1, 7-10; and the recent Hebrew translation *Kotsk: Be-Ma'avak le-Ma'an Hayyei Emet*, ed. Dror Bondi (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015).

[12] Samuel Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 7-8. Heschel notes that: "Hasidism withers when placed on exhibition. Its substance is not perceptible to the eye. It is not enough to read its written word; one must hear it, one must learn to be perceptive to the voice. Fortunately there are words in many of its records which still ring with the passion and enthusiasm of those who spoke them. The problem is how to hear the voice through the words."

[13] Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," 37.

[14] See Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 59-80; idem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala (Part 2)," *Diogenes* 80 (1972): 164-194; and my forthcoming book *Speaking Infinities: God and Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritsh.*

[15] See also Rivka Horwitz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel on Prayer and His Hasidic Sources," *Modern Judaism* 19:3 (1999), 293-310.

Shem Tov. Heschel's indictment of the synagogue as the "graveyard where prayer is buried"[16] was in many ways levied against *all* American Jews, whom he felt failed to grasp the inner world of prayer and the indispensable opportunity for spiritual growth afforded by worship.[17] Invoking the Hasidic model of leadership, Heschel argues that the contemporary rabbi must be the one to model prayerful intention and intensity, teaching others through his own spiritual life.[18]

Returning to our initial passage, Heschel refers the reader to another fundament of Hasidism: its grounding in creative re-readings of traditional or canonical texts.[19] The theological greatness of the Hasidic masters is also found in the way that threadbare canonical sources are resurrected in their hands. Hasidic interpretation was, above all else, a type of devotional exegesis, for the Baal Shem Tov "tried to consolidate abstractions and philosophic reflections of Jewish mysticism into what he called a way of worship, an existential way, an application to human terms rather than letting them stay in their naked abstraction."[20] The ideas that emerge in study must always be anchored in the spiritual life of real people. And, for Hasidism, to read Scripture is to embark upon the transformative journey of meeting God's Presence within its letters.

Heschel rejected interpretations of Hasidism as emphasizing that spirituality is predicated on withdrawing from the earthly realm and physical deeds.[21] Scholars have noted that God's need for the commandments—to wit, that mankind is charged with taking an active role as a

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[16] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 101.

[17] Heschel, "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," 119, notes: "To kabbalah and Hasidism the primary problem was how to pray; to the modern movements, the primary problem was what to say. What has Hasidism accomplished? It has inspired worship in a vast number of Jews. What have the moderns accomplished? They have inspired the publication of a vast number of prayer books."

[18] Heschel, "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," 121.

[19] Here we see an echo of Heschel's analysis of Buber, whom he criticized for his lack of familiarity with classical Jewish literature (both rabbinic and medieval). This lacuna, argued Heschel, prevented Buber from discerning the innovative elements of Hasidism from those aspects that were a continuation or amplification of earlier themes in Jewish literature. But it also occluded his understanding of Hasidism as a revolution of hermeneutics and exegesis, one that was grounded in traditional texts and not simply a new religious ethos that emerged from personal (or communal) experience. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Interview at Notre Dame," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 384-385.

[20] Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," 38.

[21] See, for example, Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Mystical Element in Judaism," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 173: "The ultimate goal of the kabbalist is not his own union with the Absolute but the union of all reality with God; one's own bliss is subordinated to the redemption of all."

partner in shaping the world—is an essential theme across Heschel's writings.[22] All deeds have infinite and cosmic significance, for "there is always a reverberation in the Beyond to every action here."[23] The movements of human beings can even impact God, for our actions are the response to the perennial divine beckoning and challenge to mankind.

These actions are often, but not always, coterminous with the *halakhah* as classically defined. For Heschel, influenced by the ethos of Hasidism, decried the exclusive definition of Judaism in terms of *halakhah* and the performance of obligations. Heschel felt that this legalistic creed, which he called "pan-halakhism," was fundamentally alien to the upbringing he received in Hasidic Warsaw.[24] Heschel constantly emphasized that *halakhah* must not overshadow the centrality of God and Torah,[25] and although obligation is a crucial element of religion, it must not outstrip the ultimate focus of devotion unto God.[26] But Heschel is often misunderstood on this point. He underscored that *halakhah* and the commandments more broadly are key tools for attaining self-transcendence and a life of piety.[27] He took the leaders of Reform Judaism to task for heedlessly abandoning religious practice. Instead, Heschel argued that we must follow the example of the early Hasidic masters by restoring balance between the twin forces of *halakhah* and *aggadah*, and to remember the order of priorities of religious life: "To many Jews the mere fulfillment of regulations was as the essence of Jewish living. Along came the Besht [Baal Shem Tov] and taught that Jewish life is an occasion for exaltation. Observance of the Law is the basis, but exaltation through observance is the goal."[28] Each commandment, taught Heschel, allows the infinite world of the spirit to become crystallized in physical deeds. Actions can become rote worship without a devotional

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[22] An emblematic passage, indicative of many others, in Heschel, "The Mystical Element in Judaism," 166, reads: "man's privilege as it were, is to augment the divine in the world… not only is God necessary to man, but man is also necessary to God, to the unfolding of His plans in this world."

[23] Heschel, "The Mystical Element in Judaism," 165, and esp. 178.

[24] In this Heschel is pushing back against the ethos present in works such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983). See Samuel H. Dresner, *Heschel, Hasidism, and Halakha* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), esp. 102-105.

[25] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Jewish Theology," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 155. In this work, Heschel struggled against the formulations of some of his colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary, as well as those of some prominent Orthodox thinkers.

[26] See Abraham Joshua Heschel, "God, Torah, and Israel," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), esp. 201.

[27] Here too Heschel engages with a perceived shortcoming in Buber's interpretation of Hasidism. Buber, said Heschel, was wrong to emphasize spirituality and religiosity (*aggadah*) above—and to the exclusion of—obligation (*halakhah*); see Heschel, "Interview at Notre Dame," 384. See also Kaplan and Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 219-228.

