



Three Warsaw Mystics

Author(s): Arthur Green and ארתור גריין

Source: *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* / תשנ"ו, כרך ג' –
מתקני ירושלים במחשבה ישראלית, ספר שני / קולות רבים, ריבקה שץ-אופנהימר – כרך ב'
רבקה שץ-אופנהימר (תשנ"ו), pp. 1*-58*

Published by: Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies / המכון למדעי היהדות נ"ש מנדל

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23364571>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies / המכון למדעי היהדות נ"ש מנדל is collaborating with
JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* /
מתקני ירושלים במחשבה ישראלית

Three Warsaw Mystics

Arthur Green

Jewish religious thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is identified almost wholly with Jewish religious philosophy in the Western mode, written primarily in Germany and the United States. This is true of anthologies and studies of the subject as well as of course curricula in universities and seminaries. The background of these discussions is dominated by German Idealism, and particularly the thought of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Various Jewish thinkers are examined in large part for their readings of Judaism in response to, and sometimes in rebellion against, these leading shapers of the continental philosophical mind in modern times.

When Eastern Europeans are considered at all in discussion of Jewish intellectual modernity, it is generally secular national alternatives to religion that they are thought to offer. Pinsker, Ahad Ha-'Am, Borochov and others are treated in this way. But the religious thought of Polish and Russian Jewry in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries has seldom been considered or thought to have broader significance. After all, we are taught, this Jewry divided itself sharply between Orthodoxy and irreligion. Orthodoxy was partly that of the yeshiva world, where almost by definition there is no significant attention given to religious thought, since the intellectual focus is entirely upon Talmudic study. For Lithuanian Jewry the exception is the Mussar movement, which has indeed been the subject of significant research. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe the key influence in the religious world was Hasidism, but this movement had been spiritually creative, it is still often assumed, only in its first half-century, a period ending with the deaths of its third generation of leaders around 1815. The early period of Hasidism of course has been very widely treated by scholars. After that time, Hasidism was supposedly so wholly engaged in its life-and-death struggle against haskalah and every incursion of modernity that its energies

[*Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 13 (1996)]

were dissipated and its creative powers diminished. If it innovated, it did so in a retrogressive way, re-reading its own earlier tradition to eliminate or lessen the religious radicalism of the BeSHT and the early Hasidic masters so that Hasidism would be a fitting weapon with which to fight off all modern, non-Jewish, and 'external' influences.

But the picture in fact is much more complicated than that. There were important thinkers, both in the Hasidic and Mitnaggedic communities, a number of whose works are now being rediscovered and in some cases translated from the mostly Hebrew originals. Lines of influence can be traced among these works, and schools of thought begin to emerge. This paper seeks to trace one such school of thought, claiming a link between a leading figure of later Hasidism and two major figures in Jewish religious thought of the twentieth century. The three have in common an association with the city of Warsaw in the early decades of this century. The three figures who will be considered here are Judah Leib Alter of Gur (1847-1905), the second Gerer rebbe, best known by the title of his book *Sefat Emet*,¹ Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942), author, journalist, sometime prophet, and martyr of the Warsaw ghetto,² and Abrab-

- 1 The biography of Judah Leib Alter has been treated (unscientifically) in Y.L. Levin's *ADMoRey Gur*, Jerusalem 1977, and in the writings of A.Y. Bromberg, *Sefat Emet* and *Ha-ADMOR mi-Gur*, in his series *Mi-Gedoley ha-Hasidut*, Jerusalem 1949, now translated into English as *Rebbes of Ger*, New York (Artscroll) 1987. A more professional historical approach to Gur Hasidism is that of A.Z. Eshkoli's chapter on *Hasidut Polin*, in I. Heilprin's *Bet Yisra'el be-Polin*, Jerusalem 1953, but he is entirely dismissive with regard to the *Sefat Emet* (p. 129). The thought of the *Sefat Emet* has been the subject of critical study by Y. Jacobson, 'Exile and Redemption in Gur Hasidism', *Da'at* 2-3 (1978-9), pp. 175-216; idem, 'Truth and Faith in Gur Hasidic Thought', *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy, and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby*; Jerusalem 1986, pp. 593-616; idem and M. Piekarz, "'The Inner Point" of the Admorim Gur and Alexander as a Reflection of Their Ability to Adjust to Changing Times', *ibid*, pp. 617-660. Y. Alfasi's *Gur: Toledot Hasidut Gur* (2nd ed., Tel Aviv 1978) is a combination of history/biography and treatment in an anthological way of certain selected topics.
- 2 Zeitlin has not yet been the subject of the full study that his work certainly deserves. There is an unpublished doctoral dissertation on Zeitlin's early years (M. Waldoks, 'Hillel Zeitlin, The Early Years', Brandeis University 1984), a slim volume by a disciple (S.B. Urbach, *Toledot Neshamah Ahat*, Israel (Shem we-Yafet) 1953, and several articles, most of which seem to have originated as memorial lectures. Among these is the study by Rivka Schatz, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Way to Jewish Mysticism', published in *Kivvunim* 3 (1979), pp. 81-91. Important information can also be found in the memorial volume *Sefer Zeitlin*, edited by I.

[2*]

ham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), who emigrated to the United States in 1940 and is well-known as a leading figure in American Jewish religious life in the mid-twentieth century.³ To this 'school' of enlightened (in several senses!) and increasingly universalist East European Jewish mystics, one might consider adding a few more names, including those of Abraham Isaac Kook, about whom a great deal has been written,⁴ and the less-known Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno, who also died in the Warsaw ghetto, as well as several others.⁵

Wolfsberg and Z. Harkavy and published in 1945. See further the treatment by I. Rabinowich in *Ha-Tekufah* 32/33 (1948), pp. 848-76, and 34/35 (1950), pp. 843-848, including a bibliography by E.R. Malachi. Vivid descriptions of life in the Zeitlin household are found in Zeitlin's son Elkhanon's memoir, *In a Literarishn Shtub*, published posthumously in Buenos Aires, 1946.

- 3 A great deal has been written on Heschel, both on his theology and on the role he played in the moral leadership of American Jewry, particularly during the 1960s. A full bibliography through the early 1980s is found in J.C. Merkle's *The Genesis of Faith*, New York 1985, pp. 271-278. A noteworthy later publication is D.J. Moore's *The Human and the Holy*, New York 1989. Special mention should also be made of the many articles (listed by Merkle) written on Heschel by E. Kaplan and F. Rothschild. Kaplan is the author of a biography, soon to be published by Yale University Press. I am most grateful to him for having shared with me his chapters on Heschel's early life, and I have drawn upon those materials in the brief characterizations offered here. The reading of Heschel's poetry and thought is, however, entirely my own. I am also grateful to Avraham Holtz for sharing with me his memories of Heschel and Aaron Zeitlin during their years at the Jewish Theological Seminary.
- 4 S.H. Bergman was the first to violate the Western bias in modern Jewish theology by including treatment of Rav Kook in his *Faith and Reason: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*, Washington (B'nai Brith Hillel) 1961. At that point the only English-language work on Kook was J. Agus' *Banner of Jerusalem*, New York 1946. In recent years there has been much written on Kook, including the appearance in English of two important monographs: Z. Yaron's *The Philosophy of Rabbi Kook*, Jerusalem 1974 (Heb); 1991 (Eng.), and B. Ish-Shalom's *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism*, Albany 1993. The best English selection of Kook's writings is that by B.Z. Bokser, published in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series, New York 1978. A collection of essays, *The World of Rav Kook's Thought*, edited by B. Ish-Shalom and S. Rosenberg, was published in English in 1991. Of course Kook was a Lithuanian rather than a Polish Jew, and Hasidism played a somewhat lesser role in shaping his mystical thought.
- 5 Shapira has been studied by N. Polen in his *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira*, Northvale, N.J. (Jason Aronson) 1994, based on a Ph.D. dissertation at Boston University, as well as by M. Piekarsz in *Hasidut Polin*, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 373-411 and *passim*, and in his article 'The Last Hasidic

From the standpoint of closeness and opportunity for intellectual influence, it is not surprising that the three figures to be discussed here are linked with one another. Young Heschel, son of a Ukrainian Hasidic rebbe recently relocated to Warsaw, was educated as a child prodigy in the Gerer *beys medresh* and under the watchful eye of Rabbi Abraham Mordecai of Gur, son of the Sefat Emet.⁶ Heschel's childhood tutor, Bezalel Levin, who had a great influence upon him, was a Kotsker/Gerer hasid, as was his Talmud teacher Menahem Zemba, also well-known for his later role in the ghetto era. Hillel Zeitlin, originally from Belorussia, made his home in Warsaw from 1907 until his death. Zeitlin was a regular visitor at the table of Heschel's uncle the Novominsker rebbe in Warsaw, where the young Heschel spent a great deal of his time, especially after his own father died in 1917. It can be safely assumed that the two met there and that the unconventionally pious and ever-seeking Zeitlin must have impressed young Heschel, about to seek his own unique path of religiosity outside the confines of Hasidic orthodoxy. As a journalist with interests in both religious and Jewish communal affairs, Zeitlin had a good deal of contact, not all of it positive, with the Gerer establishment in Warsaw and its nascent Agudath Israel movement.⁷

Both the Sefat Emet and Zeitlin were non-Lubavitchers who had clearly read and been influenced by the thought of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Lubavitch/HaBaD dynasty. *Sefat Emet* is quoted, though rather rarely, in Heschel's theological writings.⁸ Heschel devoted a short article to a Yiddish manuscript of portions of the *Sefat Emet* found in the YIVO archive in New York, a subject to which he seems to have hoped to return.⁹ In later years Heschel would be a close colleague of Zeitlin's son, the Yiddish and Hebrew poet Aaron Zeitlin, at the Jewish Theological Seminary. During the Seminary years Heschel would often slip away from his colleagues and join

Literary Testimony in Poland: The Teachings of the Rabbi of Piaseczno in the Warsaw Ghetto', *Yad va-Shem Studies* (1979) (Hebrew).

- 6 This is partly demonstrated and partly assumed in the Kaplan biography mentioned above, n. 3.
- 7 See the bitter reflections found in his fragmentary diary from the days of the First World War, published in his 'Al Gevul Shney 'Olamot; Tel Aviv 1965, p. 185.
- 8 Cf. e.g. *God in Search of Man*, New York 1955, p. 70, n. 7.
- 9 'Unknown Documents in the History of Hasidism' (Yiddish), *YIVO Bleter* 36 (1952), pp. 113-135.

Friday evening or shabbat afternoon prayers at the *Gerer shtibl* on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he could sometimes be found, in the dimming light of a Shabbat afternoon, poring over the pages of the *Sefat Emet*. Involved as he was with America, including both its religious character and the great moral/ethical crises it faced, Heschel never abandoned contact with the remains of the Warsaw Jewry in whose midst he had grown and been nourished.

But what is it that these three figures have in common on the intellectual or spiritual plane that allows us to conceive of them as a 'school' of religious thought? First, to state what may seem obvious, they are all mystics. Each of them is shaped by inner experiences or by a profound inner awareness of the direct presence of God, a presence that shatters the bounds of our ordinary way of seeing reality. God is the only true Being, before whom all other existence pales by comparison, or from whose existence all other being needs to be renewed in each moment. God is not an idea, not an abstraction, but a, indeed *the*, living reality. These formulations, reshaped by each of these thinkers to fit their varied theological styles, derive both from their own experience and from the literature and experience of the early Hasidic masters, a key source of inspiration for all three writers.

Each of the three further labors under the burden of living as a Jewish mystic in the period after Kabbalah has run its course. These are *post-Kabbalistic* Jewish mystics. All of them study the sources, particularly the Zohar itself, which has a major role in each of their literary oeuvres. But none of them thinks or describes his experience primarily in Kabbalistic language: *sefirot*, *partsufim*, *kawanot*, and *tiqqunim* (at least in the true Kabbalistic sense) are almost entirely absent from their writings. In Heschel's case there seems to be a strong avoidance of Kabbalistic language altogether. But this in itself is an old tradition, cloaking mystic insight in the normative vocabulary of tradition, one that has its roots in the MaHaRaL of Prague, not surprisingly a major influence on the *Sefat Emet* as well as on Heschel. Each of our three figures is a mystic in search of a new (and yet deeply Jewish) religious language, one in which to express and share with others the insights and experiences that have shaped his own encounter with the divine Presence.

The joining of these three figures still remains something of a shock to the system. It posits, first of all, that a latter-day Hasidic master had something original to contribute in the realm of religious thought, a no-

[5*]

tion by no means thoroughly accepted in the scholarly community. It also posits a continuity, rather than a radical break, between late Hasidic thought and at least one major figure in modern Jewish theology, suggesting a broader re-examination of such influences as well. But before we can offer speculations of such a general sort, it behooves us to discuss certain key themes as they are found in each of these thinkers, with an eye toward the question of parallels and possible influences. In each case we will be interested in examining the nature of the writer's mysticism, the limits of the mystical approach, and the relationship between mystical insight and the personalist religious language of Judaism.

Judah Leib Alter of Gur (1847-1905)

The author of *Sefat Emet* was the grandson of Isaac Meir Rothenberg (1799-1866), founder of the Hasidic dynasty associated with the town Gora Kalwaria¹⁰ near Warsaw. Isaac Meir, often known by the title of his book *Hiddushey ha-RIM*, was an accomplished Talmudist and legal authority. He belonged to the group of Hasidic masters in the movement's second period¹¹ who combined Hasidic leadership with a significant reputation for Talmudic learning, including publication in both fields.¹² Though he had been a part of the Hasidic circle around Simha Bunem of Przysucha, he is chiefly known as a disciple and the leading successor of Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (Kock; 1787-1859), one of the

- 10 Two interesting studies on the Jewish community and Hasidic court of Gora Kalwaria, based partly on the surviving physical remains, have been published by Eleonora Bergman of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The first, 'Gora Kalwaria: The Impact of a Hasidic Cult on the Urban Landscape of a Small Polish Town', appeared in *Polin* 5 (1990), pp. 3-23, and the second (in Hebrew), in *Hasidism in Poland* (Hebrew Title: *Saddiqim we-Anshey Ma'aseh*); Jerusalem 1994, pp. 111-117.
- 11 I divide the history of Hasidism into four periods, a framework I hope to explicate in writing elsewhere. The second period extends from 1815 to 1881. This is the period of Hasidism's great success and expansion, of its recognition as the leading dynamic force within Jewish Orthodoxy throughout most of Eastern Europe, and also the period of its struggle with the Haskalah.
- 12 Two other well-known members of this group are R. Hayyim of Sanz (Novy Sacz; 1793-1876) and the third leader of the Lubavitch dynasty, R. Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, known as the *Semah Sedeq* (1789-1866). All three of these are as famed for their halakhic writings as they are for their *hasidut*.

