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St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

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First published: 6 March 2025

https://www.saet.ac.uk/Judaism/Hasidism

Citation

Shuchat, Raphael. 2025. 'Hasidism: Its Thought and Theology', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Judaism/Hasidism Accessed: 11 February 2026

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ISSN 2753-3492

Hasidism: Its Thought and Theology

Raphael Shuchat

The goal of this article is to present the theological ideas of the Hasidic movement as found in the works of its founders. It delves into the kabbalistic roots of Hasidism from the sixteenth century and explains its place in the world of Kabbalah, as well as its unique innovative ideas. There is some comparison with eighteenth-century Lithuanian kabbalists, demonstrating both agreement and dissent as well as their relationship to Lurianic Kabbalah. There is also discussion on some of the main ideas associated with Hasidic thought, as well as an explanation of the connection between the Hasidic movement and Hasidic thought. In addition, there is a clarification of the relationship between the thinking of the Baal Shem Tov, considered the founder of eighteenth-century Hasidism, and Hasidic thought.

Keywords: Hasidism, Kabbalah, Hasidim and Mitnagdim, Eastern European Kabbalah, Baal Shem Tov, Lurianic Kabbalah, Kabbalistic psychology, Monotheism, Kabbalistic theology

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1 The kabbalistic roots of Hasidic thought

Gershom Scholem wrote: ‘There is still room for further attempts to interpret Hasidism, particularly in its relation to the whole of Jewish Mysticism’ (1941: 323). When discussing Hasidism, it is imperative to differentiate between the Hasidic movement, which began as a popular movement in the second half of the eighteenth century, and Hasidic thought and theology which was written and studied by a select few within Hasidic circles. Not all Hasidic Rabbis (known as *Rebbes* or *Zaddikim*) wrote works, but many did. Those whose works were based on sermons given in the synagogue to their disciples on the sabbath and holidays tended to mix novel ideas on scripture from the Torah portion of the week with Hasidic thought. This was a way of offering a more palatable Hasidic sermon to their audience. Usually, these sermons were written down by students, such as *Ohel Torah* of R. Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859) collected by Eliezer Zvi Zigelman, or *Kol Simcha*, sermons of R. Simhah Bunim of Pshischa (Przysucha, 1765–1827) collected by his students. Some sermons were said before an audience on the sabbath but written down by the speaker himself and therefore tend to be more difficult for the laymen, such as *Sfat Emet* by the R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Gur (1847–1905) or *Mei Hashiloach* by R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner (1801–1855). Others disregarded the level of the audience and wrote more intense Hasidic discourses teeming with kabbalistic and Rabbinic terminology, such as *Likutei Moharan* of R. Nahman of Breslav (1772–1810) written by his student R. Natan Sternhartz; the many works of *Chabad Hasidism* from R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), continuing with R. Dov Ber Shneuri (1773–1827), Menahem Mendel Shneerson (known as the Zemah Zedek, 1789–1866), and R. Hillel Paritcher (1795–1864) until the writings of R. Shalom Dov Ber Shneerson (1860–1920), who had a cerebral tendency, developing theosophical Hasidic thinking as an independent discipline in Kabbalah. Despite Hasidism developing as a heterogenous movement with many competing groups, there are a few common theoretical themes, and to understand these one must delve into the kabbalistic roots of Hasidic thought.

2 Understanding the schools of thought in eighteenth-century European Kabbalah

The sixteenth century brought major changes to the world of Kabbalah. Just as Moses Cordovero finished his magnum opus *Pardes Rimonim*, a compendium whose goal it was to summarize Kabbalah up to his day and synthesize the various conflicting positions, Isaac Luriah appeared in Safed and revealed to the Jewish world Kabbalah’s Copernican revolution. Just as Copernicus’ astronomy rendered Ptolemaic astronomy redundant, so too Lurianic Kabbalah created a plethora of new concepts in Kabbalah, seemingly rendering European Kabbalah of the Middle Ages antiquated. The main themes of Provençal and Spanish Kabbalah were: the *sefirot* or the supernal Divine emanations; the