[28] Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," 34.

trajectory, however, and the call of Hasidism is to fuse inwardness with ritual observance, to cultivate the spirit without sacrificing the commitment to sacred deeds.

The implications of the spiritual path of the Baal Shem Tov extend beyond the specific bond between the God of Israel and the Jewish people. Hasidism, Heschel argued, "introduced a kind of thinking that is concerned with personal, intimate problems of religion and life."[29] Heschel was troubled by the question of, "Who is man?," in its broadest sense, just as he was concerned with the idea of religion in the modern world. This universalized concern is a facet of Heschel's neo-Hasidism, emerging from his interpretation of Hasidic sources, in addition to their biblical and rabbinic precedents. The eighteenth-century renewal of Hasidism happened in a strictly Jewish context, but Heschel interpreted the sources of Hasidism in light of the deepest human questions of meaning, of personhood, of moral responsibility, and of the hidden palaces of the inner world. The Baal Shem Tov, he claimed, "brought about renewal of man in Judaism"[30]—as the heir to this legacy, Heschel hoped to create a Jewish renewal of humanity. This sentiment is, of course, linked to his well-known activism in the Civil Rights movement and the protests against the war in Vietnam, as well as his commitment to the struggle for Soviet Jewry. This was inextricably linked to his reading of Judaism—and the Hasidic traditional in particular—of a God in need of human action.[31]

Heschel's portrayal of Hasidism includes a brooding voice of discontent.[32] This posture of rebellion in Hasidism, a critical voice akin to the scouring words of the biblical prophets, calls for a continuous struggle against sham piety, equivocation, self-justification, indifference, and complacent mediocrity:

> Hasidism, which brought so much illumination and inspiration into Jewish life, was a movement of dissent…. Is there dissent in Judaism today? Creative dissent comes out of love and faith, offering positive alternatives, a vision. The scarcity of creative dissent today may be explained by the absence of assets that make creative dissent possible: deep caring, concern, untrammeled radical thinking informed by rich learning, a degree of audacity and courage, and the power of the word.[33]

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[29] Ibid., 36-37.

[30] Ibid., 34.

[31] Susannah Heschel, "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Conservative Judaism* 50 (1998), 126-143.

[32] See Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, xiii-xv, 3-82, 307-323. See also Susannah Heschel*'s introduction to Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, viii, and throughout Heschel, *In Gerangl far Emesdikeit.*

[33] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Dissent," *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, ed. Susannah Heschel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 106-107.

Hasidism represents the refusal of spiritual individuals to knuckle under and succumb to the basest elements of society and human nature. For Heschel, this sentiment was expressed as the struggle against consumerism, religious apathy, apathy toward the suffering of others, and the mistaken belief in the supremacy of reason and the intellect.

Hasidism's belief in the power of the human being also held a more positive allure for Heschel. This faith may be said to inform much of his writing and political involvement, for "the great message that Hasidism can give to us is hope and exaltation."[34] The world can become a better place, and society can improve. Human nature may have changed very little, but in every moment individual human beings can exchange callousness for compassion. Heschel is well known for his theological writings on the religious importance of wonder and radical amazement,[35] a vision of the world that leads to a quest for constant renewal. Speaking autobiographically, Heschel explains:

> I try not to be stale, I try to remain young. I have one talent and that is the capacity to be tremendously surprised, surprised at life, at ideas. This is to me the supreme Hasidic imperative. Don't be old. Don't be stale. See life as all doors. Some are open, some are closed. You have to know how to open them. But what is the key? The key is song.[36]

Hasidism teaches that devotion can all too easily become mired in routine and rote worship. We are delivered from this state neither through abject submission to law (even God's) nor through pure intellection. Inspiration and wonder, taught Heschel, comes through embodied practices that are performed with intention, intensity, and open-heartedness. Hasidic masters have shown us that song in particular can overcome the tendency toward mindless observance; music conquers even despair and allows the worshiper to achieve uplift, wonder, and ultimately self-transcendence.

Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky

Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky (1914-1984), known by many simply as "Zelda," was an Israeli poet, teacher, and artist.[37] Born in Ukraine, she moved to Palestine with her family in early adolescence and lived most of her adult life in Jerusalem. Zelda studied painting at the Bezalel Academy and taught primary school in the neighborhood of Kerem Avraham.[38] She married

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[34] Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," 39.

[35] This theme was anticipated by the writings of Hillel Zeitlin. Though the two must have met in some capacity, Heschel does not refer to the writings of Hillel Zeitlin as an important influence.

[36] Abrahal Joshua Heschel, "In Search of Exaltation," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 227.

[37] For a brief and informative overview of Zelda's life and literary impact, see https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/zelda, accessed October 14, 2018.

[38] See Zelda, *An Enchanted Bird: Writing and Art* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2014).

in her late 30s, at what was considered a relatively late age in her community, and retired from active teaching. For years Zelda had been writing poetry, publishing her work on rare occasions, but her first volume was printed only in 1968. Her work was swiftly embraced by the Israeli literary world, and she published several more collections of poetry over the course of her life. All of these works are characterized by the same evocative style, combining the pathos of Hasidic devotion with intuitive poetic vision and striking literary sensitivity.[39]

The mystical richness of Zelda's poetry stems, at least in part, from her spiritual background.[40] Zelda was the direct descendent of several prominent leaders of the Chabad Hasidic community, including the movement's founder, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994)—the Seventh Rebbe of Chabad—was her first cousin. She remained piously observant for her entire life, and motifs, images, and ideas plucked from the conceptual landscape of Chabad Hasidism saturate her poems.[41] Zelda's poems are filled with images absorbed from her traditional religious life—prayer services, ritual objects, sacred times—and her language sparkles with allusions to the literature of Jewish mysticism.

