Hasidic *Derashah* as Illuminated Exegesis

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Abstract

In his lead essay to *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, Steven T. Katz has argued that "[t]he role of scripture . . . is essential to the major mystical traditions and to the teachings and experiences of their leading representatives."[1] Professor Katz surveys the varied forms of mystical scriptural interpretation across esoteric traditions, making ample use of the Jewish mystical tradition, especially Zohar. This essay continues his work with a focus on hasidic scriptural exegetical texts, the *derashot*. I will argue that Hasidic *derashot* exemplify active interpretation, and the intimate personal engagement of the interpreter. While mystical receptivity is indeed cultivated, there is also active intervention and deliberate recontextualization. The charismatic hasidic interpreter embraces sacred scripture in a dynamic personal relationship, with the belief that the recontextualizing and renewed understanding of verses changes reality itself, moving all in the direction of compassion and beneficence. This interpretive posture of personal relationship is grounded in a robust individualism that differs from the quest for *Ayin*, the Nothing or Absolute, that has often been emphasized by many scholars of Hasidism.

Israel ben Eliezer (d. 1760), known as the Baal Shem Tov and considered by devotees as the founder of Hasidism, taught that every word of Torah can sustain two opposing interpretations, one pointing in the direction of severity, and one pointing toward compassion, or the notion that "the righteous transform the sense of severity to that of compassion."[2] For the Baal Shem Tov, the spiritual integrity of the interpreter is more important than intellectual skill or knowledge of the canon. When one learns Torah from a teacher of proper spirit, then the teaching "is fruitful and multiplies";[3] that is, the wisdom is alive

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* I am delighted to have this opportunity to salute Professor Steven T. Katz, who for decades has been warm friend, gracious mentor, and scholarly inspiration to so many others and me. His magisterial academic accomplishments are combined with human qualities of the highest order.

1 Steven T. Katz, "Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

2 *Ben Porat Yosef* (Piotrkow, 1884), 14c, quoted in *Keter Shem Tov*, ed. Jacob Immanuel Schochet (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2004), 9, (#7); 15 (#21).

3 For this phrase, see Tosefta Sotah 7: 10, ed. Lieberman 194: 95 (ms. Vienna); *b.Hagigah* 3b.

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and robust, reverberating and sparkling with implications, repercussions, and transformative power. On the other hand, "When one learns from a wicked person, then [even though the message may be correct] it is not fruitful and does not multiply, but remains flat, just as the student learned it."[4]

In a companion teaching, the Baal Shem Tov argues a complementary point: The Torah's many commandments (613 according to talmudic tradition) can all be distilled to the Ten Commandments, and these in turn are rooted in just one word, the *Anokhi*, the "I am" that opens the Decalogue. This process is one of unification, of finding the source of the many in the one, and can only take place when "the soul of one's teacher is rooted in the World of Unity; but when the teacher's soul is in the world of Division, then the disciple receives teachings that are separate, isolated."[5] This approach to interpretation eschews judgments of true/false in favor of fertile/sterile; similarly, teachers are not ranked according to mental agility or analytic refinement but by their ability to instill awareness of an underlying unity in disparate materials and eventually to unity in life perspective. For the Baal Shem Tov, because every word of Torah can be taken positively or negatively, the true teacher is responsible for bringing the words to the side of good and blessing, comprehending the text in the most beneficent way. The active interpreter's understanding shapes the text, transforming the world itself.[6]

Prominent third generation master, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lyzhensk (Lezajsk; 1717–1787), highlights the activist understanding of Torah interpretation in *Noam Elimelekh*: "When a zaddik wishes to exert influence and alter circumstances (in the direction of beneficence), he must attire the desired change in the garb of Torah. The Torah raises the matter, presenting it before God . . . By means of the Torah, the person can express his desire and make things happen in accord with his will."[7] Elimelekh defines a hasidic reading as an expression of the tzaddik's active, beneficent desire to channel blessing via the Torah. The universal, comprehensive, determinative nature of Torah means that one can always find a way to express whatever one needs and wants to express, with the assurance that this articulation will lead to the desired result. Beginning with the Baal Shem Tov, then, hasidic interpreters have intentionally responded to

4 *Ben Porat Yosef*, 23d; *Keter Shem Tov* 15–16 (#22).