doctrine of the four celestial worlds; and the five inner levels of the human soul. Lurianic Kabbalah did not negate any of these ideas, but it introduced new systems of Kabbalah that left these ideas in the shadows of the discussion. Instead of the *sefirot* it introduced five main created worlds or *Anthropos*. The interaction between these *Anthropos* created a dynamic unknown to early Kabbalah. The doctrine of the emanation of the worlds, central to early Kabbalah, was replaced with the doctrine of *tzimtzum* (contraction), and the popular doctrine of the sabbatical worlds (alluding to worlds that God created and destroyed, as discussed in early Kabbalah) was replaced with the doctrine of *tohu* and *tikkun* (chaos and rectification) taking place after the initial *tzimtzum*. The immense detail of Lurianic Kabbalah, as well as its use of anthropomorphic language, ushered in a tendency to consider the new Kabbalah as a movement away from philosophy and towards myth, which will be referred to here as a metaphysical narrative. This narrative seemed to hold a total apathy towards philosophy and the thinking of the day, despite the open declaration of Isaac Luriah's main disciple, R. Hayyim Vital, warning readers that Lurianic Kabbalah was not to be understood literally, for there are no physical forms above (Vital 1974: 5A).

Lurianic Kabbalah took the Jewish Rabbinic and intellectual world by storm. The first question was how to understand the meaning of these supernal processes, and the second was whether one is even allowed to translate this doctrine into philosophic language: are these metaphors that hold within them new meanings, or is one to just read them at face value, remembering that they are not actually physical processes? This question is known as the controversy over *mashal* (metaphor) versus *kipshuto* (literalism). The understanding of this issue is central to understanding how Lurianic Kabbalah became a central player in the Jewish intellectual arena. The dominant position in this debate was the metaphoric school which produced some of the greatest kabbalistic literature since the sixteenth century (Shuchat 2022: 281–314). The metaphoric school of thought basically brought Lurianic Kabbalah back to the arena of world ideas and helped it interface with philosophy and psychology. The idea that Lurianic Kabbalah is metaphoric goes back as early as sixteenth-century kabbalists such as R. Israel Saruk (Meroz 1996), even R. Joseph Ibn Tubul of Safed (Shuchat 2022: 283–285), and possibly R. Hayyim Vital (Shuchat 2022: 296–304). However, the attempt to explain Lurianic Kabbalah as a system which needs its symbolism to be reinterpreted – thereby creating a new school of thought – began with Abraham Cohen de-Herrera of Amsterdam (1570–1635). Herrera, however, attempted to force an interface between Lurianic Kabbalah and Greek philosophy by interpreting it in a neoplatonic way in his work *Puerto del Cielo*. This work influenced R. Joseph Ergas of Livorno (1685–1730), but failed to convince his readers, including Ergas, that the correct decoding of Lurianic Kabbalah lay in the realm of Greek philosophy.

The second systematic attempt to decode the metaphors of Lurianic Kabbalah was by R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal) of Padua in the early eighteenth century. Ramhal, both

in his *Klah Pithei Hokhmah* and in his *Daat Tevunot*, explains Lurianic Kabbalah as an intricate system of Divine providence in history. Essentially this became a historiosophical interpretation of Jewish and world history from creation until redemption. Ramhal was a multifaceted thinker who in his barely forty-year lifespan influenced competing Jewish movements. His Hebrew plays and poetry were held in esteem by nineteenth-century Jewish Haskalah, and his ethical work *Mesilat Yesharim* was held in esteem by the *mithnagdim* and Hasidim of the eighteenth century and by the nineteenth-century Lithuanian Mussar movement. However, his historiosophical interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah had a profound impact on R. Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (the Vilna Gaon) and his followers. The Gaon published Ramhal's commentary to the *idra Rabbah* [*Adir Ba-Marom*] and claimed that Ramhal was one of three who understood the meaning of Lurianic Kabbalah. R. Isaac Haver Wildmann (1789–1852), who studied with the Gaon's disciple R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov, wrote a major work, *Pithei She'arim*, in which he continued Ramhal's legacy and offered his own historiosophical interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah in a systematic fashion. This historiosophical approach to Kabbalah became an important element in Lithuanian Kabbalah. This became the first major school of thought of the metaphoric position from Ramhal, through the disciples of the Vilna Gaon, continuing right through to the middle of the twentieth century.