Zelda uses this ancient vocabulary to build a new literary vision, reinterpreting her Hasidic past in a poetic key and expanding beyond its confines. "She intuits truth about the world," claims scholar and poet Marcia Falk, "that she cannot express strictly in the terms of the theological system she has inherited."[42] Zelda speaks in torn acknowledgement of the

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[39] These volumes were collected together and published as Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky, *Shirei Zelda* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha-Me'uhad 1985). For a wonderful English translation of many of these poems, see Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky, *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda*, trans. Marcia Falk (Cincinnati and Pittsburgh: Hebrew Union College Press and University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Zelda's poetry come from this volume. The footnotes supply pages for both the Hebrew and English pages, though only the latter is included above.

[40] For a biographical sketch, including her reception within Israeli literary circles, see Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *On Zelda's Poetry* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha-Me'uhad, 1988), 9-30.

[41] In this respect Zelda is rather like Fishl Schneersohn (1888-1958), a relative and fellow-scion of the Chabad rabbinic line. He became a writer and psychologist, giving literary shape to his own religious journey in the Yiddish novel *Hayyim Gravitser*. For a portion of this work translated into English, see Fishl Schneersohn, "*Chaim Gravitzer* (The Tale of the Downfallen One): From the World of Chabad," translated by Ri J. Turner, *In geveb* (July 2018): Accessed Oct 22, 2018, and available here: https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/chaim-gravitzer. See also Eli Rubin, "Traveling and Traversing Chabad's Literary Paths: From *Likutei torah* to *Khayim gravitser* and Beyond," *In geveb* (October 2018): Accessed Oct 22, 2018, available here: https://ingeveb.org/articles/traveling-and-traversing-chabads-literary-paths-from-likutei-torah-to-khayim-gravitser-and-beyond.

[42] Marcia Falk, "Strange Plant: Nature and Spirituality in the Poetry of Zelda—A Translator's Reading," *Religion & Literature* (1991): 107.. See also Hamutal Bar-Yosef's discussion of "mysticism" and "religion" in her *Mysticism in 20th Century Hebrew Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press), 15-52; and Shachar Pinsker, "AND SUDDENLY WE REACHED GOD? The construction of "religious" and "secular" in Israeli literature," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 21-41; and ibid., "'Never Will I Hear The Sweet Voice Of God': Religiosity and Mysticism In Modern Hebrew Poetry," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 30, no. 1 (2010): 128-146. See also David Jacobson, *Creator, are You Listening?: Israeli Poets on God and Prayer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

complexity of life, whispering of a radical awareness that God is veiled and absent but also revealed through ordinary phenomena. Her poems describe the peregrinations of the soul, probing the fraught tension of existential aloneness and one's life in the community. Rather than abrupt rupture or jejune continuity, Zelda's unique vision of the world—and of the self—allows her to hold tradition and creativity together without surrendering either.[43] Zelda was a modern Jewish mystic whose religious personality and literary works push beyond conventional categories such as "secular" or "sacred." This capacity to span worlds, to refashion Hasidic piety with a sense of reverence and courage, signifies her as a neo-Hasidic thinker.

Many who look to the spiritual legacy of Hasidism are dismayed by the near-total exclusion of women's voices from its theological literature.[44] Zelda's poetry, like the spiritual autobiography of Malkah Shapiro (1894-1971), the daughter of the Rebbe of Kozhenits, offers us a remarkable window into a devotional world that has been unrepresented in the works of Hasidism.[45] Without attempting to fashion herself as a Hasidic leader or lay claim to male symbols or ritual, Zelda's verses bespeak a spiritual sensitivity that is deeply feminine in its self-representation. The place—and placement—of women is found in the imagery and symbols she evokes.[46]

Zelda knowingly writes from the periphery, lavishing attention upon ordinary natural phenomena and describing the mundane as an aperture through which to apprehend the infinite. In doing so, she actively transforms, and perhaps even inverts, the strict religious hierarchy that defined so many aspects of her life.[47] Her words seem to overturn religious structures while subtly sacralizing the mundane and imbuing the cosmos with a holy inflection. As the text erupts, the world and self are re-envisioned and everything is seen with eyes of freshness and renewal.

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[43] See Aubrey Glazer, *Contemporary Hebrew Mystical Poetry: How it Redeems Jewish Thinking* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 2009), esp. 103; and see also Aza Zwi, "The Poetry of Zelda," *Ariel* 65 (1986): 58-70; Zvi Mark, "Distant Signs and Ancient Wonders: Hasidic Faith in the Poetry of Zelda," *Havruta* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 62-71; and Michele Paskow, "A Study of Themes and Techniques in the Poetry of Zelda," PhD diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1991.

[44] See Tsippi Kauffman, "Hasidic Women: Beyond Egalitarianist Discourse," *Be-Ron Yahad: Studies in Jewish Thought and Theology in Honor of Nehemia Polen*, ed. Ariel Evan Mayse and Arthur Green (Boston: Academic Studies Press, forthcoming), and the many works on Hasidism and the place of women cited in the footnotes.

[45] Malkah Shapiro, *The Rebbe's Daughter: A Memoir of a Hasidic Childhood* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002).

[46] See Nitsa Kann, "A Boat of Light: Zoharic Images in Zelda's Poetry," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 19, (2010): 64-95 and Wendy Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 264 and 268-271.

[47] Falk, "Strange Plant," 107.