5 *Ben Porat Yosef*, 23d; *Keter Shem Tov* 16 (#23).

6 For more on the Baal Shem Tov's exegetical contributions, see Nehemia Polen, "Baal Shem Tov (Besht)," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 3 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2011) 208–10.

7 *Parashat Hukkat* (Lemberg/Lvov 1788), 81c.

what they perceive as a mandate to express meaning that conveys blessed, joyous possibility.

One of the most striking articulations of the activist, interventionist mode of interpretation is found in the work of Rabbi Yaakov Leiner (1828–1878), the second master in the lineage of Izbica-Radzyn. Rabbi Leiner's teaching appears as a comment on Jacob's dying plea to his son Joseph: "If now I have found favor (*hen*) in your eyes . . . deal kindly and truly with me, and please don't bury me in Egypt."[8] Rabbi Leiner asks, "Did not Jacob trust Joseph to fulfill his dying request—from a father to a son—to be buried in Canaan, without invoking 'grace' or 'favor'?" He answers:

> There are places in Torah which on the surface appear uninspiring. To the person who just sees their surface meaning, they appear as a lifeless, immobile body. Such a lackluster appearance is akin to being buried. However, for someone who sees the words of Torah in a gracious, favorable light, there is no passage in Torah that is uninspiring, for by means of the gracious regard (*hen*) he has for Torah, his heart is aligned with and resonates with the depth of these seemingly buried passages.[9]

In this teaching, Rabbi Leiner sets up a correspondence between Joseph's willingness to transfer his father's body from Egypt to Canaan and gracious readings of biblical texts. From a superficial perspective, it should make no difference where a body is buried. After all, the dead can be regarded as so much dust, and it should not matter whether the body is placed in one location or another. It is grace—that is, the desire to persist in cherishing ongoing relationship grounded in shared memory and future hope—that motivates and energizes the project of transferring a body to a preferred location. As Jon Levenson explains regarding Jacob's elicitation of Joseph's promise, "he . . . makes Joseph promise to bury him in the promised land, thus reiterating and deepening familial devotion to the patrimony of which they have yet to take possession."[10] That is, the location of Jacob's body is indeed significant, as it serves to focus the family's geographical attention and emotional devotion elsewhere than Egypt, to the location of its past and its future in Canaan.

Rabbi Leiner draws out the implications for exegesis as follows: there are some sections of Torah that seem dead, that do not arouse interest and appear

8 Gen. 47:29.

9 *Bet Ya'akov* (1906; reprint, Jerusalem: 1977) 15d–16a; *Bet Ya'akov al Ha-Torah Sefer Bereshit* vol. 2 (1890; reprint, Bnei Brak, IL: Torat Avraham Institute, n.d.), 1013.

10 Jon D. Levenson in *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 94.

devoid of spiritual meaning. Only a gracious reading reframes, re-deposits, spatially translates, re-contextualizes, and restores life to such passages. This is a remarkable acknowledgement that there are passages of which one might be tempted to merely say, 'Give them a decent burial.' Gracious reading opens the heart to meaning, bringing frozen passages to warmth and life. One can see the whole Izbica project as a sustained and determined act of gracious reframing, re-reading of the Torah in its entirety, especially the narrative sections that on the surface appear awkward and less than inspiring.[11] Izbica knows where the bodies are buried, and it is not shy about pointing them out, digging to reposition them so they may speak with renewed life.