[6*]

most important and enigmatic figures among Polish Jewry in the mid-nineteenth century.¹³

Kotsk is partly to be seen as a puritanical reform movement within Hasidism, the most influential of several that have come to be during the course of the movement's history.¹⁴ The Kotsker rebbe conducted relentless war against sham piety, especially that of a Hasidism defined by 'style' and outward manifestations of religiosity. He dismissed as false any display of extreme acts of piety such as were not required by Jewish law. One aspect of this campaign was denunciation and even mocking of those who claimed to have attained understanding of mystic truths or to have achieved high levels of Kabbalistic knowledge. Such understanding was beyond the ken of our generation, the Kotsker taught, and claims to the contrary were to be treated with the greatest suspicion. The chief object of study among the Kotsker's disciples was *nigleh*, the 'revealed' Torah, consisting of Talmudic and later legal sources, peppered with an occasional sharp flash of spiritual or moral insight into the seemingly dense and often obscure matters at hand. Kotsk may thus be seen as an extreme case of Hasidism cutting itself off from its earlier moorings in the Jewish mystical tradition. Kabbalists were to be found among *hasidim* in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, but not in Kotsk.

The *Sefat Emet*, heir both to Kotsk and to the earlier Hasidic tradition, was a mystic but not a Kabbalist. Only very seldom in the five volumes of his collected homilies¹⁵ do we find him referring to the *sefirot* in any-

13 On Kotsk see Heschel's two-volume Yiddish work *Kotsk: In Gerangel far Emesdikeyt*, Tel Aviv 1973. While there is no book by the Kotsker, a great many sayings and brief teachings are attributed to him. Many of these are collected in *Emet we-Emunah*, Jerusalem 1948, and *Siaḥ Sarfey Qodesh*, Lodz 1928-31. See also P. Z. Glicksman, *Der Kotsker Rebbe*, Piotrkow 1938 (rep. Israel, 1972); *Kotsker Mayses*, Warsaw 1924, and *Hekhal Kotsk* (2. vols.), Tel Aviv 1959.

14 Two others of note are Bratslav, about which I have written at length in *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, University, Alabama (University of Alabama Press) 1979, and the twentieth century movement founded by R. Arele Roth, first in Hungary and later in Jerusalem.

15 Piotrkow-Krakow, 1905-08 and frequently reprinted. There are two further volumes of teachings from R. Judah Leib's youth, before he began to serve as rebbe. These *Liqqutim*, as they are called, were published in Piotrkow, in 1934 and 1936 [see Y. Jacobson's essay in the Hebrew section of this volume], and reprinted in New York 1957 and Jerusalem 1970. There is also a *Sefat Emet* commentary on the Psalms, partly an original work and partly selected by a grandson from the Torah homilies. The edition I have seen is London 1952. I do

thing but a psychological or moralizing way. There is no reference to the four worlds, the *partsufim*, or other key features of the language associated with later Kabbalah and present in the writings of the Lubavitch and Zydachov/Komarno schools of Hasidism, which may at least in this sense be called 'Kabbalistic'. True, R. Judah Leib often quotes 'the holy Zohar', and it is clear that he studied it, as he did the Midrash Rabbah, as he prepared his weekly discourses. But the Zohar provides him essentially with homiletic material that he uses or sets aside at will, rather than with a full system of thought or symbolic expression. Most importantly, the Zohar provides an ancient and venerated example of a *spiritualized reading* of the *parashah*, which is precisely what the *Sefat Emet* is seeking to create for his own listeners and readers.

But even if not a Kabbalist, R. Judah Leib remains very much a mystic. He believes fervently that the most real existence – sometimes he insists that it is the only real existence – is that of the *innermost point*, the source and true essence of all that is. Everything else is mere garb, the infinitely varied costumes with which the *nukoda panimiyot* has chosen to cloak itself. This term, offered in typically poor Hasidic Hebrew,¹⁶ is key to his religious self-expression, and comes up hundreds of times within his writings. It may be translated as 'innermost point', 'core of being', 'inward reality'. Sometimes it appears combined with the term *chayit*, 'life-force'; *nukoda ha-chayit* would be the 'inner life-point'. Having dispensed with the subtle intricacies of Kabbalistic language, he uses such simple terms to verbalize the basic mystic insight in most direct and sometimes startling ways.

All things are brought into being by Him.¹⁷ But the point is hidden and we have to expand it. This depends upon the point within us, for the more we expand our own souls, the more God is revealed to us in every place. This is the meaning of 'When Y-H-W-H your God widens your border' (Deut. 12:20) – when the point spreads forth and expands throughout the human soul.¹⁸

not know if there was a prewar Polish printing. A commentary on *Avot* was published in Piotrkow, n.d., reprinted in Landsberg in 1948.

16 Does he intend נקודה פנימית – 'inward point' - or something like 'the point of inwardness'?

17 – ה' היה כל הדברים ממנה – probably a play on the name of God. Frequent language plays make translation of the *Sefat Emet* quite difficult.

18 *Sefat Emet* 5:54.

The ‘jump’ from speaking of Y-H-W-H as Creator to ‘the point’ within all things takes place almost too quickly, here as frequently in this book of briefly summarized homilies¹⁹ rather than clearly argued theological discourses. But ‘God revealed in every place’ is clearly identical to the expanded ‘point’. The relationship of both of these to Y-H-W-H is less than clear. Let us try another passage. Here Torah is depicted as God’s agent of creation, a well-known Midrashic motif:

Torah gives life to all of creation, measuring it out to each creature. But that life-point (נקודה חייה) which garbs itself within a particular place to give it life has no measure of its own, for it is beyond both time and nature. It was of this point that the rabbis said: ‘It [“He?”] is the place of the world, but the world is not its [“His”?] place...’²⁰

This is true of the human soul as well; it too has no measure. Scripture refers to the One who ‘forms the person’s spirit within’ (Zech 12:1). The more one transcends the body, the more one is capable of receiving soul. But the soul itself is without limit. The same is true of the world’s soul, since the person is a microcosm.²¹

The Midrashic passage quoted is the *locus classicus* in rabbinic sources for theologies of emanation and ultimately for the panentheistic position of early Hasidic theology. It is universally understood as applying to God: ‘He is the place of the world...’ Reading it here in reference to the inner point, we come very close to an identification of God with the *nequdah*. The point is infinite, beyond measure or limit. It remains unclear how aware the *Sefat Emet* is of the paradox, or perhaps the mathematical ingenuity, of his claim. A point is by definition infinitesimal; it indeed is smaller than any measure. To say that this infinite smallness is in fact infinite vastness, a limitless Oneness that contains all the world within itself, would be a formulation hardly surprising to either Kabbalist or contemporary physicist. Such a paradoxical formulation is

19 Like most Hasidic works, the *Sefat Emet* consists of brief Hebrew digests of longer oral sermons that were originally preached in Yiddish. In fact the article to which I refer in note 9 includes Heschel’s discussion about a partial Yiddish manuscript of the *Sefat Emet*, found in the YIVO archives. No one has yet worked on this manuscript or compared it to the Hebrew version.

20 Bereshit Rabbah 68:6.

21 *Sefat Emet* 1:9. This passage is discussed by Piekarz, *op. cit.* (above, n. 1), p. 635.

precisely typical of the HaBaD sources that seem to stand in the background of this formulation by the *Sefat Emet*.

There are indeed passages in *Sefat Emet* where one has the impression of reading a theistic mystic, one who believes in a transcendent and unknown God who has allowed Himself to become *manifest* in the inner point, this manifestation being knowable to those who turn away from externals, especially of the corporeal sort, and open themselves to seeing what lies within. But in other passages the *Sefat Emet* seems much closer to a panentheistic theology. Here the discovery of the inner point is a direct experience of knowing God, and thus of re-effecting the cosmic unity. In these passages no distinction appears to be made between Y-H-W-H, the innermost point of all existence, the *hiyyut* or life-energy that sustains the universe, and the cosmic soul. Most commonly, the *Sefat Emet* gives the impression of a work that treads carefully, seeking to maintain the theistic language of normative Jewish piety to express a theology that leans heavily toward the panentheistic side. Let us have a look at another passage, this time along with its homiletic setting, a comment on the passage immediately preceding Jacob's first meeting with Rachel at the well:

He looked, and there was a well in the field, and there were three flocks of sheep lying down by it, for from that well the flocks were watered. But the stone was large on the mouth of the well. When all the flocks were gathered there, they would roll the stone off the mouth of the well. (Gen. 29:2-3)

This reality, the well in the field, is found within every thing and within every one of Israel. Every thing contains a life-giving point that sustains it. Even that which appears to be as neglected as a field has such a hidden point within it. The human mind is able to intuitively know this always. This [knowledge] is the three flocks of sheep, which stand for wisdom, understanding, and awareness. With wisdom and intellect a person understands this inwardness. Within all things [dwells] 'the power of the Maker within the made'.

But 'the stone was large on the mouth of the well'. When corporeality spreads forth there is hiding; intellect is not always joined to deed. The answer to this lies in 'were gathered there' – all one's desires and every part of the body and its limbs have to be gathered together as one places oneself in God's hands before each deed. Then 'they would roll the stone'.

[10*]

You might also read ‘they were gathered’ to mean that you should join yourself to all of Israel. For when all of creation is united with God, the hiding will end. This will occur in the future, may it come in our days! Meanwhile, we Jews gather everything to Him...²²

Here the homilist uses allegory to an extent somewhat unusual in the Hasidic sources, but let us not allow that to distract us from the essential teaching. The field stands for inwardness, the unadorned inner simplicity that lies within all things. At its center is a life-giving well. The ‘life-giving point (**נקודת חיים**)’ is in everything, both in seemingly inanimate objects and in the human (or Jewish) soul.²³ The point is described by a phrase familiar to the reader of earlier Hasidic sources, *koah ha-po’el ba-nif’al*, ‘the power of the Maker within the made’.²⁴ The phrase indicates a subject-object distinction between God and the creation, the *nequdah* serving as the link between the two, or the continuing presence of the Creator within the world’s innermost self.

This situation as described is not the ideal or ultimate one. The hope is for the day when ‘all creation is united (**מתחדשת**) with God’, a day toward which Israel are actively striving. At that time one can only imagine that the separate existence of all things as well as individual souls will cease, since all will be reunited with the one.

But is that unity only a goal for the anticipated future? Here is another passage, also, as it happens, describing a field (the physicist might also be interested in these descriptions of ‘point’ as ‘field’!), but one where cautious speech is set aside, and a more radically mystical and even acosmic view of reality is proclaimed:

The Sabbath table-song of Rabbi Isaac Luria contains the phrase ‘To come into the entrance-ways of the apple field’²⁵ (a symbolic

22 *Sefat Emet* 1:124. The well in the field is already identified with ‘the holy apple field’ by Zohar 1:151b.

23 The *Sefat Emet* regularly identifies the human soul with the Jewish soul, following an old Midrashic precedent. He seems to evince no interest in the spiritual capabilities of non-Jewish humans. In this he remains quite in line with most of earlier Hasidic literature.

24 Rivka Schatz, in her edition of *Maggid Devaraw le-Ya’aqov*, p. 19, attributes this phrase’s origin to Judah Halevi’s Kuzari 5:20. Y. Jacobson, in *Da’at* 2:3, p. 177, n. 10, suggests *Sefer ha-Yashar* as the source. A full history of this usage would prove interesting.

25 The Lurianic table-songs have been explicated by Y. Liebes in *Molad* 4 (1972),

term for *shekhinah* or divine presence). Why does he refer to the 'entrance-ways'? Does one not come [directly] into the apple field?

The truth is that this apple field is everywhere, as Scripture says: 'The whole earth is filled with His glory!' (Is. 6:3) This is also taught with regard to the verse: 'See, the smell of my son is like the smell of the field' (Gen. 27:27).

But the essential task of worship is the opening of this point. On the Sabbath that gate is indeed open, as is written: 'The gate to the inner courtyard will be closed on the six workdays and open on the Sabbath and the New Moon' (Ezek. 46:1) ... Thus it is easy to experience holiness on the Sabbath.

In the same way, we should understand that the glory of God's kingdom is everywhere, even though it is unseen. This is the faith that every Jew has in God's oneness. *The meaning of 'One' is that there is nothing except God Himself; God is the all.* Even though we are incapable of understanding this properly, we still need to believe it, This faith will lead us to truth...²⁶

The point is that just as God is present throughout the week as well as on the Sabbath, but Israel are open to that presence in a special way on shabbat, so too is God present throughout the spatial realm, even if our own 'Temple gate' is to be found only in Jerusalem or the Holy Land. In this sense the *Sefat Emet* is a good reader of HaBaD thought, with its recognition (based in turn on Cordovero and Maimonides) that divinity is equally present throughout the universe. Only our capacity to attain access to that presence is varied in time and space, limited chiefly by our lack of understanding or our only partial subjugation of the lower self. Typically, the *Sefat Emet* simplifies and presents these ideas in his rather direct and non-dialectical way.²⁷

A careful reading of this passage shows no room for a distinction between 'God' and the inner point; we turn in when we are open to inwardness, and there we discover that nothing but the One exists. That

pp. 540-555. On the apple field image see also Liebes' discussion in his *Studies in the Zohar*, Albany 1993, p. 175, n. 99.

26 *Sefat Emet* 1:247. Emphasis mine.

27 For a full discussion of the HaBaD idea of the equal presence of divinity throughout all worlds and the implication of that reality for Jewish theology, see Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, Albany 1993, p. 67ff.

One is of course God, the one whose existence makes all other 'existence' pale into nothingness. This is the classic acosmic position as taught by Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi and Aaron of Starroselje.