It is this sense of renaissance and subtle and significant change, not rupture and estrangement, that defines Zelda's relationship to her Hasidic lineage and spiritual past-come-present. Her poems glowingly describe the transformative power of the quest for spiritual creativity, a yearning that is the very cornerstone of Hasidic—and neo-Hasidic—devotion:

> A very ancient song
> Wakened me to life
> When it banished humility from me
> With the lips of kings.[48]

The speaker is stirred by a voice, an antique language or melody that is simultaneously old and new. Zelda's use of the phrase "lips of the king" surely alludes to Proverbs 16:10: "A magic on the lips of the king; his mouth cannot err in judgment."[49] The spiritual melody, as if animated by enchantment, stirs the speaker to arise from her slumber.[50] Lowliness of spirit and diffidence, traits that bind the tongue, have been cast off by the power of this ancient and renewed song. Zelda concludes:

> A song of a generation
> that went silent
> ages and ages ago
> awakened me to life.[51]

This ancient melody erupts from a silent past, appearing as the resurrected song of a bygone generation upon whose lips it has ceased to murmur. The uncommon formulation of "ages and ages" *('idan ve-idanim*) gestures toward the mysterious prophecy in Daniel 7:25.[52] But whereas the original verse includes a mysterious cypher alluding to events unknown, Zelda's poem projects the phrase into the past by situating the speaker on the future side of the silent abyss. Striving to reclaim the ancient song is an act of literary, liturgical, and melodious resurrection, but it also more: the enchanted song restores life to the speaker as well.

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[48] Mishkovsky, "Ancient Song," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 206-207.

[49] All biblical translations follow NJPS.

[50] See also Gen. 28:16, a verse often cited in Hasidic homilies addressing the need to become "awakened" to a new order of vision.

[51] Mishkovsky, "Ancient Song," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 206-207.

[52] Daniel 7:25: "And he shall speak words against the Most High, and will harass the holy ones of the Most High. He will think of changing times and laws, and they will be delivered into his power for a time, times, and half a time" (NJPS).

Zelda's verses, informed by Hasidic theology and its emphasis on radical divine immanence, offer the reader a radiant vision of the natural world.[53] The most mundane objects and creatures—flowers, trees, and insects—pulse with vitality and divine presence. Even "the floor of the sea // is a chariot (*merkavah*) for God."[54] "Moon is teaching Bible," writes Zelda, invoking a familiar symbol that represents renewal, transformation, flexibility, and the indescribably sublime.[55] Zelda's moon represents a breath of the world to come—a soft illumination that "lights the gate // to the hidden world."[56] Rather than a static cosmos illuminated by the sun, Zelda calls our attention to the quiet dynamism embodied by the moon.[57]

Zelda's textured portraits of the world reverberate with verdant motifs, offering microscopic descriptions of ordinary physicality in which change and transformation are defining factors of temporal existence. In an untitled poem from her 1981 collection, we read:

> The first rain—
> a plenitude of freshness
> with no sign of Cain.
> And agony will no longer
> whisper to my soul,
> "I am the king."
> No longer will it say,
> "I am the ruler."
> Each drop is a link
> between me and things,
> a link
> between me and the world.
> And when night
> conjures up the abyss,
> the abyss conjures up
> fields and gardens.[58]

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[53] Falk, "Strange Plant," 97-108.

[54] Mishkovsky, "From the Songs of Childhood," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 76-77.

[55] Mishkovsky, "Moon is Teaching Bible," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 56-57; and see Bar-Yosef, *On Zelda's Poetry*, 33-34.

[56] Mishkovsky, "In the Moon's Domain," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 214-215.

[57] On the symbolic association of the moon with the feminine in medieval and early modern Kabbalah, see Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 52, 57; and, more broadly, Susan Berrin, ed., *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996).

[58] Mishkovsky, "[The First Rain]," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 192-193.

The break of rain, suggests Zelda, showers freshness and renewal (*ra'ananut*) upon the world. This meeting of ground and water produces "multitudes" (*alfei revavah*), which, as Falk notes in her commentary on this poem, is a term that is laden with connotations of fertility and fecundity.[59] When this precious, life-giving rain returns once again, perhaps reappearing after its seasonal absence, the stigma or "sign" (*ot*) of Cain has been removed. This mark, which symbolizes the fracture of human mortality, moral debasement, and the complexities of repentance, may also be interpreted as a "letter" (also *ot*, or pl. *otiyyot*).[60] Zelda may be alluding to the reemergence of a redeemed, unblemished language, perhaps even to a poetic language whose life-giving power lies beyond the "mark" of "letters" or words.

The description of raindrops also calls to mind droplets of ink, a physical form of language that links the author (or scribe) and the reader. Rain and ink, tools of regeneration and creativity, give life through connectivity and thus the expression of autonomy and *Wille zur Macht* embodied in the statement "I will rule!" Kabbalistic sources generally invoke this expression in reference to the mythic "shattering of the vessels" (called *shevirat ha-kelim*), the moment during creation in which the primordial containers were overwhelmed by the flow of sacred vitality. The vessels shattered, showering sparks of divinity throughout the cosmos.

In the moralistic literature of Hasidism, "I will rule" becomes a watchword for the sin of pride, a hubristic preoccupation with the self that prevents the worshipper from realizing that the world is filled with the divine presence.[61] Chabad Hasidic sources, however, employ the phrase to describe God's decision to bring the various worlds into existence, enabling multiplicity to emerge from the original point of divine unity. This generative process of revelation, the expression of the divine self through the birth of the cosmos, ends with *malkhut*.[62] This *sefirah*, the most immediate and concrete manifestation of God's presence, represents the final stage of emanation. It is through contemplating *malkhut* that one may reverse the thrust of creation through meditative ecstasy of God's transcendence.[63]

True courage, says Zelda, requires one to step beyond "I will rule"—that is, bridging beyond individuated identity and gazing past the mask of the cosmos. It is this openness to the inner

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[59] Cf. Gen. 24:60. On the generative property of rain, described in plainly erotic terms in the Talmud; see *b. Ta'anit* 6b.

[60] See the sources discussed in Ruth W. Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 28-29.