Another major hasidic lineage of Poland is that of Ger (Gora Kalwaria), in whose work we find a similar idea. Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter comments on Gen. 28:11, which describes the fugitive Jacob's "assembling the stones of the place" around his head.[12] According to Rabbi Alter, this means that out of the fragments of his dislocated life, Jacob arranged an edifice of meaning, a coherent conceptual structure, a "Torah of the place."[13] Similarly, each generation is bidden to take the particularities of its own place and time, its own existential circumstance, and shape them into Torah.[14] Drawing on an old mystical motif from Sefer Yetzirah that refers to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as stones, and letter permutations as rearranged stones, Rabbi Alter asserts that there are some scriptural passages whose meaning is clear, direct, and that speak with transparent power; there are other passages whose meaning is murky and that call for mindful attention. As the Talmud acknowledges, in order to make an exegetical derivation work, elements of the text may need to be rearranged.[15] This is an activist, interventionist construction of meaning.[16]

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11 For more on the Izbica school's theology and biblical exegesis, see Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Ora Wiskind-Elper, *Wisdom of the Heart: The Teachings of Rabbi Ya'akov of Izbica-Radzyn* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010); Morris M. Faierstein *All is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner*, revised edition (Piscataway Township, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

12 Genesis 28:11.

13 Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, *Sefat Emet* (Piotrkow: S. Belkhatovsky, 1905), s.v. "*Amru Hazal she-tikken tefillat arvit.*"

14 Idem 130.

15 Yoma 48a.

16 For more on this teaching, see Nehemia Polen, "Jacob's Remedy: A Prayer for the Dislocated," in *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life*, ed. Lawrence Fine, Eitan Fishbane, and Or N. Rose, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), 201–08.

Another aspect of hasidic exegesis might be called a theology of intimate perception of the textual surface. Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim of Sudylkow (c. 1748–1800), grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, wrote a work called *Degel Mahaneh Efraim* that transmits many traditions from the author's celebrated grandfather. In a discussion of the manna, Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim draws an analogy between the "food from heaven" that the Israelites gathered during their wilderness trek, and the task of the interpreter of Torah. His point of departure is the following verse "This is the food that God has given you for eating . . . gather from it, each person (*ish*) according to what he eats—according to the number of your people, every person (*ish*) according to whomever is in his tent shall you take."[17] Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim presents a parable from his grandfather the Baal Shem Tov, followed by his interpretation. While in general the expositions in *Degel Mahaneh Efraim* are reasonably clear as hasidic texts go, this piece is elusive and cryptic, apparently deliberately so. The text—both the grandfather's parable and grandson's application—is presented below in its entirety. While the body of my response to the teaching is placed at the conclusion, from time to time I make insertions, marked by square brackets, where I feel that interstitial phrases are necessary for understanding. Biblical quotes are set in small caps to assist the reader in seeing how the rabbi is nuancing the verse. Finally, I break up the text into paragraphs not present in the original Hebrew, and assign letters to the paragraphs. He writes:

> (A) In my humble opinion this verse [Ex. 16:16] contains a counsel/secret [*sod*] of the Lord for those that fear Him [cf. Ps. 25:14] and it seems to me that [my understanding of it as presented here] is on the path of truth.
> (B) THIS IS THE FOOD THAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU FOR EATING—and how should you eat? GATHER FROM IT, EACH PERSON [*ish*]. . . . This accords with a parable I heard from my revered grandfather [the Baal Shem Tov] of blessed memory:
> (C) There was a king who bequeathed treasures to his children, for each one a different treasure. The treasures were wrapped in distinctive gold casings and safeguarded in fortified chambers. The king hoped that each child would recognize and discern [what lay beneath the casings] consistent with his comprehension and would find [the treasure meant for him].