The interest of the *Sefat Emet* in mystical language is not only theoretical, nor is it merely an accident of his Hasidic tradition. R. Judah Leib should not be depicted only as one who seeks to set out a particular position among mystical *doctrines*. On the contrary, the *Sefat Emet* is very much a living religious document, and one can feel the enthusiasm with which its author keeps renewing his emphasis on inward vision and the point within. Unlike most Hasidic collections, his book is presented as a series of dated homilies on each Torah portion and festivals over the period of some thirty-three years of his 'reign' as *Gerer rebbe*. If we think of his table-talks (again, in their original oral Yiddish version that lies behind the Hebrew) as educational sessions at which he was inculcating values into his assembled *hasidim*, we cannot but marvel at how frequently he comes back to the themes of inwardness and spirituality. The reading of Ezekiel 46:1 quoted here must occur a hundred times in the *Sefat Emet*, even if alluded to only briefly. The same is true of other references to inwardness and the inner source of life. Especially given the battles with secularization and modernity that Hasidism was fighting in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the emphasis he chooses to place on this spiritual theme is absolutely remarkable. It is by no means clear that such emphasis was to his 'advantage' in this struggle. Ger was working hard to achieve dominance over Jewish religious life in central Poland; this included the building of *yeshivot*, educational reform from within, and efforts to overcome remaining religious resistance to Hasidism. The constant spiritualist refrain was addressed primarily to his own *hasidim*, as though to regularly remind them that all their efforts were for the sake of this higher goal of mystical consciousness, one that was not to be lost while at work on building the earthly trappings of a powerful religious movement. If he wanted to remind them of how their value system was essentially different from that of the non-Hasidic – including the non-Hasidic Orthodox – world, he did so by this constant emphasis on inward spirituality as the true goal.

There are also passages in the text where R. Judah Leib speaks out quite directly as a mystic. Even through the veiling so familiar in Jewish sources, one can hear in these words an echo of someone speaking of his own religious experience:

[13*]

'All the people saw the voices [lit.: the thunder]' (Ex. 20:15). The meaning is like that of: 'I am the Lord *thy* God' (*ibid.*, 20:2) [in the singular]. Each one of Israel saw the root of his own life-force. With their very eyes they saw the part of the divine soul above that lives in each of them. They had no need to 'believe' the commandments, because they saw the voices. That's the way it is when God speaks.²⁸

The religious consciousness expressed here remains aware of divine transcendence, but in a way that brooks no contradiction to the immediate presence of God within both world and self. It is still the transcendent voice that speaks the words: 'I am the Lord thy God'. But as that voice is spoken we translate it into a commandment that simultaneously demands and affirms our ability to discover divinity within our own souls. This is the transforming power of divine speech, which is able to address each of us in an intimate and unique way.

The transcendence one can speak of in this context is surely not about the remoteness of God, nor can it be characterized in Rudolph Otto's phrase as the transcendence of the 'wholly other'. God is not 'wholly other' here, for something of God's own undivided Self fills both human self and world. That transcendence remains a quality of this all-and ever-present God is a matter of wonder and mystery, expressible more by allusion than by any specific theological formulation.

'I will sing unto the Lord for He is exalted, exalted' (Ex. 15:1). The transcendence (הַמְּלֹאת) of God cannot be conceived. Each conception that we attain only shows us that God remains beyond it. Thus it is written: 'You are transcendent (תָּרוּם) forever, O Lord' (Ps. 92:9); Your power remains supreme. This is the meaning of 'exalted, exalted' – the only exaltedness and transcendence to which we can bear witness is that He remains raised high and exalted beyond all of our conceptualizations.

In the book *Qol Simhah* [by his teacher Simhah Bunem of Przysucha], in the section *Hayyey Sarah*, the author interprets a Midrash on the verse 'O Lord my God, You are very great' (or 'large'; Ps. 104:1). His form is larger than the tablet [on which it is drawn], referring to the parable of a sage who designs a wondrous instrument, for which everyone offers him great praise.

28 *Sefat Emet* 2:91.

Then along comes one person [of greater understanding] who says: 'The wisdom of this sage is surely much greater than the skill displayed here'. But it was by means of the instrument that they had become aware of the sage's brilliance.

Thus we come to know God through all the wisdom of Creation, but He remains high and exalted beyond all that. So our understanding of God's blessed wisdom is that He is exalted beyond [our understanding]. This is the meaning of 'exalted, exalted'.²⁹

This teaching, which may reflect the indirect influence of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav,³⁰ understands God as infinitely transcendent mind, but mind that is nevertheless manifest in all of God's works, and attainable only through our appreciation of them. In a broader sense, we may see the influence of an intellectualist mysticism here, a tradition reaching back into both the philosophical and mystical works of medieval Jewry, and in turn to their sources in Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought. God is always transcendent because the human mind always and necessarily fails to fully apprehend that which is present within it and around it. This failure seems to be a necessary condition of our corporeal state, one that great minds and souls can push back quite considerably by their lives of self-negation, but that cannot be overcome entirely. God does, however, allow us very significant glimpses into that total human transcendence of our intellectual limitations by the regular gift of the Sabbath and its extra measure of soul, a 'gift without limits' and 'a foretaste of the world-to-come' that comes to us from the world beyond.

The Jew knows two types of consciousness, that of the weekday and the special consciousness of *shabbat*, the time of the extra soul. 'Six days shall you labor and do all your work' means that on the weekdays we are supposed to seek out God through the things of this world. Our weekday task is to discover the wisdom of the Sage by appreciating the wonders of the instrument He has fashioned, to return to the language of our parable. That weekday consciousness has something of 'natural religion' about it, an appreciation of transcendent mystery within the natural order itself. In fact 'miracle' and 'nature' should be joined in this mind-set, reflecting together the power of the Creator:

29 *Sefat Emet* 2:80.

30 On Nahman's view of God as One who constantly eludes comprehensibility see the sources quoted in my *Tormented Master* (above, n. 14), p. 292ff.

On the verse ‘But if you should say: ‘What will we eat in the seventh year, since we neither plant nor reap our harvest?’ I shall command My blessing upon you...’ (Lev. 25:20-21), the author of the book *No’am Elimelech*³¹ quotes a comment by his brother. He said that it is because of the asking that God will have to command His blessing.

The meaning is as follows. What kind of question is ‘What will we eat?’ The One who provided life itself will provide food as well! But this would make the existence of Israel dependent upon a miracle, and not every generation is deserving of miracles. It is of this [situation] that they ask: ‘What will we eat?’ The answer is that sustenance will come about through the blessing [of abundance], and such blessing is partly natural.

Israel should really know that miracle and nature are all one. In fact there is nothing so miraculous and wonderful as nature itself, the greatest wonder we can apprehend. When this faith is clear to us, we no longer are concerned with being sustained by miracles. Once we say: ‘What will we eat?’ [realizing that we cannot count on miracles], the answer comes ‘I shall command My blessing...’

And in fact the generations when miracles occurred were firm in this faith, and to them nature and miracles were all the same. That is why God performed miracles for them.³²

It may be said that there is nothing new about this sense of the natural world as the greatest of miracles. The ‘*amidah* prayer, after all, itself reflecting the Biblical Psalter, thanks God for ‘Your miracles that are with us daily, and Your wonders at all times; evening, morning, and afternoon’. The sense of wonder, as Zeitlin and Heschel will both remind us, informs all of religious life. But there does seem to be something added in the claim that God would perform miracles (the out-of-the-ordinary sort) only for a generation that could take such miracles completely in its stride, seeing them as no different than the process of nature itself. It bespeaks a religious consciousness so elevated that it knows both the seemingly ordinary and the unique as events that equally bear witness to God’s presence within them. It is that sort of religious mind that the *Sefat Emet* seeks to cultivate in those who hear (or read) him.

31 Cf. *No’am Elimelech, be-har*, ed. G. Nigal, Jerusalem 1978, p. 350.

32 *Sefat Emet* 3:190f. Emphasis mine.

Insofar as the *Sefat Emet* is concerned, it is clearly Jews alone who have the power to cultivate such a way of thinking. Only Jews are able to discover the structure of God's Torah, in fact the very structure by which the world was formed, within their own souls, since only the Jews have accepted God's Torah. This remains true, however, of all Jews, no matter how far they think they may be from God or from Torah. The words of Torah cannot be entirely erased from the tablets that lie deep within the Jewish heart.³³ Like most of the Eastern European Jews whom he led, R. Judah Leib had rather low regard for and little interest in the spiritual lives of non-Jews. He frequently makes the jump from 'person' to 'Jew' without any seeming self-consciousness. He has a strong sense of Jewish vocation as God's witnessing people in the world, the ones who call forth the divine presence in all of Creation by discovering it within their own souls. There seems to be much influence of Judah Halevi in the frequent references here to the mission of Israel, perhaps conveyed through the writings of the MaHaRaL of Prague and Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi.

The unique place that Israel has in the human community and *shabbat* has in the realm of time is paralleled by the unique sanctity of *Ereš Yisra'el* in the realm of space. Judah Leib is fascinated by the claim of *Sefer Yesirah* that the three realms of space, time, and soul ('*olam, shanah, nefesh*') are parallel to one another, and a great many of his teachings adumbrate this theme in one form or another. These are the three dimensions in which the holiness of the *nequdah* comes to be manifest in the world. Among souls, it is those of Israel, or sometimes specifically that of Moses or of the High Priest that reflect the inner holiness of existence; among times it is the holy days of the Jewish calendar, but especially *shabbat* (the holiness of which is not derivative from Israel's, since it was declared holy by God at creation and its arrival is not determined by calendrical considerations); among places it is the Holy Land, Jerusalem, the Temple or the Tabernacle that is the manifestation

33 The above-quoted article by M. Piekarz (see n. 1) views this as the essential purpose of the idea of the 'inner point': it served as a strategy to continue to claim the loyalty of Jews who in their outward lives were no longer loyal to tradition. I would lend greater weight to the fact that the inner point is found throughout nature, not just in the Jewish soul (a point acknowledged but not emphasized by Piekarz), and would see the *nequdah penimit* chiefly as the basis on which R. Judah Leib sought to construct a mystical or neo-BeSHTian theology for an age that had little patience for the complexities of Kabbalistic language.

of the *nequdah*, brimming with life-energy and bathed in holiness. It is by working through these three categories that holiness can be brought from abstraction into real and daily existence.

The flow of the passages [in the Torah-portion Emor]: from the holiness of priests and the High Priest among all souls; 'You shall sanctify him...for he offers the food of your God' (Lev. 21:8). Because the priest draws the souls of Israel near to the blessed Holy One. The same is true of the festivals [that follow the discussion of priests], 'callings of holiness'; they too draw the souls upward and near. That is why it says: 'You shall sanctify him'. The same is true in the dimension of space; the Temple and the Holy of Holies raise souls up to take greater care for their holiness.³⁴

Regarding the Sabbatical Year: 'The land shall rest' (Lev. 25:2). The Children of Israel were created in order to redeem space and time, as it is written: 'I made the land and created man upon it' (Is. 45:12). 'Man' here refers to Israel as in: 'You are [called] "man" [and the nations of the world are not called "man"]'. Just as there is redemption in the soul, so 'shall you give redemption to the land' (Lev. 25:24). Just as Israel were previously mixed in among the nations in general, and were only later chosen ... and at the Exodus they were redeemed physically and spiritually, so too was the land of Israel formerly under the seven nations, and later it proceeded to become the Land of Israel; that is both a physical and a spiritual redemption. The same is true of time. Previously the holy times were all mixed together [with other times]. Later they were purified, sabbaths and festivals drawn out of the category of times. This happened by means of the redemption of Israel. That is why the festivals are 'in memory of the Exodus from Egypt', since it was through the Exodus that their potential light was realized...³⁵

Here the emphasis seems rather clearly to be placed upon Israel. It is their soul-work to raise all things up to God or to uncover the presence of divinity as *hiyyut* or *nequdah penimit* throughout the twin domains of time and space. But depending upon the homiletical need, sometimes

34 *Sefat Emet* 3:186.

35 *Sefat Emet* 3:197

one of the other two dimensions is given priority, and Israel's holiness follows along with it.

In the verse: 'The land upon which you lie' (Gen. 28:13). Our sages said that the blessed Holy One folded the entire Land of Israel beneath him. We have already written frequently that an innermost point exists within space, time, and soul. [This point] includes all, and is referred to in the verse: 'In every place where I mention My name' (Ex. 20:24). That is the Temple, which includes all places; that is why it is called 'every place'. All of space is folded up within that single place. On the verse 'The Lord God created man from the dust of the earth' (Gen. 2:7) it is said that He gathered his dust from the four directions, or else from that place of which it says 'You shall make an altar of earth' (Ex. 20:24). See RaSHI's comment there. But the two interpretations are now one, since this dust [of the altar] contains the entire earth!

Jacob was as beautiful [i.e. perfect] as Adam, and that is why it is said that 'he reached the place' (Gen. 28:11) – he reached that place which belongs to him. It did not say which place, since that place contains all places. The same is true of Jacob's soul, which contained all souls, just as Adam's had. Only in Jacob's case the good souls had been separated [and they] alone [were present]. The same is true in time, since *shabbat* contains all the six weekdays as we have said elsewhere.³⁶

Or we might choose an example where sacred time has the primary role:

'God blessed the seventh day' (Gen. 2:3). The Midrash says that He blessed it with lights. 'The light in a person's face on a weekday is not the same as it is on the sabbath'. This refers to the revelation of inwardness, that of which it says 'A man's wisdom lights up his face' (Eccl. 8:1) – that is the revelation of the extra soul. For the inwardness of space [lit.: 'the world'] as a whole is also revealed on the holy sabbath. Thus it says: 'And there was light', which the sages said was stored away for the righteous [in the world to come]. But 'Let there be light' meant that [divine light] should be present in every particular [of creation]; all of

36 *Sefat Emet* 1:138

creation has a part in this light, except that it is hidden. But on *shabbat* something of this light is revealed. The weekdays are compared to an opaque glass, but the sabbath to a shining one. That is why there is a commandment to light candles for the sabbath, to show that light is revealed on the holy sabbath. Israel look forward to this holy light and feel the darkness of this world...³⁷

There is something surprisingly modern about the use of these three categories, even though cloaked in the timeworn methods of homiletic association. There are passages where R. Judah Leib seems as much phenomenologist of religion, a role to be taken up more self-consciously by both Zeitlin and Heschel, as he does Hasidic preacher. He understands the interplay between space and time as realms for potential spiritualization as well as the fact that the difference between them is nullified when both turn out to be mere garb for the self-manifestation of the *nequdah* that underlies and animates them. It would seem that the mystic, understanding that all things are one in God (or that the same *nequdah* is the being that underlies all, to use his language), has the need to test the extent of this insight by seeing through the most basic of distinctions that ordinary consciousness makes among categories of being, including such fundamental dualities as time/space, self/other, and microcosm/macrocsm.