[61] See *Or Torah ha-Shalem* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 2011), *ki tetse*, no. 176. See also Hillel Zeitlin, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, ed. and trans. Arthur Green (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 90-91. The phrase is based on a reading of 1 Kings 1:5.

[62] *Malkhut* is generally associated with *shekhinah*, understood in kabbalistic and Hasidic sources as the feminine aspect of the Divine.

[63] See *Likkutei Torah* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 2002), *nitsavim*, 51b; ibid., *naso*, 21d; *Torah Or* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 2011), *megilat ester*, 92c; and *Torat Menahem 5717* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society), vol. 18, pt. 1, p. 8.

unity that binds (or "links") the speaker to the cosmos. Gazing beyond the boundaries of the self also leads the speaker into an encounter with the "abyss" (called *tehom*), an inner crevasse that seems to be a place of rebirth and regrowth as well as a yawning chasm of absurdity and unknowing. New life, it seems, will spring forth from the nullification of the self, a vital inner response to the gentle fall of rain. These "fields and gardens" represent verdant life, filled with growth and change, a return from the abyss and an embrace of particularity and the dynamic—and subtle—phenomenon of the world.

Such poems seem filled with a deep-seated longing to merge the self with God—or the sacred energy—that inheres within a monistic vision of the world. But we shall see that Zelda's works generally leave this yearning unfulfilled, describing the unity of speaker and cosmos as impermanent and fleeting. In her "As a Blossom of the Valley," we read:

> If your soul is without distraction,
> Like the blossom of the valley,
> It will arrive at the heart of the world.
> It will arrive at the gate
> That has no color. . .
>
> If your soul is without distraction
> Like the blossom of the valley
> You will not be submerged in the darkness
> Unto the root,
> You will not drown in the now
> Unto the innermost point.[64]

The encounter between the speaker and the verdant cosmos—typified in microcosm by a "blossom of the valley"—must be one of total, unadulterated presence. Such distractions (called *peniyot*) are much discussed in Hasidic sources, which warn against impure motivations and describe the lack of attentiveness as erecting an insurmountable roadblock in one's divine service.[65] For Zelda, one must transcend these ulterior motivations or utilitarian calculus in order for the incandescence of ordinary phenomena to come into relief. Only thus can one come to see mundane things for what they are: sublime gateways pointing toward eternity.

Through such acts of focused noticing, one arrives at the place that is beyond all. This attunement is described as a return to the supernal root. This alludes to the image of an inverted cosmic tree, a motif favored in Jewish mysticism.[66] The worshipper—the speaker, or the human being—returns to the Root, effecting a kind of mystical rebirth generated by the

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[64] Mishkovsky, *Shirei Zelda,* 56. The brief excerpt above includes only the second and fourth stanzas. See the translation and discussion in Glazer, *Hebrew Mystical Poetry*, 100-104.

[65] See Bar-Yosef, *On Zelda's Poetry*, 153.

[66] See Falk's note on page 259 of her anthology.

ground of inwardness in all things. This transformative power is found here in an evocative reference to the "innermost point (*ha-nekudah ha-penimit*).[67] In Hasidic sources, this "point" refers to a singularity of divine energy in all things and in all people, a reservoir of sacred energy that vitalizes the cosmos. In Hasidic devotion, of course, the mystical ascent to this "point" is also a journey to the innermost depths of the human mind. This path begins with venturing beyond the confines of the "I", looking beyond the external façade of the cosmos—and the self—in order to penetrate and unlock the inner essence of all things.

Zelda's poems, however, are circumspect regarding the possible synergy of speaker—and perhaps also the reader—with the cosmos and infinitely-beautiful phenomena it contains. "The mystical experience of union, specifically represented as union of the human self with some aspect of nature," argues Falk, "is at the core of many of Zelda's poems. Yet often the moment of union is followed by an immediate withdrawal, a pulling away and pulling back into separateness."[68] The yearning to become attached to the Divine is a cornerstone of Hasidic devotion, as is the celebration or "appreciation of the natural world."[69] Zelda's description of the unity of the speaker with God—or the physical world—as a fleeting and momentary experience recalls Chabad Hasidism in particular, with its embrace of a dialectic in the worshipper's approach to the Divine. The contemplative is drawn near to God through an outpouring of love, but must then retreat in order to preserve his individual identity.[70] This yearning of the soul must be tempered, since the siren call of devotion—which can become overwhelming and all consuming—collapses all the boundaries and unmakes the project of creation.[71]

Poetic language and soulful melody, suggests Zelda, represent expressive mediums through which one may, in a sense, bridge between the longing of union and the necessary

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[67] It is interesting to note that an early version of this poem, one that was intended for a religious audience, used a slightly different vocabulary. There Zelda deployed *shoshanah* ("rose") instead of *tsits* ("blossom"), and *tehom* ("abyss") instead of *akhshav* ("now"); such words conjure up symbols that are well known in the religious thought of Judaism. By expanding her vocabulary, Zelda dampens these particular associations and opens the imaginative power of her verse to a broader readership without compromising the poem's introspective drive.

[68] Falk, "Strange Plant," 103.

[69] Ibid., 105. See also Arthur Green, "Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat," *The Other Side of God: A Polarity in World Religions*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981), 104-130.

[70] See, in particular, Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). See the source translated in Arthur Green, *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid's Table*, with Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse and Or N. Rose (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2013), vol. 2, 190-191; *Mamarei Admor ha-Zaken ha-Ketsarim* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1981), 96-97;and Naomi Kolber, "Zelda's Poetry—With an Emphasis on Her Love Poetry," *Journal for Semitics* 3, no. 2 (1991): 202-209.