The second major school of thought of the metaphoric position in the eighteenth century was the world of Hasidic thought. Whereas Ramhal and some of the Vilna Gaon's disciples took the meaning of the Lurianic metaphor to the historiosophic realm, the students of the Baal Shem Tov, the Hasidic thinkers, explained the meaning of the Lurianic metaphor in the human soul. Some researchers claim that Hasidism takes its kabbalistic sources from Cordoverian Kabbalah more than Lurianic Kabbalah (Idel 1995: 41–43), and the answer depends on which branch of Hasidism is being discussed. In general, Hasidism is eclectic, utilizing sources from Lurianic, Cordoverian, and other early sources, as well as mystical sources from Merkava Literature. However, the epitome of Kabbalah was considered Lurianic Kabbalah and this should therefore be seen as the official interfacing point or possibly point of departure. Thus began the inner journey of Hasidic thought. Since these two schools of thought were born at the same time and in the same geographic area, one can only be fully comprehended in comparison to the other. As Idel wrote:

> the affinities between the two movements are not only a matter of action and reaction [...] but also of sharing a common and diversified heritage of mystical literatures [...] While quarrelling and criticizing each other, the two opposing camps were still seeing the very same landscape. This is reason why an analysis of the view of one of the most influential camps kabbalists in the camp of the Lithuanian opponents is in order for a better understanding of Hasidism. (Idel 2008: 54)

3 Hasidism and its interpretation of Kabbalah

Most discussions of Hasidism begin with the Baal Shem Tov and the Hasidic movement. However, as mentioned above, one must differentiate between the Hasidic movement, which is a popular movement with social and religious goals, and Hasidic thought, which is written by few for an audience of few. This section will begin with with the main discussion, which is Hasidic thought.

3.1 The Baal Shem Tov

R. Israel ben Eliezer was known as the Baal Shem Tov (the Besht, 1699–1760), or the master of the good name. It appears that the title 'master of the name' (Baal Shem), was given to those who were experts in the use of Divine names as techniques to reach ecstatic experiences and astral ascent. The Besht was one of a series of Ba'alei Shem or masters of the name. Jonathan Garb describes these masters of the name as shaman-like wonderworkers who employed the power of the divine names and language for healing and social needs (2020: 113). Moshe Idel describes the Besht as one who practiced magic and clairvoyance, amulets, and healing (1995: 75). That the Baal Shem Tov utilized his knowledge of divine names and mystical techniques is evident from the famous letter he wrote to his brother-in-law, Gershon of Kitov (published by R. Jacob Joseph of Polna in *Ben Porat Yosef* [1844] 127B), in which he described a successful attempt of astral ascent to the upper worlds by utilizing various divine names (*yihudim*) to achieve this goal. It appears that the Baal Shem Tov was seen as a natural healer of sorts whose knowledge derived from the Kabbalah. It is instructive to note that Moshe Rosman in his book on the historical Baal Shem reports that he found in the archives of the city of Miedzyboz, in which the Baal Shem lived, the annals of the city tax paid to the Czartoryski Baron. In one insert it reads: 'Israel Baal Shem kabbalist', the title 'kabbalist' exempting him from the city tax, and in another 'Israel Baal Shem doctor', again exempting him from the tax (Rosman 1996: ch. 10). His being seen as a natural healer can be supported by a letter the Besht wrote to a certain Moshe of Kutov before coming to Mezhbizh, in which he describes a potion to strengthen the brain. His method of healing was not just for the body but for spiritual ailments as well (Biale et al. 2018: 46). Such a description of him is strengthened by R. Nahman of Breslov, a great grandson of the Besht, in his story *The Tale of the Wise Son and the Simpleton*, in which he describes a Baal Shem as both a physical and spiritual healer. The Baal Shem Tov was not the rabbi of Medzhybizh; he was more of a spiritualist who many turned to in time of need. The Besht left no books but had students who flocked to him. The students of the Baal Shem who came to meet and learn from him were scholars in their own right who came to learn his practice of *yihudim* (combining divine names), as well as his techniques and knowledge of ecstatic Kabbalah which had fallen into disuse for generations. Questions arise from these facts, such as: what was his message? Why did these disciples come to study from him and what was the topic