17 Ex. 16:16.

The Baal Shem Tov's parable is concluded and the voice of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim now returns:

> (D) This is literally releasing captives [from darkness] to great light, from person to person [*me-ish la-ish*] and from person to the human [*u-me-ish la-adam*], and that's why it can be sensed in the taste/reason/musical trope [*te'amim*], for the *te'amim* are superscripted [*elyonim*], and whatever is below requires something higher.
> (E) ACCORDING TO THE NUMBER [*mispar*] OF YOUR PEOPLE—Their souls became *sefirot*, radiant, i.e., *behirot*—luminous.
> (F) This is reminiscent of another teaching from my grandfather of blessed memory, who told of a responsum directed by Maimonides to be written to [the people of] a certain land, as is explained in the writings of the 'high priest' of Polonoyye.
> (G) EVERY PERSON (*ish*) ACCORDING TO WHOMEVER IS IN HIS TENT SHALL YOU TAKE—for each one is covered in a TENT HE HAD SET AMONG MEN (Ps. 78:60), and each one has a virtue, each excelling the others in some way.
> (H) I [Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim] too have written this [in the hope that] perhaps God Almighty will be gracious, and one of my children or students will come and discern and comprehend this parable.

Section (A) announces Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim's intention to present what he deems a profound, esoteric interpretation of Exodus 16:16, as the gesture to Ps. 25:14—often deployed with reference to prophetic revelations—makes clear. Nahmanides, in his commentary on the Torah, employs the phrase "by way of truth," *al derekh ha-emet*, to introduce a kabbalistic interpretation,[18] but it is likely that the author's primary intention here is more general. He is sharing his confidence that what he is about to present is truthful, an accurate assessment of the verse's inner meaning and, more broadly, of the manna motif in scripture. Section (B) introduces the stress on the keyword '*ish*,' or person, which appears twice in Ex. 16:16, and motivates the entire piece's focus on personhood and individuality. It sets the stage for introducing the Baal Shem Tov's parable. Section (C), the parable, will be discussed at length below, but at this point it is important to note that the king has multiple

18 On this phrase, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides's Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJS Review* 14, no. 2 (1989): 103–78.

children, each one with a special virtue; no single child is singled out for unique superiority.[19]

In section (D) the author alludes to a Zohar passage[20] which adduces various terms for humans, such as *ish* (human being), *gever* (man), *enosh* (mortal), and asserts that "the greatest of them all is *adam*." As demonstrated by Gen. 1:27 and 9:6, Adam was made in the image of God. The human task is to move oneself to ever-higher levels of being, eventually rising to become the true Adam, the divine image. Thus the '*ish*' of Ex. 16:16 is invited to find the manna and savor the taste specifically meant for that person. Absorption and integration of that nourishment enables the person to rise to the level of the quintessential human, Adam. All this is understood as taking place along two linked dimensions: the Israelites' physical eating of the manna in the Exodus narrative, and the interpreter's attunement to the peculiarities of the text's surface features, unlocking and accessing its deeper message.

The Hebrew word for taste, *ta'am*, occurs with reference to the manna at Ex. 16:31 ("and its taste was like wafers in honey") as well as at Num. 11:8 ("and its taste was as the taste of a cake baked in oil"), giving rise to the midrashic tradition that the Israelites could taste whatever they desired in the manna. 'Taste' as signifying spiritual experience is already found in the Bible in Psalm 34:9, "Taste and see how good the Lord is." In the medieval period, Judah Ha-Levi's *Kuzari* invokes taste repeatedly to convey his phenomenology of religious experience in contrast to the logical arguments of Jewish philosophy. As Diana Lobel writes in her study of Sufi influence on Ha-Levi, "The sense of taste is by its very nature unmediated; no second-hand report, however eloquent, can convey the actual savor of a feast. *Dhawq* [taste] is not simply a kind of cognition, but an immediate experience accompanied by relishing and enjoyment."[21] Ha-Levi also mentions the *te'amim* as masoretic accents, and in the following century the *Zohar* discusses their symbolic significance as tropes, melodic modes for scriptural reading.[22] All of this is background for Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim's use of the term. He refers to superscripted

19 The first occurrence of the word for son/child is missing a *yod* signifying the plural, but since all later mentions of offspring in the parable clearly refer to a plurality of children, it must be assumed that the dropped *yod* is a misprint or the word was written in truncated, abbreviated form, a common printer's habit of the time.