[71] See also Ariel Evan Mayse, "'Like a Moth to the Flame': The Death of Nadav and Avihu in Hasidic Literature," *Be-Ron Yahad: Studies in Jewish Thought and Theology in Honor of Nehemia Polen*, ed. Ariel Evan Mayse and Arthur Green (Boston: Academic Studies Press, forthcoming).

maintenance of distinction and differentiation.[72] Her enduring love of language, which coexists with knowledge that words have a limited capacity for conveying sublime truths, characterizes much of Zelda's poetic oeuvre and her evocative style.[73] Communication transcends the fundamental rift between human beings, between the speaker and the cosmos, and language may thus come to cover the abyss with a bridge of words and letters:

> You call out silence to me
> From the hidden world…
> I cover up your silence with the letters and their sounds,
> I cover up the Nothingness with birds that come to sip water
> And with snakes,
> Yes, with snakes.
>
> There is no thing
> I have not called a candle—
> for I fear that in the dark
> I will not distinguish.
> living water from empty wells.[74]

In a world of thunderous silence, all things are transformed into candles—they become incandescent tools for dispelling the darkness and thus, paradoxically, for disclosing the infinite pool of divine vitality that dwells within. Shifting to the image of flowing water, Zelda then suggests that words, letters, and sounds may serve as worthy vessels that receive—and reveal—infinitely powerful and ever-unfolding divine silence. In the epistemic darkness of our existence, encircled as we are by the blanket of unknowing, it is difficult to distinguish these genuine wellsprings of inspiration from their fraudulent counterparts.

This image of water collected in wells and cisterns is a frequent Hasidic trope. One who envisions the cosmos as filled with God's presence will see the infinite flow of sacred energy coursing into the world and sustaining its existence. One who gazes at the fracture of multiplicity, seeing individuated entities and thus paying no heed to the deeper oneness, is likened to one who sips only from the brackish, stagnant water that fills the limited vessel.[75] The core of this cosmology is the pulsing divine heart, a faceless God that is also called the Naught or *Ayin*. This term for the infinite Divine occupies a critical place in the history of Jewish mysticism, and is a particularly repercussive term in the school of the Maggid from

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[72] See Glazer, *Contemporary Hebrew Mystical Poetry*, esp. 99-134; and Dorit Lemberger, *A Red Rose in the Dark: Self-Constitution Through the Poetic Language of Zelda, Amichai, Kosman, and Adaf*, trans. Edward Levin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 109-110. Cf. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* I:59.

[73] See Moshe Idel, "Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism," *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42-79.

[74] Mishkovsky, "You Call Out Silence," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 108-109.

[75] See the source translation of this source in Green, et al, *Speaking Torah*, vol. 1, 118-119.

which Chabad Hasidism stems.[76] There, in early Hasidic sources, the *Ayin* is described as a place of transformation, a place attained during the raptures of prayer, through mystical self-effacement, through song, and through the mystical properties that inhere in language both human and divine.[77]

Zelda's description of human language as a bridge spanning abyss recalls a similar treatment in Hayim Nahman Bialik's "Revealment and Concealment in Language." Bialik's famous essay, similarly filled with mystical allusions and terminology, was first published in 1915 and was surely known to Zelda.[78] Human beings create language, claims Bialik, because we are terrified by the abyss, by the oneness and unity but also by the absurdity of life. Therefore, we obscure our vision of this expanse of Naught, overwhelming it with language and insuring ourselves from its corrosive power. But the stopgaps are impermanent, because human nature is such that we seek to take off these self-imposed masks of language, yearning to gaze beyond the edge and to confront the infinite Naught.

Such struggles with the abyss and the encounter with sadness, anxiety, and death are frequent themes in Zelda's poems. Her poem "Heavy Silence," included in a 1981 collection, describes the collapse of all distinction — the "spectacular difference" — at the end of one's days. The human perception of multiplicity, wondrous as this faculty may be, folds into the abyss and recedes together with an endless stream of language returning to its source. Only God remains as an inscrutable mystery amid the utter weightiness of this enduring silence:

> O knower of Mysteries,
> Help me understand
> what to ask for
> on the final day.[79]

As death draws nigh, only one request may be posed to this Revealer of secrets, whose divine wisdom plumbs the depth of the human heart: we ask for the questions that have the power to endure. In the twilight moments of the ultimate quest, as mortality approaches and differences recede, only questions remain. Rather than the "woman of valor" in Proverbs 31, who looks to the "final day" with what seems to be a lighthearted sense of joy, Zelda's glance at the ultimate tomorrow is filled with trepidation, unknowing, and yearning.

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[76] See Daniel C. Matt, "*Ayin*: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 67-108; Rachel Elior, "The Paradigms of *Yesh* and *Ayin* in Hasidic Thought," *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London and Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 168-179.

[77] See the source translated in Green, et al, *Speaking Torah*, vol. 1, 83.

[78] Haim Nahman Bialik, *Revealment and Concealment: Five Essays*, ed. Zali Gurevitch (Jerusalem: Ibis Books, 2000), esp. 19-20.

[79] Mishkovsky, "Heavy Silence," *Spectacular Difference*, trans. Falk, 220-221.

The arresting verse and spiritual nuance of this unassuming poet succeeded in speaking to a new generation of Israeli writers, poets, and seekers. Zelda's works earned her the accolades and admiration of Israeli literati of all stripes.[80] She was awarded several important literary prizes, rarely bestowed upon religious literary figures. To some degree Zelda's work found its primary home in the secular *belles lettres* of Israel, but she is widely read and much discussed in religious communities across Israel. Her poetry, however, is scarcely known among most North American Jews. Marcia Falk's masterful collection of translations has made Zelda's poems accessible to English readership, yet her works have yet to land among the religious readership of American Jewry.[81] To many she remains a mystery, a scion of Hasidism whose life—and poetry—bridge worlds in unexpected ways. But Zelda's poems, like the Hasidic sermons imbibed in her childhood, awaken and inspire with a sparse language that is at once resonant, repercussive, and elliptical.