I wish to conclude this treatment of some key mystical themes in the *Sefat Emet* by calling attention to the title of the work itself. The brief introduction to the first volume, reprinted in later offset editions, is signed by 'the sons and sons-in-law of the holy rabbi, our master, teacher, and rabbi of Gur, may the righteous one's memory be a blessing unto the life of the world-to-come'. There they tell us that the manuscript of this work, in the author's own hand, was untitled at the time of his death, and that they called it *Sefat Emet*, based upon an interpretation of Prov. 12:19 found in the last teaching he had entered into the collection, a comment on *parashat va-yehi* for 1904/05. There *emet* or truth is associated with the speech of all Israel, 'because the witness to God is not the individual person but the totality of Israel'. As is often the case in the *Sefat Emet*, this homily is a variant on one he had offered five years earlier, in the same *parashah* for 1899/1900. There Jacob represents truth and the sons gathered around his deathbed are the lips

37 *Sefat Emet* 1:13

[20*]

that bring this truth to expression in language. Jacob's truth would be silent were it not for the tribes who bring it into words.

I would suggest that in a perhaps only partly conscious way this reading of Jacob's deathbed scene had another level of meaning to R. Judah Leib Alter as well. Jacob, the quality of truth, represents R. Mendel of Kotsk, who is often referred to as 'the pillar of truth', and who was known, as we have said, for absolute devotion to truth and integrity in all walks of life. This utter insistence on truth had the effect of making him a radical minimalist in religious language and of frightening his disciples into the same position. R. Judah Leib realized that this necessary and well-intended cooling of Hasidic exaggeration and hyperbole also had the more far-reaching effect of denying any possibility of religious speech at all. There was nothing one could say regarding the spiritual life or the inner universe of faith that did not fall victim to this ever sharp Kotsker scrutiny. The lips were silenced, and the inner Torah became truly *nistar* (hidden) once again; only *nigleh* could be spoken of in Kotsk. Now R. Judah Leib has taken on the task of restoring speech to the (silent) truth of faith, *תַּשְׁבָּחַ תִּהְלָא*, of recreating, on the far side of Kotsker questioning, a new and simplified religious language, one that can express higher or deeper truth without falling prey to the question of whether anyone in our time can attain to such high rungs of knowledge. He does so by insisting that the insights he offers belong to all of Israel. Expressed in simple terms, they are truths that conform to the intuition emplanted within the soul of each and every Jew. No Kabbalah beyond a bare minimum of vocabulary is required here. The mystical insight offered in *Sefat Emet* is at once too direct and too profound to be the exclusive property of those who know the occult lore. This creation of a post-Kabbalistic Jewish mystical language is a major goal of the *Sefat Emet*, which should probably be best translated as *Honest Speech*.³⁸

38 I recognize that the same characterization of seeking to create a 'post-Kabbalistic' Jewish mysticism could be applied to Hasidism as a whole, as Scholem does in *Major Trends*, p. 329f. But the focus is much sharper here because of the new critique of would-be 'Kabbalists' in Kotsk. Here the need for a new and simple religious language becomes more conscious, and I believe it is one of the major purposes of the *Sefat Emet*, who recognizes quite well the ways in which his generation differs from prior ages and the need for a type of religious language that can be used in his day.

Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942)

The early writings of Hillel Zeitlin, including his book on *Baruch Spinoza* (1900)³⁹ and his articles on Friedrich Nietzsche (1905)⁴⁰ hardly predict that their author would later in life become a figure of Jewish mystical piety and the symbol of a modern's return to Hasidic Judaism. The trajectory of his move was a surprising one, unlikely for the generation in which he lived. Zeitlin was one of the many young men growing up in Russia of the last decades of the nineteenth century who rejected his *shtetl* and Hasidic past in favor of the 'new Jew' whose creation was deemed so vital. In fact he counted himself among the disciples of the most radical of Jewish spiritual revolutionaries, Micha Josef Berdyczewski (1865-1921). Influenced by the writings of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and others, Berdyczewski called for a radical 'transvaluation' of the Jewish cultural heritage and literary canon. The group that called itself *Se'irim* in the Belorussian city of Homel saw itself as cultural shock troops ready to respond to Berdyczewski's call. Zeitlin was a key member of this group, and mentor to a younger member, the future writer Joseph Hayyim Brenner (1881-1921). The alienation from and critical evaluation of tradition in this circle (and others like it) set its stamp upon the entire future course of Jewish spiritual and cultural history. That a key figure within the group, one of its most widely acclaimed young writers and activists, would turn aside from revolution-as-norm and return to the thoroughly discarded old way of religious living in an age when the traffic seemed to be moving entirely in the other direction was certainly quite a shock.

The surprise only increases when we turn more specifically to the content of Zeitlin's treatment of *Baruch Spinoza: His Life, Works, and Philosophical System*. In 1900 he presents himself as quite a convinced Spinozist, willing to defend the sage of Amsterdam against all his critics, including those who found in Spinoza an unacceptable lack of both divine and human free will,⁴¹ presumably pillars of classical Jewish theology. When it comes to discussing the ban against Spinoza, both that of the rabbis and that of the Catholic Church, Zeitlin displays no sym-

39 Warsaw, Tushiyah, 1900.

40 First published in the Vilna journal *Ha-Zeman*, 1905. The articles appear in Vol. 1, pp. 125-135; Vol. 2, pp. 113-124; 398-419; Vol. 3; pp. 389-408.

41 *Ibid.* (above, n. 39), p. 127ff.

pathy at all for religious orthodoxy. The final chapter of his book, 'Spinoza's System and Judaism' tends to minimize the Jewish influences on Spinoza and specifically dismisses any thought of the Kabbalah's having had a major impact upon the philosopher.

At the conclusion of that chapter, Zeitlin turns specifically to the question of Hasidism. Zeitlin had been raised in a Hasidic milieu, and was influenced in adolescence by HaBaD Hasidism as taught by the Kopust branch of the Schneersohn family. Since Spinoza is the classic pantheist of Western religious philosophy and Hasidism (HaBaD in particular) is known for the pantheistic tendencies of its thought, one might expect that Zeitlin would find some common ground between the two as a path toward a Jewish appreciation of Spinoza.

But this is not the case. 'Spinoza's strength', says Zeitlin of 1900, 'lies not only in his pantheism, but in the freedom of his thought and his scientific point-of-view, and the way in which he makes these consistent with the idea of God'⁴² (p. 135). This is an attitude hardly to be found among Jewish mystics, who 'from beginning to end are very far from a scientific view of the world'. From here he goes on to discuss the alleged parallels between Spinoza and Hasidism:

From this it appears that those who find complete equality between Spinoza's view and that of the leaders of Hasidism, particularly HaBaD, are mistaken. Spinoza's primary assumption that nothing ever departs from the laws of nature in any way whatsoever is totally inconsistent with the teaching of Hasidism.

Aside from this, they are divided by their views of God, even though the *hasidim* are also pantheists to a certain degree. According to Hasidic views God 'fills all the worlds' and 'surrounds all the worlds'. Spinoza would have God 'fill all the worlds', or, in his language, be the internal cause of all things (*immanente*), but not 'surround all the worlds', meaning that God is not their external cause (*transcendente*). In the Hasidic view, even though God also incorporates nature within Himself (since the Kabbalists had already noted that Elohim is numerically equivalent to *ha-teva*'), God also hovers above the bounds of nature. For Spinoza there is finally nothing beyond nature.

If there is anything in Spinoza's system that accords with the

42 *Ibid.*, p. 135

teachings of Kabbalah and Hasidism it is on the poetic side. God as the center of all ideas, the spiritual love of God, the joy and devotion to Him remind us of the enthusiastic statements in the writings of the Ba'al Shem Tov's disciples.⁴³

To this discussion Zeitlin appends a footnote:

(1) 'All the worlds, according to this, are but a reflection of His blessed self'. Occasionally they do think like pantheists, but they generally stand within the bounds of theology and consider God to be a specific being in every way. Even when they express things that tend toward pantheism, it is mostly out of theological enthusiasm. If they knew where the things lead they would be taken aback.

Zeitlin in his twenties is still enamored of science. His pantheon of the great includes Darwin and Spencer along with Spinoza,⁴⁴ and it is the rational and scientific character of Spinoza's thought that makes him most significant. The unscientific character of Kabbalistic and Hasidic thought leaves Zeitlin cold, and it is only a vague bit of poetic fancy that he can find of value in the Hasidic teachings. Perhaps most significant (and not entirely inaccurate) is his comment in the footnote to the effect that Hasidism is far from being a thought out pantheistic system, such as is Spinoza's *œuvre*, but rather a theism that leaves room for enthusiastic outcries of a pantheistic sort. Quite a few more recent readers of Hasidism have seen it that way as well.

This evaluation and self-positioning will change dramatically over the course of the ensuing decade. By 1910, the next time he compares the two, Zeitlin is identifying with the Ba'al Shem Tov rather than with Spinoza. The subject matter is somewhat different, to be sure, but so is the tone with which Hasidism is treated:

Had the BeSHT conceived of divinity as Spinoza did, he would have had to say together with Spinoza that all conceptions of good and evil, whether perfect or imperfect, are purely human. Pure divinity has nothing to do with them. Because people have imperfect ideas, they think that this thing is good and that is bad.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 135f.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 122f

The universal self – nature – God – is neither good nor bad. People love, rejoice, suffer, live, die. But this has nothing to do with God.

But the BeSHT, even though he was a pantheistic thinker like Spinoza, even though he always saw the oneness of God and world, conceived it in an entirely different manner. God and the world are one, but God is not bound to the world, which is itself a sort of illusion or fantasy of God's. If He wants, it is already done with. On the one hand, the world is divinity itself. On the other hand, it is a creation, a work of art, a masterpiece. As a creation it has its goal. From time to time it comes closer to that goal, reaching higher and higher, purer and purer.

Spinoza's God is without life, a pure idea. The BeSHT's God is one that lives, strives, grows, blossoms, suffers and composes, thinks and creates that for which the heart is torn and the soul longs. The BeSHT's God is in man, even his lacks and sufferings, his sin and smallness.⁴⁵

Here the identification is clearly with Hasidism, and one can see quite dramatically the change of attitude that has taken place in Zeitlin over the course of a decade. Hasidism has taken on the specific persona of the Baal Shem Tov, a figure about whom Zeitlin wrote and with whom he clearly identified.

What was the nature of this change? In the course of ten years Zeitlin has moved from commitment to a scientific worldview to one much more identified with the poetic and spiritualist attitude of Hasidism. His pantheist position is not sacrificed, but the tone in which he enunciates it undergoes significant modification. His concern here is not for philosophical consistency, but for the religious and emotional power of ideas. Hasidic pantheism is saved from the Spinozist conclusions by its sense of this world's unreality. If this God-filled world is, from one point of view, mere 'illusion or fantasy', a 'masterpiece' spun out by the divine imagination, God indeed remains transcendent to His world even in the pantheistic context.⁴⁶

45 *Di Benkhaft nokh Sheynheyf*, in Zeitlin's *Schriftn*, Warsaw (Velt-Bibliotek) 1910, p. 34.

46 While Zeitlin could have reached these conclusions entirely based on Jewish, and particularly HaBaD (as the above-mentioned work by R. Elior [above, n. 27] amply demonstrates) sources, I suspect there is some influence here of Zeitlin's exposure to Hindu theological formulations as well. He read William James'

The identification of young Zeitlin with the Ba'al Shem Tov in this passage is the beginning of his lifelong involvement with the early Hasidic masters and their teachings. A major part of Zeitlin's literary efforts was devoted to explication of Hasidic thought, especially that of the BeSHT, R. Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi, and R. Nahman of Bratslav. His writings on Hasidism, when they do not come in biographical form, give the impression of a person teaching a truth that is his own, not merely that which he reports in the name of past masters.⁴⁷ The other major literary text for Zeitlin is the Zohar, which he hoped to translate from Aramaic into Hebrew to render it accessible to Jews in his day. Only the prologue to the Zohar was published (further work on the project was destroyed in the ghetto fires), but Zeitlin's disciple and Warsaw neighbor Fishel Lachower carried the idea forward in his collaboration with Isaiah Tishby on the monumental *Wisdom of the Zohar*.⁴⁸

While Zeitlin does not seem to have returned to the full pattern of religious observance until somewhat later (perhaps after the First World War), he begins to appear as early as 1903 as a religious writer, one who strives throughout his writings to express a personal vision of his relationship with divinity. His *Kawwanot ve-Yihudim*, published in *Luah Ahiasaf* 10 (1903) is mostly a hymn to the beauties of nature and the way in which all of nature sings the praise of God. This prose poem was written during the years preceding 1904, while Zeitlin lived in the

Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) before 1913, and I have every reason to assume that his omnivorous spiritual appetites would have included the likes of Tagore and Ramakrishna, whose works were already available in Western languages. Zeitlin's openness to parallels between Judaism and Indian religion is mentioned by Schatz, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

- 47 Zeitlin's theoretical writings on Hasidism, beginning as early as 1910, have been collected in two posthumous volumes: *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut weha-Kabbalah*, Tel Aviv 1960, and 'Al Gevul Shney 'Olamot, Tel Aviv 1965. Zeitlin was a most prolific and often repetitive writer; these 'final editions' by no means represent the totality of his work, which is to be found scattered throughout the newspaper and periodical literature (in both Hebrew and Yiddish) of Polish Jewry in the first four decades of the twentieth century, and in several prior collected editions. His writings on HaBaD were similarly edited in the posthumous *Araynfir in Khsides in der Veg fun KhaBaD*, New York 1957, and on Bratslav as *R. Nakhman Braslav: der Ze'er fun Podolie*, New York 1952.
- 48 The translation of the prologue to the Zohar and other writings on the Zohar make up the latter portion of the first Hebrew volume mentioned in the preceding note. On the connection to *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, see the opening page of Tishby's introduction to that work.

small town of Roslavl, close to the then untamed Belorussian countryside. The piece reflects long periods spent alone in the woods, lost in meditation on nature that inevitably took the form of prayer. It opens:

I pray and the trees pray with me.
I bend and they bend with me;
I bow and they bow with me.

Man and nature are joined in their devotion. Zeitlin here expresses his clear preference for the lone company of tree and hills, fields and forests, over the human community of worshippers. The pattern of lone religious life that will so characterize his later poetry is already well established in these relatively early years. In a Yiddish essay entitled 'The Longing for Beauty' first published in 1910 he gives further expression to this way of living and its concomitant dislike of the city and its ways. After telling the tale of how God's light, created on the first day of Creation, is hidden in the Torah, he adds:

But there is another place where one can find that hidden future-light. That is the free⁴⁹ field, the free forest.