20 Zohar 3: 48a–b.

21 Diana Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari* (Abany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 92.

22 See Elliot Wolfson, "Biblical Accentuation in a Mystical Key: Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Te'amim," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 11 (1988–1989): 1–16; esp. 12, note 22. The second part of this essay appears in the same journal, 12 (1989–1990): 1–13.

tropes, *te'mamim elyonim*, which are applied to notably sublime and majestic passages, in particular the Decalogue. With this allusive language, the rabbi of Sudylkow implies that scripture is like manna: its taste is unlocked by the reader who savors its sublime possibilities. It is precisely the nobility and sensitivity that one brings to a passage that frees its inner significance, allowing access and enabling it and the reader to soar together.

In section (E) the author plays on the Hebrew root *s-f-r*, associated with numbers, as well as with the gemstone sapphire/*sapir*. The multiple senses of this keyword are already exploited in *Sefer Yetzirah* and early kabbalistic texts, where *sefirot* are the ten divine manifestations.[23] Here the author is not thinking primarily of technical kabbalistic terminology, but the idea that the individual's soul radiates and pulsates as it recognizes affinity with surface features designed for it, as these surface phenomena point to a hidden spiritual treasure meant specifically for that person.

Section (F) refers to the writings of Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, an early disciple of the Baal Shem Tov whose works preserve the first published teachings attributed to the great master.[24] The specific passage is found in *Tzafnat Pa'ane'ah*, originally published in 1782.[25] This passage details the rabbinic doctrine of resurrection of the dead as well as the biblical prooftexts that the Talmud supplies to anchor this doctrine in scripture. Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye recounts that a certain group of medieval Jews challenged the rabbinic readings, pointing out that the verses in question could be read differently and that the prooftexts were hardly dispositive. The reply is that the yearning for a spiritual state reflects a predisposition for it, an intuitive, tacit comprehension that makes the idea congenial. Those individuals who find rabbinic prooftexts for resurrection unpersuasive indeed have no affinity with that state, which implies that they are not destined for resurrection.

In Section (G) the rabbi understands the "tent" of Ps. 78:60 in the mystic sense of a nimbus that envelops the individual, known in Kabbalah as "surrounding presence" (*maqqif*).[26] Each individual is invited to take and taste what is truly theirs by deep affinity so that they may become *Adam* as in Psalm 78:60, "*ohel shiken ba-adam*"—"the tent he had set among men" or, as the rabbi

23 See Zohar 1: 8a.

24 The appellation 'high priest' is an honorific flourish, alluding to Rabbi Jacob Joseph's status as a Kohen, a member of the Aaronide priesthood.

25 See Gedalyah Nigal, ed., *Zofnath Paaneah: Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes* (Jerusalem: Institute for the Study of Hasidic Literature, 1989), 220–21 [50a–b].

26 For more on *maqqif*, see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1992), 331–32, n. 13.

suggests we read the verse, "the tent he had set around Adam." The "tent" or *maqqif*, that is, the envelope encasing one's personhood, is illumined by affinity with the scriptural passage that speaks most directly to it.[27]

Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim's conclusion in Section H is moving and poignant. He argues that the parable itself belongs to whoever understands it, shines, and resonates with it, whoever discerns and savors both its surface and depth more richly. Indeed, the parable has implications that perhaps even Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim has not fully grasped. There are always levels that only the future will reveal. And the inheritors of the parable may be disciples, not necessarily the rabbi's biological heirs. This point has implications in light of hasidic history, which at this time was already moving to a dynastic system largely based on filial succession.[28] The rabbi suggests that the legacy of spirit is not limited to any one family tree, and true kinship with scripture's riches are open to whoever perceives them. This is a striking statement coming from the grandson of the founder of Hasidism.