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[80] See Lily Ratock, "*Malakh ha-Esh: 'al ha-kesher beyn Yona Wallach and Zelda*," *Aley si'ai* 37 (1996): 75-85.

[81] Translations of Zelda's work were also featured in *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself: A New and Updated Edition*, ed. Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, Ariel Hirschfeld, and Ezra Spicehandler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2003), and a few have appeared in select literary journals.

A Controversial Halakhic Case Against the State of Israel

Shmuel Silberman

I Will Await Him by Yirmiyahu Cohen (Natruna Publishers, 2018) thoughtfully advocates a position anathema to many *Lehrhaus* readers: anti-Zionism. After arguing that the establishment of the State of Israel violates Halakhah,[82] Cohen goes on claim that the State is illegitimate, and religious Jews should disassociate from it. My *rebbeim* do not think its founding transgresses Halakhah or at least are unconcerned with this question after the fact. Indeed, while most of us pay lip service to halakhic pluralism, it's uncomfortable when our cherished notions are challenged. Yet *I Will Await Him* offers the the Zionist reader an opportunity to hear the best arguments against Zionism. If the reader is not persuaded, probably nothing will change his or her mind.

Of course, anti-Zionism is not new in Orthodox circles, but this book's character may surprise readers. *I Will Await Him* addresses a highly emotional topic in a civil tone.[83] Cohen politely (though strongly) disagrees with pro-Zionists. He is trying to be as even-keeled as a rabbi writing about kosher gelatin. Cohen even gives significant exposure to views contrary to his own. The author tackles dozens of pro-Zionist arguments, and analyzes the words of leading Zionist rabbis such as R. Yitzhak Herzog, R. Shlomo Zevin and, *yibbadel le-hayyim*, R. Shlomo Aviner. It's fair to say Cohen knows more about religious Zionism than many of its supporters. He even discloses some positive statements of *hareidi* leaders about the State of Israel.[84] In accounting for these "admissions," Cohen told me that in our information age there are no secrets, and questions must be addressed head-on.

I Will Await Him, like much of the literature surrounding the halakhic permissibility of the State's founding, focuses on the Three Oaths mentioned in *Ketubot* 111a. These Oaths adjure the Jewish people not to prematurely end the Exile by (1) rebelling against the nations and (2) ascending to *Eretz Yisrael* "like a wall." The third Oath adjures the nations not to oppress Israel "too much." It's impossible to do justice to Cohen's complex halakhic analysis in brief, but part of his argument is that the nations did not give the Land to the Jews. The British fled, the UN lacked jurisdiction and their Partition Plan was a recommendation that was

[82] Cohen's focus is halakhic; the book takes no position on public protest, voting, or international relations. Likewise he avoids the usual anti-Zionist themes: the secularism of the Israeli government or the alleged mistreatment of Palestinians.

[83] Cohen is frank in his condemnation of Zionism. However, when addressing the writings of Zionist rabbis, he sticks to substance rather than personal attacks.

[84] Examples are R. Tzvi Pesach Frank, R. Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, and R. Zalman Sorotzkin.

never implemented, and the Arabs objected. Cohen also marshals sources which say that the Three Oaths forbid mass immigration even without creating a state.

The author also rejects the popular argument that the Oaths are no longer in effect because the gentiles did not keep the third Oath (not to oppress Israel too much). He argues that the Oath not to ascend *Eretz Yisrael* "like a wall" has independent validity,[85] earlier persecutions did not stop *rishonim* and *aharonim* from invoking the Oaths, and Maharal says it is forbidden to transgress the Oaths even under threat of torture.[86]

Strengths

Cohen shows how an array of *poskim*, before and after 1948, viewed the Three Oaths as forbidding Zionism.[87] He uncovers a surprising statement of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook that affirms the Oaths and cautions the Zionist movement not to violate them.[88] Cohen reclaims three early heroes of religious Zionists - Maimonides, Nahmanides, and R. Yehuda Halevi - by arguing that these *rishonim* contradict political Zionism in principle.[89] The book includes scores of *rishonim* and pre-Zionist *aharonim* who mention the Oaths in commentary and responsa.[90]

Beyond his comprehensive and sometimes-unexpected citations, another major strength of the book is that its sources are illuminating regardless of ideology. One need not share the author's conclusions regarding political Zionism to be moved, for example, by his rich exploration of the meaning and value of *galut* (exile). *Galut* provides national atonement, inspires converts, and offers opportunities to sanctify the entire world. It prepares us for the *geulah* (redemption) that follows. Its challenges compel us to show patient trust in Hashem. Our preservation shows His miraculous hand, as no other explanation accounts for our

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[85] Besides offering logical arguments, Cohen notes that zero sources pre-1948 link gentile behavior specifically with the obligation not to "ascend like a wall" or "force the end" with action.

[86] *Netzah Yisrael*, chap. 24.

[87] This includes the Rogatchover, the Rebbe Rashab of Lubavitch, the Hazon Ish, the Brisker Rav, R. Yosef Henkin, and the Steipler, among many others. (Cohen notes that R. Henkin said the safety of the State must be ensured post-facto)

[88] *Olat Reiyah* p. 377.

[89] Maimonides warned Yemenite Jews to obey the Three Oaths even under persecution (end of *Iggeret Teiman*). Nahmanides writes that the Jews of the Babylonian Exile were forbidden from returning even with permission from Cyrus, had there not been Divine permission (*Sefer Ha-Geulah,* end of *Sha'ar* 1). *Kuzari* says if we would submit to the lowliness of exile for the sake of Hashem, we would merit *mashiah* (1:115).

[90] Notable is Rashbash, who explains Nahmanides' position that *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* is a *mitzvah* as limited to individual settlement while the Oaths are in effect (*Sheilot u-Teshuvot Rashbash*, 2). This interpretation of Nahmanides is shared by others, complicating the thesis that Ramban was a forerunner of political Zionism.

survival. Cohen's analysis is a corrective for views of exile as simply a misfortune or, alternatively, as a place to feel comfortably at home.