If your soul is pure, rise up very early, leave behind you the city with its busy bustle, its grist and grime, and go out to the great free field. Have a look with fresh open eyes at God's free light-filled world, and you will see the hidden future-light.

See! God's grace is poured forth over all; all is so lovely and mild, good and pure. Everything speaks of deep holiness and eternal goodness, peace and contentment. All speaks of great secrets, of far distant worlds, of a bright, bright future.

The city will fall; everything false, soiled, and impure will disappear. Everything petty, narrow, and dull will have no place. All will be free and bright, holy and grand.

In the distant future not only all wars will be ended, all acts of violence and battle, but also money, business, and property.

Deep, deep future! All of life will become a bright light, an eternal

49 The word *frey* (Ger.: *frei*) might better be translated 'open' in this context, but I have retained the more literal 'free' because of other associations. *Frey* included a sense of freedom as being 'unburdened, and particularly unburdened by the weight of religion and tradition. Secular Jews referred to themselves as *freye*, those 'liberated' from tradition. It is this sort of fresh and unencumbered experience that Zeitlin seems to be seeking here.

song, an eternal dance of the righteous. *God and man will become one, Creator and creature – joined forever*, God ‘going dancing with the righteous in paradise where all see Him openly’.⁵⁰

The theme of mystical pantheism or oneness with God is found in *Kawwanot ve-Yihudim* as well:

We pray... and with ‘One’ we intend simply that the blessed Holy One and His name are one, that all is one, that all changes and differences, separations and oppositions, reversals and contradictions, permutations and transformations are mere illusion.

We have few specific intentions, but rather one grand one: that not only the Torah is composed entirely of names of God, but the entire world as well.⁵¹

Here Zeitlin has already arrived at that radically pantheistic/poetic worldview that will remain with him through most of his later years. One can clearly still see Berdyczewski’s ‘transvaluation of values’ here, but with a greater emphasis on the mystical-religious side. These views will often be manifest in his later writings as readings of Hasidic sources or as an interpretation of the Ba’al Shem Tov.⁵² There is no more talk of the value of science in Zeitlin, whose writings over the course of his lifetime may be seen as giving increased rein to the imaginative, poetic, and ultimately even prophetic dimensions of Zeitlin’s soul. While it is conventional to view this as a return from Spinozism to Hasidic Judaism, one may also say that the Nietzschean side of Zeitlin triumphs over the Spencerian, or that the Russian mystic in him⁵³ vanquishes the Western critic. The detached and seemingly ‘objective’ tone

50 *Benkhaft*, p. 10. Emphasis mine.

51 *Kawwanot ve-Yihudim*, reprinted in his *Sifran shel Yehidim*, Jerusalem 1979, p. 81.

Cf. Waldoks, *op. cit.* (above, n. 2), p. 36. *Sifran shel Yehidim* was a title already used by Zeitlin for a book published during his lifetime (2nd ed., Warsaw 1930). The 1979 edition is much enlarged, including *Demamah we-Qol* and *Davar la-‘Amit*, originally published as separate volumes (Warsaw 1936 and 1929) and a number of other essays.

52 *Yesodot ha-Hasidut*, 1910, which in turn goes back to *Le-Heshbono shel ‘Olam* in *Ha-Shiloah* 13:3 (1904), is the prime example, followed by many other passages.

53 Zeitlin was much impressed by a meeting with Lev Shestov in 1904, and he frequently refers to both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in his works, assuming his readers will have read them.

that Zeitlin had sought to effect in his *Baruch Spinoza* will not be heard again.

There is much in the passages just quoted that also reminds us of the particular time when young Zeitlin was writing. The idealization of field and forest, flowing over easily into a mysticism of nature, sounds as much like young Buber or others of the Blau-Weiss Jewish youth movements of Central Europe as it does like Berdyczewski on the Russian-Jewish side. These in turn were Jewish versions of a larger spiritual and intellectual picture, as George Mosse has shown.⁵⁴ There is an innocence about these formulations in the pre-World War I period that they were soon to lose forever. But we should also recall that the identification of the city with decay, with commerce, with small-mindedness, all of which are to be rejected by those who have found God in the freedom of field and forest, was to have a major impact upon Jewish life in the twentieth century, not least through its role in shaping the movement that would ultimately cost Zeitlin and six million other Jews their lives.

The turn that will lead Zeitlin back to tradition has already begun to happen in these very first few years after the publication of his *Baruch Spinoza*. It has begun with a turn from philosophy to religion, in the broadest sense. But perhaps this is the place to note that religion preceded philosophy in Zeitlin's life as well as having followed it. He not only came from a Hasidic area, as could still be said of most East European Jews in his day, but he was an adolescent who had taken his religious life most seriously. In an autobiographical fragment published many years later, Zeitlin recalled the great religiosity of his youth:

But a while after my departure from Rechitsa I found myself consumed by religious enthusiasm (אַכְוֹל שָׁלָהֶבֶת-זִי) for more than half a year. I was then about thirteen years old, and I was truly sunk in *Eyn Sof*. No one knew what was going on in me, since I was modest and a loner by nature. But even today I can recall with an inward joy that wondrous time in which I could almost see the power of 'the Maker within the made', or look through 'the physicality of things, their corporeal and [seeming] reality' to the 'divine power that flowed through them in every single instant, without which they were nothing at all'. I then found myself in

54 G. Mosse, *Germans and Jews*, New York 1970, and elsewhere.

an ecstatic state that I had not known previously and have never known again. Usually states of ecstasy last for minutes or hours, but I remained in this ecstatic state day and night. My mind was attached to God with hardly a moment's interruption.⁵⁵

This 'confession' challenges us to wonder whether the turn in Zeitlin during his thirties was a new direction at all, or perhaps just a return to a person he had already been before the liberation from religion that had come with adolescence. It somehow does not seem so surprising that the 'God-intoxicated' young adolescent of this passage would have found his way to Spinoza and Nietzsche. Nor is it incomprehensible that critical objectivity wore thin for him, and that he sought his way back to a religious rather than a philosophical stance.

The most impassioned account Zeitlin offers of his own conversion or reversion to religious vision is that of the prose-poem 'The Thirst'.⁵⁶ The work is a kind of intellectual *dance macabre*, in which the author is led through a vast cemetery of gods, truths, ideals, and values, all of which have been killed by the contemporary belief in science and the unwillingness to retain unprovable beliefs. Among the tombs he passes are those of traditional religion, the soul, the life-force, eternity, Kant's *Ding an sich*, Marxist materialism, and so forth, each marked with its appropriate epitaph. But Zeitlin seeks the living God, one who cannot be buried and has not died with the death of all the old religious forms, the One to whom you can call after you've lost everything, including your conventional religious faith. In this case he rejects the pantheist alternative offered him by the poet ('Why do you seek God outside yourself? Is God not within you, in the flow of your blood, the beating of your heart... you see your God in all, and He is all.'),⁵⁷ looking instead for the God of this final and desperate human faith. 'The Thirst' seems to indicate that Zeitlin is not satisfied with the Nietzschean liberation from religion. Liberated as he may be from the small-minded religiousness of most of humanity, there is no more exultation here in being free of God. Zeitlin continues to seek. He traverses deserts and climbs mountains, but remains empty-handed. As his journey nears its close a voice asks him:

55 *Qitsur Toledotai*, included in *Sifran shel Yehidim* (1979), p. lf.

56 Published in his *Ketavim Nivharim* 2:2; Warsaw (Tushia) 1912.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 166

'What did the mountains tell you?'

'Only what I seek' is his reply.

'And what is it that you seek?'

'I don't know yet what it is called'.

'But what do people call it?'

'Wonder'.

The search for God is the search for a nameless wonder.

This work leads directly to Zeitlin's most interesting and universalist attempt to articulate the nature of religion, found in his *Be-Hevyon ha-Neshamah*, published in 1913.⁵⁸ Zeitlin has now read and been impressed by William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and seeks to use something of James' method in exploring Jewish religiosity from within. Believing himself to belong to the small band of those formerly pious and still sympathetic to religion, the only group who can truly be called upon to deeply comprehend and explain religious phenomena, Zeitlin would like to create a phenomenology of Jewish religious experience, based both on textual sources and on his own experience of the materials as he has encountered them. James' account was too neutral for Zeitlin's taste, even on the crucial question of 'God' versus 'gods'; Zeitlin wants to write in a clearly Jewish and monotheistic context, one that will also demonstrate by its monotheism the ultimate oneness of human religious experience.

Continuing directly where he left off in 'The Thirst', he claims that the first step in articulating a Jewish religious consciousness is that of 'wonder'. This is the 'wonder of the heart', the power within the mind that leads us to approach the world in an open and receptive manner. Zeitlin notes that Berdyczewski too had spoken of wonder, but had seen it wholly as the creation of the mind itself. In James' spirit, Zeitlin now seeks to go an important step beyond this humanistic approach. It is the divine spirit within the human soul that causes us to long for God; the search characterized by wonder is circular because the true seeker is the divinity that lies inside us:

Because the light of the one God shines within us, we desire, long, and thirst for the hidden and concealed. Were it not for that light,

58 Parts reprinted under title: 'The Religious Experience and Its Manifestations', in '*Al Gevul Shney 'Olamot*.

we would create all sorts of cultures in the world but would not seek out the 'hidden well'....

'For with You is the font of life; in Your light we see light' (Ps. 36:10). Because the upper font flows in us, because the upper light shines in us, we see the light.⁵⁹

Such formulations, familiar to the student of Western mysticism from Plotinus or Pseudo-Dionysius (and quoted as such by James), are to be found in the Hebrew corpus as well. They have a well-known prior history within Hasidism in particular. It is probably upon all of these that Zeitlin is drawing. Even in his later and more fully pious period, Zeitlin continued to see Jewish religiosity in the broadest human context. His own prayers contained some based on originally Christian and other sources.⁶⁰

The next step beyond wonder is amazement (תָּהֲרֵשׁ), the mind as silenced beyond all the endless questions that wonder asked. Wonder is the author of science and inquiry, the starting-point of all human seeking. But it is amazement rather than wonder that gives birth to religion and its sisters, poetry and song. Amazement joins wonder to a great sense of inner bewilderment and trembling; it is the person shaken to the core by a confrontation with utterly transcendent mystery. Out of our depths we turn to the great mystery that lies beyond ourselves. This confrontation combines the senses of love and awe or fear in all their various parts, from the most profound and selfless religious emotions to the fear of death and the love of divine reward. The product of this combination is beyond articulation, but 'anyone who has tasted of this feeling of amazement in his life, even if just a few times, knows all this from his own self'. Zeitlin attempts description, but regularly falls back on the experiential and the intuitive.

Amazement is the human emotion that allows us to be open to the divine presence or revelation. Revelation is constant, present in the life

59 *Ibid.*, p. 17f.

60 *Gezangen tsum Eyn-Sof*; Warsaw 1931. 'Ikh Loif tsu Dir' (I Flee to You) on p. 67 is based on a passage in Augustine's *Confessions*, 'with changes, and naturally omitting those passages which are not in the Jewish spirit'. 'Dveykes' on p. 77 is based on the writings of Simeon the New Theologian (1100-1178), an important figure in the Eastern Church, whose work Zeitlin says he knew via Buber's *Ekstatische Konfessionen*. Here is a fascinating example of two contemporary Jewish seekers teaching one another, *inter alia*, the works of a classic Christian mystic.

of every religious person who know how to seek it out. 'The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth' Zeitlin quotes from the Psalter (145:18). This means that there is constant divine response to human prayer, if only we know how to read the many layers of language in which God speaks. The divine presence in nature is a way in which God addresses humans. Opening to that presence is a revelation that may in itself re-direct our lives. So too are symbols, the language 'understood by great poets', a form of divine speech. All that happens in life may be read symbolically; 'the letter-permutations of the divine word' are there to be found. So too are there 'special hints' in our lives, ways in which God calls us to return to the good, to leave behind the vain clamor of the world, and to become more fully and spiritually ourselves. God speaks to us through dreams, through inner voices, longings, and thoughts of penitence, indeed just through the feeling of divine closeness. When we count all of these as ways in which God speaks, we come to realize that the self-revealing God is present to guide us always, not only in those rare moments and individuals which are usually deemed 'prophecy' and 'prophets'. Those are the very highest form of revelation; they represent but the most articulate end of a spectrum that reaches deeply into the life of every person of faith.

It seems obvious that this very much unfinished work of Zeitlin's is the *Vorlage* of Heschel's grand introduction to *God in Search of Man*, surely one of the portions of Heschel's work for which he is best-known and most highly appreciated.⁶¹ Heschel's version is significantly expanded, going from a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, thence to wonder and amazement, and on through several additional steps before turning to revelation. This is Heschel's prose at its finest, and the richness with which he textures the discussion defies description. Heschel is also responding to further developments in the study of religion in the fifty years intervening between Zeitlin's writing and his own. In particular one feels the presence of Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, as well as subsequent developments both in philosophical phenomenology and in the phenomenology of religion. Nevertheless, the thrust of Heschel's presentation remains an expansion of Zeitlin's: it is only by cultivating an openness to the human emotions associated with wonder, awe, and amazement that we will be able to comprehend and appreciate the religious claim for revelation.

61 This was first noted by M. Waldoks in the dissertation referred to above in n. 2.

It is fair to characterize Zeitlin as a theologian of radical immanence. With the young Martin Buber and with the Hasidic sources that he and Buber both so loved to study and quote, he believes that there is no person, no place, no moment devoid of God's presence. Buber, the great modern re-teller of Hasidic tales, moved from an early embrace of mysticism toward discovery of the dialogic principle, in which preserving the otherness of each other, including the divine Other, came to be of great importance. On this basis, there is considerable debate about whether the mature Buber's theological position may be considered mystical at all. Zeitlin was always more swayed by the theoretical sources of Hasidism than by the tales. It was HaBaD thought in particular, most familiar to him from his youth, that bespoke a theological position with which he identified. But when he sought to simplify the Hasidic message in order to present it to his modern reader, his presentation sometimes sounds remarkably like passages one can find in that slightly earlier simplifier of Hasidic speech, the *Sefat Emet*. Here is Zeitlin on the Hasidic view of the relationship between God, world, and Torah:

The main difference between the conventional religious view and that of Hasidism with regard to the divinity of Torah is this: every religious view believes that Torah was given by God (lit.: 'from heaven'), but Hasidism, like Kabbalah, believes that Torah is heaven itself. The Torah is not only divine, but in its innermost essence it is the Deity Itself.