Discussion

While the use of parables in early Hasidism is well known, this particular parable has not received sustained attention.[29] It is reminiscent of other early

27 My thanks to Rabbi Gedalia Fleer for a fruitful conversation on this topic.

28 On this, see Nehemia Polen, "Rebbetzins, Wonder-Children and the Emergence of the Dynastic Principle in Hasidism," in *Shtetl: New Evaluations*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York University Press, 2006).

29 Moshe Idel has discussed another passage by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim relevant to this parable. See his *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 245, where he quotes the following: "[A] person who is righteous is close to the Torah and . . . the Torah is in him and he is in the Torah." As Idel writes, "The study of Torah is here regarded as a restoration of the human body through its purification, culminating in a mystical union with the Torah, which dwells upon the sanctified members." But this is not the interpretive personalism of our parable. See also the discussion in Alan Brill, "The Spiritual World of a Master of Awe: Divine Vitality, Theosis, and Healing in the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 (2001): 51–57, who, following Idel, correctly emphasizes that for the *Degel*, pneumatic inspiration is the basis of Torah interpretation. However, he does not explore the personalist dimension. Roland Goetschel, "*Torah lishmah* as a Central Concept in the *Degel mahaneh Efrayim* of Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudylkow," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 258–67, discusses techniques of meditation on and manipulation of the Hebrew letters as modes of engaging Torah, but does not discuss our topic.

hasidic parables that feature kings, princes, servants, and treasures. Typically, the servants are distracted by gold and silver and only the son remains faithful to the real quest and perseveres to find the treasure, the King Himself. In an extended essay, Moshe Idel has discussed the famous "Parable of the Son of the King and the Imaginary Walls," often understood as reflecting a pantheistic or acosmistic theology, but which Idel sees as expressing a personal relationship between king and son. As he writes, in that parable "no full pantheism is assumed, despite the resort to the concept of illusion. There is a center from which the light radiates and this center is described in strongly anthropomorphic terms: the face of the king."[30] And, as Idel suggests, in that parable the prince confirms his true relationship with the king by overcoming enemies and collapsing any supposed distance between son and father. In our parable however, there is not just one true son or one correct interpretation. Rather, "*kol ehad yesh lo ma'alah yeterah zeh mi-zeh*": each child is blessed with a faculty that the others do not share; each one's particular gift invites awareness of a specific surface feature encasing a unique treasure. The game is not zero-sum; all persons in the quest can find the treasure meant for them and add to the rich palette of Torah interpretation.[31]

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30 Moshe Idel, "The Parable of the Son of the King and the Imaginary Walls in Early Hasidism," in *Judaism, Topics, Fragments, Faces, Identities: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rivka* [*Horwitz*], ed. Haviva Pedaya and Ephraim Meir (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007), 87–116; above quote on 102. For prior discussion, see Gershom Scholem, "Devekut, or Communion with God," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 224; Joseph P. Schultz, "The Concept of Illusion in Vedanta and Kabbalah," in *Judaism and the Gentile Faiths: Comparative Studies in Religion* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1981), 70–100, esp. 92–94. See also Aryeh Wineman, *The Hasidic Parable* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 79–81, "The Barriers to the Palace," 165–171, "More Treasure Tales."

31 This crucial point distinguishes our parable from another parable with which it shares some features. I refer to the parable *Parashat Behar* in Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, vol. 3 (1780, reprint Monroe, NY: S. Weiss, 1998), 468–69, in which the Seven Pillars of Secular Wisdom are palace treasures visible to all, hence seized by 'servants,' while the deep treasure, understood as religious piety, is hidden by the king in the palace walls. The favored son, having been alerted in advance by the king, is able to notice a slight irregularity in the wall, which he proceeds to demolish, and uncovers the hidden treasure. In Rabbi Jacob Joseph's parable (which he attributes to an ambiguously identified "Moharaz"), there is once again the contrast between the beloved son and the servants, who evidently do not enjoy the same level of intimacy with the king. In addition, the game is stacked in favor of the son, because he is told ahead of time of the existence of the most precious treasure, while the servants—oblivious to the existence of any hidden treasure—have no chance of finding it.