Accordingly, Cohen's book can enlighten those of us who live in exile. Numerous sources obligate us to respect *malkhut* and behave deferentially, as Yaakov did with Esav. We should exercise our rights as citizens of our home countries. At the same time, neither possession of an non-Israeli passport nor the State of Israel's existence is a reason to be strident, disrespectful, or unpatriotic. We are in *galut* and must act accordingly.

Studying the Oaths can also help us understand contemporary Halakhah as it affects Israeli issues. R. Ovadiah Yosef[91] and, *yibbadel le-hayyim*, R. J. David Bleich[92] theoretically permit trading land for peace because the Oaths remove the obligation of conquest. Though R. Shaul Yisraeli disagrees,[93] it is interesting that *poskim* who accept the State on some level invoke the Oaths on a major national issue.[94]

Further, Cohen's engagement with the writings of Religious Zionist pioneers enables the reader to view familiar personalities in a new light. It isn't only Rav Kook who cautioned Zionists not to violate the Oaths. So did R. Yitzchak Yaakov Reines[95] (founder of *Mizrahi)* and R. Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal.[96] Cohen may well be mistaken to conclude that Rav Kook would have opposed a state in 1948. His research, however, corrects the misconception that the Oaths matter only to the Satmar Rav.[97]

Above all, the book's value lies in its profound engagement with a Talmudic *sugya.* A halakhic conclusion is best appreciated in light of a contrary position. A study of opposing *pesak* yields recognition that even a correct *maskana* is still a *hiddush.* There is no reasonable way that Cohen's thesis, shared by a roster of *gedolim* and buttressed by dozens of sources,

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[91] "Ceding Territory of the Land of Israel in Order to Save Lives," *Tehumin* 10 (1989). (This article was translated in *Crossroads: Halacha and the Modern World*, Vol. 3, 1990.)

[92] "Of Land, Peace and Divine Command," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 16 (Fall 1988):61.

[93] Cf. the analysis of R. Yisraeli's approach located at download.yutorah.org/2017/1053/Yom_Haatzmaut_To-Go_-_5777_Rabbi_Mann.pdf.

[94] It follows that without the Oaths, land-for-peace is forbidden, and conquest is a *hiyuv.* An interesting question is whether conquest of Southern Lebanon is, if possible, now obligatory. A reliable source told me this was indeed R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook's position (but not R. Yisraeli's). Have those who confidently assert the Oaths are obsolete thought about these possible far-reaching consequences of their position?

[95] *Or Hadash al Tziyyon, Sha'ar Shemini*, p. 240, and *Sefer Ha-arakhim*, p. 259.

[96] *Eim Habanim Semeiha,* 3:21, pp. 175-176, and chap. 2, p. 94.

[97] Cohen is also correct that "Zionist" is an inappropriate label for R. Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer and the Netziv, neither of whom spoke about a Jewish State, and advocated settlement only.

can be blithely dismissed. Halakhic debate should be engaged in with honesty and without fear.

Shortcomings

Why then, given the book's considerable strengths, was I not convinced? Minority views are not necessarily wrong, but start from a default point of suspicion. Cohen represents a minority position even in the *hareidi* world. Even among those who believe the Zionists violated the Oaths, most limit its contemporary relevance. Missing in this book is acknowledgment that it represents a minority view or any serious discussion of why most *hareidim* differ. The reader may suspect, as I did, there must be more to the story.

What is more, while Cohen has reason to challenge a simplistic Zionist narrative that the British and the UN gave the Jews a state - the British withdrew and the UN was not a government - his argument is not airtight. Perhaps the British transferred authority to the UN, the latter becoming a legal extension of the British Mandate. Maybe the UN's failure to enforce Partition isn't tantamount to rescinding it. These possibilities, as well as others, are not explored in the book.

Additionally, one statement open to objection is the following: "...there was really no *gadol* at all who halakhically permitted the state" (p. 371). Zionist readers may object that R. Herzog and R. Zevin, among others, are *gedolim*. Cohen's claim is also misleading. By "halakhically permitted," Cohen means justifying the state in terms of the Three Oaths. R. Soloveitchik and R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg did not do this explicitly, but by writing positively about the State they implicitly do not view the Oaths as a problem. The same is true for a number of *hareidi* leaders.

As the State of Israel is a *fait accompli*, the question of relevance may be Cohen's biggest hurdle. He writes that due to the high *hareidi* birth rate, "the day is not far off when we will indeed have a chance to vote on whether the state should exist or not" (p. 319). This may be true, but it's likely they will vote affirmatively if they vote on the question at all. As the *hareidi* population grows, they may need to play a larger role in running state institutions. Given increased engagement in recent decades, it remains to be seen if Cohen's arguments will appear compelling to *hareidim* over time.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Jews with Cohen's views (numbering in the hundred of thousands!) are part of *klal yisrael* and Orthodox Judaism, and I gained from the author's understanding of this ideological camp.[98] There is value in knowing what others believe and why. At the very least, realization that a *pesak* is legitimately based in Jewish sources removes

[98] This includes but certainly is not limited to Satmar.

suspicion of nefarious motives. Yirmiyahu Cohen is a Torah scholar who sincerely believes his position represents the truth of Judaism and is good for the Jewish people.[99]

I Will Await Him failed to persuade me to abandon the path of my *rebbeim.* I continue to trust great rabbinic leaders who do not take the path of the author. It succeeded in educating me in areas that are seldom written about. Let us continue to debate Zionism but knowledgeably and with *derekh eretz*, until *mashiah* can help us unravel the issue. I too will await him.

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[99] Cohen's position is not to be confused with Neturei Karta, which joins hands with anti-semites. There are red lines that Brisk and Satmar will not cross.