Just as, according to Hasidism, 'the category of God is the category of world and that of world is that of God', i.e. in their innermost hidden root, so the category of Torah is that of world and the category of world is that of Torah. Not only are 'Israel and Torah one', but world and Torah are one.⁶²

The ultimate oneness of God and world by means of Torah, the agent of creation, is a theme familiar to readers of the *Sefat Emet*. But Zeitlin too had some misgivings about ecstatic and uncompromising proclamation of universal oneness. We conclude this section with two contradictory quotations, the juxtaposition of which will hopefully show the range through which Zeitlin's thought vacillated on this key topic in the minds of all three of our Warsaw mystics. First we read from the

62 *Ha-Hasidut le-Shitot ha-u-Zerameha*, Warsaw (Sifrut) 1910, p. 22.

concluding section of *Dos Alef-Beyis fun Yudntum*, published in Warsaw in 1922.⁶³ This collection of 'letters to Jewish youth' culminated in a call for *akhdes* (*ahidut*), oneness or unity:

Now we shall demonstrate that the Torah brought into the world something of which the world had previously known nothing, or almost nothing.

First: the principle of oneness or, as it is now called, monism. I say not monotheism but monism. The Torah's greatness does not consist only of the fact that she recognizes one God rather than many. It includes also her seeing the entire cosmos as a single body with various limbs and functions. In retrospect, Torah's greatness lies in the fact that it was the first, sharpest, and clearest articulation of the monistic doctrine and in that it drew from that doctrine all possible logical conclusions.⁶⁴

The desire to present Judaism as a thoroughgoing monism is still tempting to Zeitlin more than twenty years after his fling with Spinoza, a thinker whose approach he never wholly abandoned, even in his years of return to the life of piety. His religious poems, both in Hebrew and Yiddish, are filled with longing for oneness and inclusion within God.

Zeitlin and Rav Kook wrote similar poems of longing, and in the translations now found in American prayerbooks it is often difficult to know which of the two one is reading. But when confronted precisely with the monistic vision in someone else's name, Zeitlin stands ready, in time-old Jewish fashion, to caution against its *hybris*:

Abraham said: 'I am dust and ashes'. Moses said: 'What are we?' This completely negates that frame of mind of the extreme ecstasies (especially among the Christians) who in their intense attachment imagine themselves so fully included within God that they

63 Ferlag Alt-Yung. There is now a Hebrew translation of this work, *Alef Bet shel Yahadut*, published by Mossad ha-Rav Kook in 1983. It is interesting that the disciples of Rav Kook, whose theological position was parallel in certain ways to that of Zeitlin, have rediscovered his work. Zeitlin and Kook met privately on Zeitlin's one visit to the Holy Land. This visit is recalled by R. Zvi Yehuda Kook in his article in *Sefor Zeitlin* (above, n. 2). A letter from Zeitlin to Kook is also reprinted in that volume. Two reviews by Zeitlin of Kook's writings are included in the 1979 edition of *Sifran shel Yehidim*.

64 *Alef Bet shel Yahadut*, p. 119. Translated from the Yiddish original.

and God are – one. Really the creature has to remember always that he is only a creature, naught, nothing.

'In the place of joy, there should be trembling'. In the place of the most intense attachment and most powerful union (*התאחדות*) there should also be tremendous awe, a stepping backward. In the very hour when the soul in its rapture is united with the endless light, she has to recall her absolute nothingness when she is on her own. That recall will bring her to true humility. Then, when humility and joy are united, a person feels the nearness of God. In the place of 'running forth' there also has to be the 'returning'. More precisely, the 'running forth' and the 'returning' have to happen in the very same moment. 'If your heart runs, turn backward'. In the very moment of inclusion a person has not only to think, but to feel in the very depths of his soul: Who am I, lowly creature of so little awareness, before the Perfect Mind?⁶⁵

Torah in its essential message is monistic, teaching that nothing exists but the single one. All else is illusion. Human life is filled with longing to realize this ultimate truth. But as we come close to it on an experiential level, the only way it can be truly grasped, our very humanity is reinforced by the humility we must feel before the majesty of that One of whom we are but an infinitesimal part. The humbling shudder of that final moment – the one in which we see God's greatness and realize that all the walls between us are illusory, the moment before we step through the doorway – is that of Zeitlin's greatest joy.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)

Abraham Joshua Heschel is generally treated as an American Jewish thinker. His influence is felt primarily in North America, and his most important theological works were written in English and published in New York in the 1950s and '60s. But Heschel arrived in the United States in 1940, at the age of thirty-three. His religious ideas had been largely formed before he came to America, both in the Warsaw of his youth and the Berlin of 1928 through 1938 where he lived as a student and a young adult. Coming to America as a refugee from the devastation of Nazi Europe, Heschel was motivated both by the loss of Polish

65 'Al Gevul, p. 195. From an essay called 'Orot'. I have not found where this essay was originally published.

Jewry and by his perception of the great spiritual poverty of American Jewry to become the leading Jewish theologian of his age and a voice for the Jewish spiritual tradition.

A great deal has been written on Heschel as theologian, and a long awaited full-length biography is about to appear. I shall thus keep my introductory remarks here to a minimum, and focused specifically on the 'Warsaw' period of Heschel's long and varied intellectual career.

Heschel was born to a family of the Hasidic élite in Poland, and was named for his great-great-grandfather the famous Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt (Opatow; 1755-1825), a leading figure among the Hasidic masters of the early nineteenth century. He was also descended, due to the ways in which the families of Hasidic zaddiqim married with one another, from such other luminaries as Dov Baer of Mezritch (Miedzyrzec; 1704-1772), Israel of Ruzhyn (1796-1850), and Levi Yizhak of Berdichev (1740-1809). His family was closely related to the Hasidic dynasties of Kopichenitz (Kopzynce) and Novominsk (Minsk Mazowiecki).

But such elegance of lineage did not necessarily make for wealth or power in the much-diminished world of Hasidism at the turn of the twentieth century. Heschel's own father was a *rebbe* without a following who had wandered from the family's Ukrainian home, via Novominsk, where he married, to Warsaw, where he was established in one of the neighborhoods of the city's Jewish poor and became known as the Pelzovizner *rebbe*. After his father's death, when he was ten years old, Heschel was raised partly within the court of his mother's brother, the Novominsker *rebbe*, whose table, as we have noted, was frequented by Hillel Zeitlin, among many other guests.

Though there were differences of both ideology and style between the Kotsk/Ger traditions of Warsaw and the Galician/Ukrainian origins of Heschel's family, it would seem that his education took place largely within the Warsaw-style Hasidic milieu. It was from this context that Heschel developed a deep knowledge of and attraction to Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk, a figure to whom he would devote two books late in his career, indeed the only Hasidic figure about whom he would manage to write at such length. Here he also must have spent many hours reading the *Sefat Emet*, along with some of the other many writings of the Polish Hasidic masters. These probably included the recently published teachings of Rabbi Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin (1823-1900), toward whom the later Heschel showed great respect. In the heady days

[37*]

of the late 1960s Heschel told the author of these lines that a Jewish 'radical theology' should begin with the writings of the *Sefat Emet* and Rabbi Zadok ha-Kohen.

But young Heschel did not grow up to become the pious Hasidic *rebbe* or typically Polish-Jewish Talmudic scholar that this education predicted. He discovered within himself the soul of a poet, and during his adolescent years, while still studying at *yeshiva*; began to secretly seek to have his Yiddish poems published in the thriving secular Yiddish literary journals of Warsaw. At age eighteen he left his native city, attending first a secular gymnasium or high school in Vilna and, upon graduating, matriculating to study at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin.

Of course it was not unusual for young men of Hasidic background to depart from the tradition in Heschel's day. Since the middle of the nineteenth century there had been a steady attrition of youth from the traditional Jewish community, most seeking to embrace either secular Jewish nationalism or some form of either assimilationist or international socialist ideology. Zeitlin had been such a person, a generation earlier. Over the decades these defections had included even more than a few children of the Hasidic élite, much to the scandal of their families and followers. But Heschel did not become a secular Jew. Though adopting Western dress and relaxing many Hasidic stringencies, he did not fully abandon religious observance and continued to be concerned primarily with issues of faith and the nature of religious identity. Like Zeitlin (though out of different biographical circumstances) Heschel became an unusual religious figure, defying the polarization of religion versus secularism that was rampant in his day, and trying to stake out an independent position vis-à-vis the tradition, one that was hardly 'orthodox' from the Hasidic point of view but that also had nothing in common with the only non-orthodoxy known to Polish Jews, that of Warsaw's single 'Temple', bastion of the Jewish assimilationists.

Heschel's first publication was a volume of Yiddish poetry entitled *Der Shem Hameforesh: Mentsh (The Divine Name: Man)*, that appeared in Warsaw in 1933. During his student years in Berlin Heschel had continued to write and publish poetry in various Yiddish journals. These and other poems were now collected and sent home to be printed in Warsaw, the capital of the Yiddish literary world in Europe. The poems are very much those of a young person, filled with wonder and joy at living. A majority of the poems could be called religious in the specific

[38*]

sense that they address God or speak of sacred love or of the divine/human relationship. The first poem in the volume is entitled *Ikh un Du*, a title that surely invokes Martin Buber's *Ich und Du*, published in 1923 and surely known to Heschel during his student years.

Messages proceed
from Your heart to mine
exchanging and blending
my pains with Yours.
Am I not You?
Are You not I?

My nerves' tendrils are intertwined with Yours
Your dreams meet in mine.
Are we not one
embraced in multitudes?

In all others' form
I see my own self
Perceiving, in the laments of Man –
Distantly voiced, my own whimpering self –
As if my own face was behind millions of masks!

I live in me and in You.
Through Your lips a word proceeds from me to myself.
Your own eyes' tear drop wells up in me.

In need's distress do call on me,
If You need a friend, open the door between us.
You live in me as well as in You.⁶⁶

The direct address to God is very strong in this poem, as it is throughout the volume. The young Heschel's God is one to whom he can talk, cry out, and bare his heart. The identification with God's pain as well as that of humanity's multitudes are themes well known from the later

⁶⁶ *Der Shem Hameforesh: Mentsh*, Warsaw (Farlag Indzil) 1933, p. 9. Translation by Z.M. Schachter, from his 'Nachdichtung', entitled *Human, God's Ineffable Name*, privately printed (Philadelphia 1993). In this and one other case I find Schachter's translation sufficiently literal for use in this context. Wherever not indicated, translations are my own.

Heschel, whose *The Prophets* is seared with the prophetic identification with both divine and human suffering. But there are other elements in this poem, not characteristic of Heschel the mature theologian, that cannot be denied. There is not yet a clear distinction made here between identifying with God – with God’s love for humanity, with God’s pain and God’s pathos – and a claim that God and man are ultimately identical, something the mature Heschel would not have said. Repeated three times in this poem we have statements of the identity of man and God

Am I not You
Are You not I...

I live in me and in You...

You live in me as well as in You.

While such formulations can be defended by the theologian as extreme expressions of the poetic muse, they seem here to be the direct and unchecked outpourings of one who feels himself to be totally absorbed in God, ‘intertwined’, ‘embraced’. There is no effort here to preserve the ‘otherness’ of God. Given the poem’s familiar title, it is tempting to wonder whether it might not have been written or named in response to Buber, whose own *I and Thou*, we will recall, represents a turn away from his earlier mysticism, and especially from what he had considered the too ready identification of God and man, or self and other.

The tendency toward identification of God and self is complemented by another of the most directly religious poems in Heschel’s collection, a poem entitled *The Most Precious Word*:

Each moment is a greeting call to me
From timelessness eternal.
And all words remind me
Of that single word-of-words by which I name Thee:
God.

Stones shine for me as brightly as the stars
And every quiet drop of rain
Resounds as an echo of Your call
My Father, Teacher, with me still,

My All!
Your name has become my home.

Outside it I am desolate, forlorn.
What would I do without You?

My only possession is this single word;
Rather would I forget
My own name than Yours.
I hear a cry coming from my heart:

I will give You a name in every word!
'Forest!' I will call You. 'Night!' Ah, yes,
Gather together of all my moments,
A weave of eternity, a gift for You.

I long only to spend eternity
Celebrating a holy day for You –
Not just a day – a lifetime.
How minuscule my offering,

My gift, my way of honoring
Your presence. What can I do
But go about the world and swear
Not just believe – but testify and swear!⁶⁷

Here the personal quality of relationship is stronger; we are closer to religious love poetry in its classic form. Such themes as God's constant presence and the inadequacy of human response to God's loving call are well-known to the reader of Jewish poets who celebrate divine love, from the Psalmist to the prayerbook to the Golden Age in Spain. But here I am especially interested in a pair of references to God and language:

And all words remind me
Of that single word-of-words [...by which I name Thee]:
God!

I will give You a name in every word:
'Forest!' I will call You. 'Night!'

All words remind the poet of the single word that stands as the pinnacle of human language: the word 'God'. At the same time, all of human language itself may be transformed into a series of divine names, as

67 *Dos Teyerste Vort*, p. 24f.

God is named by every word we speak. This is the poet as Kabbalist, if an Azikri or an Alkabetz is the Kabbalist as poet. Though Heschel uses the Yiddish word 'Got' in the first passage quoted here, it is clear that he means the *shem ha-meforash*, which he has already taken as the title of his book. That is the word-of-words, the one that stands at the center of human speech and renders all of language holy. And with that word as his inspiration, the name that can never be forgotten, he can turn back to language and, in good Hasidic fashion, recall that God is 'garbed' in everything that is, making all words, representing all things that exist, ways of naming or recalling God.⁶⁸ Elsewhere the young Heschel says of himself

I have come to sow vision in the world,
To unmask God, who has disguised Himself as world.⁶⁹

The closing stanza of another poem articulates in quite perfect brevity a clearly Hasidic understanding of the relationship between God, world, and person:

I am a trace of You in the world
And every thing is like a door.
Let me follow all those traces
And through all things come to You!⁷⁰

In these poems we may see a modern expression of the vision of reality that underlay Hasidism from the beginning. This was the Ba'al Shem Tov's experience of God present throughout the world, cloaked in the varied and ever-renewing garb of all existence. 'God longs to be worshipped in all ways' the early Hasidic masters taught. The BeSHT's disciples, prominent among them Heschel's own ancestors, taught that this God could be found and served through all things that exist in this world. That everything is a doorway to God is a formulation of which the Maggid of Mezritch or R. Nahum of Chernobyl (1730-1797) would have been proud. It is also the doorway to inwardness that the *Sefat Emet* found to be open every sabbath. At the same time, we should em-

68 The passage particularly recalls Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi's statement to the effect that God's word stands forever in heavens, that all that exists is merely its garb, and that God does not cease speaking the eternal word for even a moment. *Tanya, Sha'ar ha-Yihud weha-Emunah*, 1.