Mystical readers tend to look for secrets under the surface of sacred text. But we have here a theology of the textual surface, a heightened attentiveness to exterior aspects that are not perceived as arbitrary, capricious, or misleading. What appears to be scaffolding actually supports a deeper message that leads reciprocally to a more powerful appreciation of the surface itself. This appreciation is rooted in an epistemology of faith: one must have faith that superficial perception actually conforms to deeper phenomena, and one must recognize that the surface pattern indicates resonant affinity. When one identifies the surface feature corresponding to the treasure, the soul shines, glowing with the excitement of discovery and the characteristic frequency of the treasure itself.

The biblical motif of manna is a perfect vehicle for this teaching: the manna's taste was appealing because the savor is a genuine sign of divine favor and presence. Already in Psalms, manna is described as "angel food."[32] The connection between manna and Torah is ancient. The early midrash *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* tells us "only those who eat manna could interpret Torah."[33] And *Shemot Rabbah*, a later aggadic midrash, links the revelatory Voice of Sinai—which was heard by all recipients according to their absorptive capacity—with the manna, whose taste and tactile sensation was tailored to each Israelite in an age-appropriate manner.[34]

Thus Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim draws on a well-established tradition linking manna and Torah, but he extends and develops it with his self-reflective examination of the process of exegesis, which he says depends on intuiting connections between seemingly arbitrary features on the surface and hidden riches below. This points to something often missed about ParDeS, the four-faceted system of interpretation from the Middle Ages.[35] What may have been tacitly understood by many kabbalists and what the hasidic master now makes

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32 Ps. 78:25, as understood by many ancient and modern interpreters.

33 Tractate Vayissa 3; see *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* vol. 2, ed. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (1933, reprint, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 104, in the name of Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai; Cf. idem, Tractate Beshalah vol. 1, ed. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (1933, reprint, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 171. The maxim is generally understood to mean that only those not burdened by the cares of livelihood and with sufficient leisure can devote themselves to Torah study, but it actually may refer to the fact that "manna was absorbed in their bodies," as the midrash puts it, so that the ingestion of the heavenly food transformed their bodies, making them appropriate vessels to comprehend and expound the Torah.

34 *Shemot Rabbah* 5: 9; Cf. 25:3.

35 On the four levels of scriptural meaning known as PaRDes, see Steven T. Katz, "Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," 21–32; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections:*

explicit is that the four levels dovetail, buttressed and undergirded by the belief in scripture as an organic, integrated whole. Kabbalistic and hasidic readings are symbolic, to be sure, but the symbols are not adventitiously chosen or haphazardly deployed. Surface texture and deep significance project onto each other reciprocally because all layers are encased in a relational latticework that is intuited by the reader for whom the pattern is organically consistent.

More broadly, the Baal Shem Tov's parable and Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim's application of it may be seen as an effort to preempt a critique of hasidic exegesis. Already in the rabbinic period, as Christine Hayes has shown, the Babylonian amoraim "felt a deep ambivalence about non-contextual or midrashic methods of exegesis."[36] This anxiety about midrashic exegesis left its traces in discussions of *peshat* versus *derash* in the medieval period, and may have been felt with particular acuity by hasidic masters, whose techniques were perceived by some to be especially idiosyncratic and eccentric. The skepticism about hasidic exegesis carries forward into the modern period. Louis Jacobs, a twentieth-century rabbinic scholar basically sympathetic to Hasidism wrote the following: "Hasidic 'Torah' can hardly be described as exegesis. The texts are taken completely out of context to yield the desired conclusions; ideas are read into the texts that by no stretch of the imagination can they possibly mean; grammar and syntax are completely ignored; there is not the slightest indication of any awareness of the historical background."[37] As if in response to the implied critique of hasidic readings, Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim asserts that they speak to those for whom their message is addressed. This approach is obviously circular, but the rabbi would no doubt see this as a virtuous circularity: persons comprehend surface features whose depth they already intuit, whose message in some sense they already own.[38]

Kabbalah and Interpretation (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 429–48.