69 *Intimer Himm*, p. 29.

70 *In Farnakhtn* IV, p. 33.

phasize the modern context in which these poetic expressions are found. The book contains no reference to *mitsvot* or religious observance; it is by no means clear from the poems that their author remains an observant Jew. A portion of the book is devoted to 'A Woman in a Dream' and contains erotically tinged love poems that would have made Heschel's Hasidic relatives blush. At the end of the volume he returns to God, but now in a series of more typically modern outbursts against divine silence:

In our longing for You – Answer us, O God!
Overcome Your own silence, Lord of all words!
Prostrated millenia cry out to You: Reveal Yourself...

Why do You mock our trust?
Do You laugh at our pride in You?⁷¹

This sort of religious language is to be found more widely in Yiddish literature, and was destined to become a major force in all Jewish expression in the holocaust years. Heschel's God, as manifest in this volume, is an interesting combination of One who can be discovered in all of being, in the simplest and most natural of human experiences, and in that sense is readily accessible always, along with a God who remains silent, distant, and frustratingly unresponsive to the poet's – and mankind's – heartfelt pleas. It is noteworthy that the open path to God is that of immanence, and not particularly that of God as conceived in personalist terms. God is accessible because He can be named by all names, because He is hidden throughout all that is. It is the personal transcendent God who is the object of Heschel's outcry, the one to whom he turns in bitterness and an anger laced with something of compassion, addressing to Him this *Tikn Khatsois* (*Tiqqun Hatsot*) or 'Midnight Lament':

Each midnight the Shechinah weeps and mourns.
Sits on lonely stoops of heaven.
At Her feet a young man's prayer shivers:
God – O Father, grant me death!

And through the smoke of sacrificial ruin
On altars of catastrophe

71 *Gebet*, p. 97.

A dying man lifts fists and croaks:
 You cosmic Usurer, be cursed!
 And ever He blasphemes Himself
 When heavenward a forest dense
 Of naked hands that reach for help
 In prayer protest plead in night.

O sunshine, blood of eventides
 You did not console, did not redeem.
 And God His breast beats
 In infinite remorse and pleads:
 Why am I so ashamed to show mercy?⁷²

But if Heschel the poet finds fulfillment in the God of nature, Heschel the young scholar shows us a rather different face of this already complicated thinker. Only three years after the poems there appeared *Die Prophetie*, published through the Polish Academy of Sciences in Krakow in 1936 (when it was already difficult for a Jew to publish in Nazi Germany). This book forms the basis of his much more widely known *The Prophets*, published in 1962. Heschel's view of prophecy in these works is essentially one of passionate empathy, the prophet identifying with the love and anguish God feels toward His human creatures. In the English version Heschel takes great pains to distinguish prophecy from a variety of other religious and psychological phenomena, including ecstasy and mystical experience. The general tendency of this section of the work is to deprecate these other phenomena. Ecstasy is derived from 'a thirst to become possessed with a god, or to become one with a god'. Such a thirst is 'alien to Biblical man'. Ecstasy or enthusiasm means 'extinction of the person... self-extinction is the price of mystical receptivity'.⁷³ Mystical experience implies a depreciation of consciousness; it is an end in itself, a purely private experience. The implication is that the mystical/ecstatic has no connection to society, no value for the world outside the realm of purely interior transformation of the individual.

This sharp polemical tone is already found in the earlier version of Heschel's work on the prophets; indeed the volume practically opens with a clear setting off of prophecy, as Heschel will understand it, from

72 *Tikn Khatsois*, p. 98; Schachter translation.

73 *The Prophets*, Philadelphia 1962, pp. 355-57.

the ecstatic and Neo-Platonic forms of mysticism, all of which, according to Heschel, are but sublimations of the Dionysiac orgy-cult that longs for ecstatic self-absorption in the deity and loss of individual identity. This sort of self-denying mysticism, Heschel claims, is present in two of the great religions of the West.

This ecstacy that turns man into God, in which man feels himself to be one with God, found its way into both Christianity and Islam. It is represented for us by both the Western [i.e. Christian] mystics and the Sufis. A partial parallel is found in the Yogic practices of Indian religion.⁷⁴

Obviously missing from here is any reference to Jewish mysticism. In *The Prophets* as well, the entire discussion of prophecy vis-à-vis ecstacy, mysticism, the loss of self, etc. makes no mention at all of the Jewish mystical tradition, and quotes no Jewish sources outside the prophets themselves. The absence of such references demands some explanation. Of course Heschel is well aware of the Jewish mystical tradition, that on which he was raised and with which he lived in some tension. Writers who knew less than Heschel might have claimed that true mysticism is not present in Judaism. Even Gershom Scholem, writing *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* but a few years after Heschel's *Die Prophetie*, was to claim that there is no *unio mystica* in Judaism, a point on which Isaiah Tishby and later Moshe Idel were to sharply diverge from Scholem. But Heschel was intimately connected to the literature of Hasidism, where *bittul* (self-negation), *hitlahavut* (ecstasy), and even *hitkalelut* (absorption) are discussed with some frequency.

Can Heschel be avoiding all these just for the sake of a clearer *Auseinandersetzung*, where Biblical religion needs wholly to stand behind the prophetic and later Judaism dare not be brought in lest it 'muddy the waters' of his radical distinction? I think there must be more to the twice-repeated omission than this. In 1936 Heschel is still a young student, considered intellectually suspect by the *hasidim*, to be sure, but not entirely cut off from his own family. To denounce the Jewish mystical tradition, or to use it as a source of negative examples, was more than he could bear to do. This was especially true at a time when Judaism was already receiving a terrible beating from Nazi propaganda. Heschel would not demean his tradition by joining into the at-

74 *Die Prophetie*, Cracow (Polish Academy of Sciences) 1936, p. 13.

tacks upon it. By the time of the *The Prophets*, a volume dedicated to the martyrs of the holocaust, Heschel was the great voice of Jewish spirituality in America. Now, too, it would have been irreverent and inappropriate for him to choose Hasidic or Kabbalistic teachings on the negation of the self in mystical self-absorption to use as negative examples with which to contrast prophetic religion.

But there is also a more profound and less apologetic reason why Heschel fails to mention Jewish mysticism in this context. He believed that the Jewish mystical tradition was truly different. For Heschel the Kabbalistic-Hasidic tradition had already taken on another hue, one that had a key role in the formation of his own religious philosophy as formulated chiefly in *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*. I refer to the Kabbalistic understanding of the commandments and the sense of religious obligation that lies at the very core of Judaism's distinctive spiritual path. Heschel understood the core of Jewish mysticism's uniqueness to lie in its claim that the commandments of the Torah as performed by the Jew were יְהוָה יְבָרֵךְ, the fulfillment of divine, as distinct from human, need. Unlike both the medieval Maimonidians and all modern Jewish ethicists, Kabbalists and hasidim understood the mitsvot as mysterious sacramental acts, the performance of which had real power in the ongoing cosmic struggle between good and evil, or between God and the forces of chaos. God needs Israel to fulfill the *mitsvot*; He calls upon them to perform the commandments as acts of testimony in this world, where Israel are His unique witnesses. Their testimony adds to the quotient of divine energy present in the universe, the energy by which the ongoing struggle against evil is waged. This is the Kabbalistic extension of a version of Judaism Heschel saw as originating in the school of Rabbi Akiba, the Judaism that taught: 'If you are My witnesses, I am God, but if you are not My witnesses, I am, as it were not God'.⁷⁵

75 Cf. Heschel's *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, I, London 1962, p. 68f. and sources quoted there. See below for Heschel's interest in this theme in his 'The Mystical Element in Judaism' and elsewhere. The divine need for fulfillment of the commandments is an aspect of Kabbalistic thought that is particularly emphasized by such later Kabbalists as R. Meir Ibn Gabbai (1480-after 1540; cf. 'Avodat ha-Qodesh 2:1-6) and R. Isaiah Horowitz (1565?-1630; cf. *Shney Luhot ha-Berit* [ed. Warsaw repr. Jerusalem, 1959], pp. 41-45, 71). Both of these works were favorites of Heschel's that he assigned to seminars or individual students at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Heschel as emerging theologian took this Kabbalistic/Hasidic view of Judaism and its commandments most seriously. He understood that it lent an infinity of meaning to the religious act that no claim of spontaneous celebration of the presence and no debate about autonomy or heteronomy could ever give it. Here one was doing something for God, offering a gift of mysterious and unfathomable significance. But Heschel's creativity lies in the great subtlety with which he treated this theme, that of 'the deed' which serves as the climax and conclusion of his *God in Search of Man*. Heschel understood that he surely could not present this notion as the Kabbalists had; it would be both unbelievable and unacceptably magical to contemporary thinking Jews. Over the course of a hundred pages he meanders through such rubrics as 'The Divinity of Deeds', 'Ends in Need of Man', 'The Meaning of Observance' and 'The Ecstasy of Deeds', never quite saying that the *mitsvot* fulfill a divine need, but regularly claiming that they are something transcendent, mysterious, and more than merely human. God asks a question of man; the deed is our response. God seeks out the human heart; in deeds we show that our heart belongs to God.

Thus beyond the idea of the imitation of divinity goes the conviction of the divinity of deeds. Sacred acts, *mitsvot*, do not only imitate; they represent the Divine. The *mitsvot* are of the essence of God, more than wordly ways of complying with His will.⁷⁶

Man and spiritual ends stand in a relation of mutuality to each other. The relation in regard to selfish end is one-sided; man is in need of eating bread, but the bread is not in need of being eaten. The relation is different in regard to spiritual ends: justice is something that ought to be done, justice is in need of man... Religious ends are in need of our deeds.⁷⁷

To do a *mitsvah* is to outdo oneself, to go beyond one's own needs and to illumine the world. But whence should come fire to illumine the world? Time and time again we discover how blank, how dim and abrupt is the light that comes from within...

But there is an *ecstasy of deeds*, luminous moments in which we are

76 *God in Search of Man*, New York 1955, p. 289.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 291f.

raised by overpowering deeds above our own will; moments filled without outgoing joy, with intense delight. Such exaltation is a gift. To him who strives with heart and soul to give himself to God and who succeeds as far as is *within his power*, the gates of greatness break open and he is able to attain that which is *beyond his power*.⁷⁸

One of the things Heschel has done here has been to turn around the order of the commandments to which the most mysterious of language was applied. The Kabbalists said these exalted things mostly about 'commandments between man and God', or the mysterious ritual acts of the tradition. They especially applied this thinking to certain grand ritual acts of the sacred calendar such as the sounding of the *shofar*, the waving of the *lulav*, or the eating of *matzot*. Heschel rather applied this way of thinking to the other half of the commandments, those 'between man and man', or the ethical duties of Judaism. It was *these* commandments – the life of goodness and justice – that Heschel taught God needed of man. Kabbalistic thinking about the commandments in Heschel was both universalized – applied to all humanity, not just to Jews – and Biblicalized. By the latter term I mean that the urgency and cosmic vitality the Kabbalists associated with religious action was re-assimilated to the religion of the Biblical prophets and the absolute demands they made for justice, care for the needy, and compassion for a God who ultimately depends upon man to do His bidding. Speaking to an American religious audience, and especially to one that included many Christians as well as Jews, Heschel made almost no reference to the mystical traditions he knew and loved so well, but learned to couch their insights almost entirely in terms of the West's shared Biblical and prophetic legacy. In doing this he 'purified' them of any magical associations; the theurgic power of the deed has been submerged into God's passionate love of man and His need for a caring humanity to be His partner in a fulfilled Creation.

It is for this reason that the Jewish mystical tradition does not even come to Heschel's mind when he describes other mysticisms as self-preoccupied or purely private. Judaism, including the Kabbalistic portion of the traditional (Heschel almost never uses the word 'mysticism' in his theological writings) has been defined in another direction.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 358.

It is oriented toward the attainment of holiness in the deed, communal in focus, and tied to the life of religious obligation. Examples from within the history of Jewish mysticism who clearly do not fit this description – one might think of Abraham Abulafia or Isaac of Acre seeking their lone mystical illuminations – were little enough known to Heschel's readers that he could simply ignore them and the questions their presence might raise.

The polemic against ecstasy in both versions of Heschel's *The Prophets* does not mean that he consistently opposed inner enthusiasm in the religious life. On the contrary, the reader of *Man Is Not Alone* or *God in Search of Man* will find frequent passages like those we have quoted, where personal ecstatic experience of God's presence within human life comes to be a regular part of human existence.

...the mystery is not apart from ourselves, not a far-off thing like a rainbow in the sky; the mystery is out of doors, in all things to be seen, not only where there is more than what the senses can grasp. Those to whom awareness of the ineffable is a constant state of mind know that the mystery is not an exception but an air that lies about all being, a spiritual setting of reality; not something apart but a *dimension* of all existence.⁷⁹

The pious man is possessed by his awareness of the presence and nearness of God. Everywhere and at all time he lives in his sight, whether he remains always heedful of His proximity or not. He feels embraced by God's mercy as by a vast encircling space. Awareness of God is as close to him as the throbbing of his own heart, often deep and calm but at times overwhelming, intoxicating, setting the soul afire.⁸⁰

Here we see a Heschel closer to his Hasidic roots. The latter passage in particular is reminiscent of Zeitlin, or perhaps even the young Buber, in describing the spiritual life of the *hasid*. Now Heschel has lifted these from the realm of romantic description of a distant past and made them accessible, almost prescriptive, for his own reader. While 'the pious man' in this last paragraph may well be a fitting translation for 'the *hasid*', Heschel will use no such alienating terminology. He wants his

79 *Man Is Not Alone*, New York 1951, p. 64.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 282.

reader, Jew or Christian, to be able to find himself, in a fully contemporary context, in the 'pious man' of whom he speaks.

In the course of describing the life as piety, a fitting characterization for much of Heschel's work, there are times when he clearly speaks of such typically mystical states as absorption into or identification with the Deity. This is particularly true in *Man Is Not Alone*, the first of Heschel's major theological works.