36 Christine E. Hayes, "Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of *minim* and Romans in *B. Sanhedrin* 90b–91a," in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine*, ed. Hayim Lapin (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 1998), 249–89.

37 Louis Jacobs, *Their Heads in Heaven: Unfamiliar Aspects of Hasidism* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005), 27.

38 This is closely related to what Moshe Idel calls the "dearcanization" of exegesis in Hasidism. By this he means the shift from disclosure of a body of esoteric gnosis, to direct, transformative religious experience. In Hasidism the very notion of a body of 'secrets' is derided in favor of tasting divinity directly. See Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 181–85.

The Centrality of Personhood

Scholarship on hasidism has tended to focus on mystical states and the relationship of *yesh* [being] and *ayin* [naught], to the relative neglect of the individual personality. But the interpretive dynamics of early hasidism depend crucially on the personhood of the interpreter engaging with the personality of Torah, effectively identical with the personality of God. The hasidic interpreter not only applies a method, but also explores and reveals the personal aspect of self and of Torah, in dialogue with each other. To be sure, the mystical teachings—omnipresence of God, illusory nature of evil, the creation of the world anew every moment—frame and influence the teachings, but it is also true that the masters celebrate the individuality of interpretation as reflecting the stamp of each unique personality.

In his work on Kabbalistic interpretation, Idel has explored the mystical idea of "primordial spiritual roots and corresponding interpretations," and is careful to state that even when the infinitude of interpretations is asserted, together with the belief that the soul of each Israelite holds a facet of Torah, there may be "no special veneration of the uniqueness of the individual; the soul is conceived of as but part of the greater spiritual reservoir of primordial souls, which are no more and no less than sparks of the divine essence which descended into the mundane world and will return to their supernal source at the end of time."[39] He does note that as the history of Kabbalah unfolds, a more subjective perspective emerges, with an emphasis on the "contribution of the individual" to the fullness of interpretive possibilities.[40] The parable of the *Degel Mahaneh Efraim* shows that it is in Beshtian hasidism that this trend flowers to its fullness. Just as Gershom Scholem has noted in regard to early hasidism, that the doctrine of uplifting the sparks takes a "definite, personal, and intimate turn,"[41] here as well, interpretation is an intimate, personal quest

39 Ibid., 98–99.

40 Ibid., 100. Elsewhere Idel writes that "[t]he attenuation of the role of kabbalistic theosophical terminology, sometimes by its psychological reinterpretation, enable the Polish Hasidism to regain some of the charm of midrashic discourse" ("Midrashic versus Other Forms of Jewish Hermeneutics: Some Comparative Reflections," in *The Midrashic Imagination*, ed. Michael Fishbane, [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993], 55). He notes that the Midrash is "expressly dominated by a personalistic view of God." Ibid., 49. This means that in framing hasidic theology and exegesis, one should not overemphasize metaphysical categories such as *Yesh* and *Ayin*; the personalities of God, Torah, and the interpreter are always in the foreground.

41 See Gershom Scholem, "Neutralization of Messianism in Early Hasidism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, (New York: Schocken, 1978), 188.

to find what is one's own, what truly belongs to one's individual self and therefore to the infinitude of divine possibilities.

All this confirms the observation of Steven T. Katz that "[E]xegesis . . . is a way of learning theurgical practices that can influence God or the Ultimate; a primary form, a main channel, of mystical ascent; a basic source of spiritual energy; a performative mystical act with salient experiential—transformational—consequences; a way of defining one's mystical path; and a way to meet and interact with God or the Ultimate(s)."[42] Even (perhaps especially) at the moment of encounter with the Absolute, the individual comes most into her/his self.

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42 Steven T. Katz, "Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," 57.

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