This presence of God is not like the proximity of a mountain or the vicinity of an ocean, the view of which one may relinquish by closing the eyes or removing from the place. Rather is this convergence with God unavoidable, inescapable; like air in space, it is always being breathed in, even though one is not always aware of continuous respiration.⁸¹

Yet he never mentions these as specifically mystical states. He seems to want to avoid the notion – so much a part of his own Hasidic heritage – that there is a special class of spiritual illuminati who are capable of experiences unknowable by others. The whole thrust of Heschel's *oeuvre* is the sense that every person of faith may experience the fullness of God's presence. There is no room for the Hasidic *zaddiq* here, except insofar as every reader should be inspired to become a *zaddiq*. In that sense Heschel's work – and Zeitlin's for that matter – harkens back to the earliest Hasidism, the period of Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye or the Maggid of Mezritch, when the *zaddiq* was not yet an institutionalized figure and the later Hasidic distinction between *zaddiq* and *hasid* was as yet mostly unknown.

The same seems to be true for the words 'mystic' or 'mysticism'. In the 1950s these terms were not yet in good repute, neither among intellectuals nor in the American Jewish community. They were still associated mostly with 'obscurantism' or 'occultist' thinking. They belonged more to medieval than to modern times, and in modernity were associated either with Catholic monasticism or with the strange experimentalism of the Theosophical Society and its allies. Heschel wanted none of these associations for his work. Though he came increasingly to appeal to Christian readers, perhaps even more than Jews, he did so as a fully authentic Jewish voice. While Heschel surely understood that religion is universal as God is one, there was nothing of syncretism in his

81 *Loc. cit.*

approach. Only rarely does he quote a non-Jewish religious text, and there for special emphasis.

Within the Jewish world as well, Heschel did not want to represent any particular sect or party. Though he came from the Hasidic world and was often dismissed by his Litvak colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary either as *hasid* or as mystic, Heschel did not present himself as a representative of Hasidism. He very much did see himself as an East European Jew and as a survivor of the holocaust. His task, more God-driven than self-appointed, was to bring to American Jews the spiritual depth and richness of piety as he had come to know it – both in his Hasidic youth and in his philosophically trained and sophisticated adulthood. His books are an argument for holy living, for openness to the spiritual dimension of human existence, for awareness of the presence of God. All of these were presented in a deeply Jewish context, obviously drawing richly on the legacy of Heschel's own knowledge, but always presented without alienating or off-putting 'foreign labels'.

Is Heschel a mystic? Our answer of course will turn on definition. If by 'mystic' we mean one who sees inner experience of God as the true core of religious life, I have no difficulty in placing Heschel within that camp. The life of service, toward which his work is geared, is our response to being touched by a real sense of God's presence in each moment of our lives. Revelation, tradition, and discipline are all important to Heschel, to be sure, but the real reason for living the religious life has most to do with our experience of the world and the way the religious vision transforms it. If 'mystic' has also to do with a tendency toward seeing beyond the external veil of existence and discovering the underlying oneness within all things, here too I would well place Heschel within the mystical camp. Heschel, like Zeitlin, is a theologian of radical immanence; in this sense his theology is the faithful continuance of his youthful poems. But this is not to say that Heschel is a denier of divine transcendence. He is repeatedly careful, after letting go with poetic expression of God's nearness throughout the world, to remind the reader that God Himself lies beyond appearances and is not to be wholly identified with the world, however filled it may be with His own indwelling presence.⁸² Mystery and awe, two key categories for Heschel's thought, have much to do with divine transcendence.

82 See for example *ibid.*, p. 122.

It would seem that the only way Heschel might *not* be a mystic is if we insist on the most rigid of definitions, naming the mystic as an experiential monist, one who knows that any distinction between God, world, and soul is false, and that there exists nought but the One. Here indeed it would seem that Heschel parts company with Zeitlin, whom we heard proclaim his monism, as well as with HaBaD and certain other parts of the Kabbalistic and Hasidic tradition. Heschel's God is clearly other, and man's task is to know Him (which means to become known by Him)⁸³ and to live a life touched by His presence and dedicated to acts of service, rather than to identify with God and to seek to be one with Him. Here there does seem to be a certain retreat from Heschel the poet to Heschel the theologian. Though he does not say so explicitly, I believe it is the encounter with radical evil in the form of Nazism that leads Heschel to this insistence on divine otherness; his source of moral authority has to lie clearly and absolutely beyond the self.

In an ultimate and eschatological sense, however, Heschel's vision retains moments of mystical commitment even in this final sense. The following passage, admittedly an unusual one, represents Heschel at his most Kabbalistic.

The world is *not* one with God, and this is why His power does not surge unhampered throughout all stages of being. Creature is detached from the Creator, and the universe is in a state of spiritual disorder. Yet God has not withdrawn entirely from this world. The spirit of unity hovers over the face of all plurality, and the major trend of our thinking and striving is its mighty intimation. The goal of all efforts is to bring about the restitution of the unity of God and world. The restoration of that unity is a constant process and its accomplishment will be the essence of messianic redemption.⁸⁴

This passage could be translated quite precisely into Kabbalistic language, and as such it would look entirely familiar to Heschel's great-great grandfather. Indeed its point is quite similar to the *Sefat Emet* passage we have seen on Jacob at the well. Here the duality of God and world is seen as tragic; it is what leads to the 'state of spiritual

83 *Ibid.*, p. 125ff.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

disorder' in which we find ourselves. Obviously the intent of the Creator is not this, but that 'His power... surge unhampered through all stages of being'. That of course is precisely a Kabbalistic formulation of the relationship between God and world, as well as of the tragedy of our present unredeemed state. If the classical Kabbalist may be classified as a 'mystic', there is surely no reason to deprive the author of these lines of that title.

Of course Heschel's strength is not that of the systematic theologian. To say that he is inconsistent on the questions of immanence, otherness of God, 'personalist' versus immanentist theology, and so forth, would be unfair and to miss the point. Heschel is carefully trying to walk a tightrope, one not unlike that walked by the *Sefat Emet* and by Zeitlin, between the personalist language of Judaism and his own experience (and Hasidic tradition) of radical divine immanence. The tension is surely sharpened for the mature Heschel by the trauma of surviving the war and its destruction, but it is all the more marvellous that this experience has not caused him to lose or flee from his sense of the immediate presence of God.

In speaking of Heschel as mystic, there is one passage in *Man Is Not Alone* that demands our particular attention. Here Heschel describes what must surely be called a mystical experience, and I believe it constitutes one of the great such descriptions that we have in twentieth century theological literature. Though he does not use the first person in this passage, I have little doubt that he is telling us of an experience of his own, one described in considerably more color than the parallel description we saw in Zeitlin's account of such an experience quoted above. Here again we hear Heschel the poet, now garbed in theological prose:

But, then, a moment comes like a thunderbolt, in which a flash of the undisclosed rends our dark apathy asunder. It is full of overpowering brilliance, like a point in which all moments of life are focused or a thought which outweighs all thoughts ever conceived of. There is so much light in our cage, in our world, it is as if it were suspended amidst the stars. Apathy turns to splendor unawares. The ineffable has shuddered itself into the soul. It has entered our consciousness like a ray of light passing into a lake. Refraction of that penetrating ray brings about a turning in our mind: we are penetrated by His insight. We cannot think any

more as if He were there and we here. He is both there and here. He is not a *being*, but *being in and beyond all beings*.

A tremor seizes our limbs; our nerves are struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry, wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: GOD. Not an emotion, a stir within us, but a power, a marvel beyond us, tearing the world apart. The word that means more than the universe, more than eternity, holy, holy, holy; we cannot comprehend it. We only know it means infinitely more than we are able to echo. Staggered, embarrassed, we stammer and say: He, who is more than all there is, who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our mind can answer; He to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer.⁸⁵

We do not know when Heschel had this experience, or whether the account might not in fact be a conflate of several moments rather than a single one. But the account here is clearly one of a mystic, complete with obliteration of any distance between self and God, the breaking of the ordinary bonds of self and the shattering of our universe. Brilliant light and lake-like stillness also belong to the description. All of these could be documented, of course, by parallels from the extensive literature on mystical experience in the context of many traditions throughout the world. The reader will also notice the focusing on the word GOD, a motif already known to us from one of Heschel's poems, written some twenty years earlier. Perhaps this is a memory of an experience of Heschel's youth, recalled here for inclusion in his first major theological statement.

While Heschel was at work on *Man Is Not Alone*, he was obligated to write another piece which stands as Heschel's only treatment of 'mysticism' *per se*. In 1949 Louis Finkelstein, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary where Heschel was teaching, published his collection *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion*. For this project, he asked Heschel, who had recently joined his faculty, to write an essay entitled 'The Mystical Element in Judaism'. The young scholar could hardly refuse, though I believe the result shows his great ambivalence and essential unwillingness to deal with this subject as such, as though to

85 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

write on 'Jewish mysticism' were to admit that the mystical tradition were somehow separate from Judaism itself.

The entire nineteen-page chapter is based on the Zohar; this choice is justified in a brief concluding note. Heschel opens with a section that seeks to identify the Kabbalist as an uncompromising God-seeker, one who wants to experience divinity wholly and directly, one who knows that

our normal consciousness is a state of stupor, in which our sensibility to the wholly real and our responsiveness to the stimuli of the spirit are reduced. The mystics, knowing that we are involved in a hidden history of the cosmos, endeavor to awake from the drowsiness and apathy and to regain a state of wakefulness for our enchanted souls.

From here Heschel turns immediately to 'the exaltation of man' in Kabbalah, concentrating primarily on the notion of God's need for man, which we have discussed above. It is clear that the key themes of Heschel's own thought are already developing, and their roots in his reading of the mystical sources are well illustrated here. The anthropocentric attitude of the Kabbalah is much emphasized, and the reverence for humanity, so much a key to the later Heschel, is seen here in his understanding of the Zohar and the passages he selects from it.

Man himself is a mystery. He is the symbol of all that exists His life is the image of universal life. Everything was created in the spiritual image of the mystical man... Man is not detached from the realm of the unseen. He is wholly involved in it. Whether he is conscious of it or not, his actions are vital to all worlds, and affect the course of transcendent events... The significance of great works done on earth is valued by their cosmic effects... Endowed with metaphysical powers man's life is a most serious affair...⁸⁶

The *sefirot* are treated, but very briefly, for an essay on Zoharic Kabbalah. Clearly this is not what Heschel hopes the reader will retain. He is much more interested in 'The Mystic Experience' and 'The Mystic Way of Life'. Here again he turns to the theme of doing for the sake of

86 'The Mystical Element in Judaism', in L. Finkelstein (ed.), *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion*, II, Philadelphia 1949, p. 935.

God, of the commandments and especially prayer as ways of adding strength to God and restoring cosmic Oneness. 'The essential goal of man's service is to bring about the lost unity of all that exists'.⁸⁷

These concerns bring him, quite surprisingly, to a final section called 'The Concern for God'. Here he starts off by defending the place of mysticism in Judaism, quoting mostly from the Psalter. But then he suddenly makes a switch. From the Psalms he turns to the prophets, and the entire last section of this work, purportedly on mysticism, is on the prophets of Israel, their identification with God's pathos, their passion for justice, and all the other key themes of *Die Prophetie* and *The Prophets*. It is as though he had forgotten that he was writing about the Zohar, and had let himself get carried away by the theme that was really engaging to him. He tries, in a (for Heschel) remarkably weak concluding paragraph, to tie this last section back to the mystics, but does not really succeed in doing so. He had said what was significant for him about the mystical tradition. It called for a life of sacred action dedicated to God. But this was in no way separable for him from his vision of a renewed prophetic Judaism, and it was toward that vision that his attention was really drawn.

Some Final Comparisons

We have depicted three mystical theologians, men who had some contact with one another, either personally or through teachings, all associated with Jewish Warsaw of the early twentieth century. All of them, I believe are Jewish mystics who live in a post-Kabbalistic universe, though they are nourished by the writings of the Kabbalah, especially by the Zohar. They also each have an attraction to the teachings of the earliest Hasidic masters, the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Maggid, and their disciples. These texts are their shared central sources of spiritual nourishment from within the post-Biblical tradition. All are observant Jews, affirming of the normative tradition, but all three see their real interest to be in the spiritual aspect of Judaism rather than in the halakhah itself.⁸⁸ This defines itself as involvement with the life of the soul and the

87 *Ibid.*, p. 948.

88 This is not strictly true of the *Sefat Emet*, since there is also a *Sefat Emet* on the Talmud, covering the orders Mo'ed, Kodashim, and selected passages of Zera'im. (3 vols., Warsaw, 1925-31). It remains fair to say, however, that in contrast to his grandfather the *Hiddushey ha-RIM*, for example, the *Sefat Emet*

continued cultivation of an inward view of reality, in all of which the presence of God could be discovered in each moment. In this sense all three have a notion of revelation as a constant process, the manifestation of God through the soul into human consciousness.

The *Sefat Emet* was concerned with sacred space and sacred time as religious categories, an awareness of which Heschel probably first gained from studying that work. Heschel's selection of time over space for his famous characterization of *The Sabbath* is, I believe, a result of reflection after many years' reading in the *Sefat Emet*, where the characterization of time as sacred is ultimately the more convincing. It was in his Yiddish poetry that Heschel first used the phrase 'Palaces in time', there applied to evenings, later to become famous as his designation for the Sabbath.

All three of these thinkers may be called theistic mystics. They believe in divine transcendence but are constantly captivated by the experience of immanence. In one way or another we have seen each of them struggle with this issue, working to maintain their faithfulness to the mostly personalist and transcendent language of their Biblical heritage, while seeking to share and teach the ready access to God within the natural world and within the soul that they knew from their own lives. Ultimately there is no contradiction between immanence and transcendence for them, since both are faces of the One that itself transcends all such categorization.

There are some other things that the three have in common, matters that take us to their public lives, which have mostly remained beyond the concern of this paper. All have a strong sense of *אֶחָדָה יִשְׂרָאֵל*, a love for the Jewish people, evident in all their writings. Each has a strong sense of personal mission and uses both the written and the spoken word in an attempt to influence large numbers of Jews – and, in Heschel's case, others as well – to take their religious lives more seriously and to develop their own God-given spiritual resources.

Jewish Warsaw is gone for more than half a century. There is hardly anyone alive now who bears adult memory of the circle around Zeitlin or the Novominsker rebbe's *tisch*. I doubt that there is anyone left who still heard the *Sefat Emet*; if so, he will be a very old man with a distant childhood memory. But the rich spiritual legacy of Jewish Warsaw lives

is known more for his *hasidut* than for his legal or Talmudic writings.

on, contained in the writings of these men and others, and continuing to shape the lives of seeking Jews who live far from that city on the Vistula, once the home of so much Jewish life and spirit.

[58*]