of study? The first logical assumption would be that they wanted to learn techniques to achieve an ecstatic experience. In *Keter Shem Tov*, a collection of teachings of the Besht from his students' writings, one finds *Yihud Hamikve*, which prescribes which divine names to meditate upon while immersing oneself in a ritual bath (mikvah). However, it was not the mystical techniques alone that drew disciples. The students of the Besht saw him as one who had the ability to transmit the real meaning of Lurianic Kabbalah. R. Jacob Joseph of Polna cites ample quotes from the Besht. He often refers to him as 'my teacher', which is the way R. Hayyim Vital refers to R. Isaac Luriah (Loberbaum 2022: 135). In addition, he claims that the Besht was taught kabbalistic secrets by the soul of Ahiya Ha-Shiloni, a biblical prophetic figure from the Book of Kings, who also taught R. Isaac Luriah, according to R. Hayyim Vital (R. Jacob Joseph of Polna 2011; Balak, 156A; see Loberbaum 2022: 136). In a similar fashion, R. Shlomo Lutzker, a close disciple of the Maggid Dove Ber of Mezeritch (Międzyrzecz 1704–1772), quotes the Maggid, who described the Besht as

> one who merited the revelation of Elijah the Prophet […] and had taught him the language of the birds, and of the tree […] the secrets of the Divine names and how to conjugate them […] as well as names of angels. (R. Dov Ber (Magid) of Mezeritch 1971: 2)

The Besht is therefore seen by his closest disciples as the main funnel for the dissemination of the secrets of Lurianic Kabbalah. These secrets are explained by them as well:

> The author of the Ketzot ha-Hoshen [R. Arieh Leib ben Yosef] asked […] R. Zvi [Hirsch Eichenstein] of Zidichov (1763–1831), how is it that since the Baal shem tov appeared there are such an abundance of Hasidim who follow him? After all the Besht built on the basis of the Ari, and even the Ari himself did not have such a following. What was the innovation of the Besht that drew such an assembly after him? [...] R. Zvi answered: our rabbi the Ari came to reveal what R. Shimon bar Yohai and his colleagues had concealed, but all of the Ari's thinking deals with the supernal lights and worlds […] the Besht revealed godliness even in this lowly world, in every detail and in man, for all he has and all his actions are but garments which hide the inner divine power. (Sefer Baal Shem Tov 1, Meirat Einayim, 12a–13A)

The idea is that Lurianic Kabbalah describes, in a very anthropomorphic way, the higher worlds. However, the Besht is explaining this symbolism in the human psyche and experience. For the kabbalists, our reality is an outer perception of an inner world. The human being has a body and a soul. However, contrary to neo-Aristotelian philosophy, there is no real friction between body and soul. One is a mirror image of the other. A human being might be drawn by desire to self-interest or lust, but that is not a fault in the

corporeal world, just a fault in the expression of our free will. Evil is therefore not intrinsic to the physical world but rather exists in the mind of man, as does goodness; it is a matter of a decision. The early kabbalists of the Middle Ages saw the human body, therefore, as paralleling the upper worlds. They argued that it is a three-dimensional map of a non-dimensional spiritual realm. Just as a map of London is a two-dimensional picture of a three-dimensional city, bodies reflect souls and, in turn, all of the upper worlds. This is the idea of Jacob's ladder, whose legs rest upon the ground and whose head is in the heavens. The description of the sefirotic tree as a parallel to the human body is found already in the Kabbalah of the Middle Ages. Even the parallel to human attributes and emotions can be found there. However, the students of the Besht took these ideas a step further and developed them into an intricate form of kabbalistic psychology. The basis is made of kabbalistic ideas and not empirical data; however, there are from time to time examples taken from observation of human nature. This idea, that the kabbalistic upper worlds can be understood in the human psyche and experience, is a prominent motif in Hasidic writings. R. Jacob Joseph of Polonne (1710–1784), a close disciple of the Besht, writes:

> I received from my teacher [the Besht] that there are ten sefirot in man who is referred to as a microcosm of the world. For his thought is called father [the *sefira*] of Wisdom [*Hokhma*] and after the contraction [*tzimtzum*] which is like the intellectual decision, we call this mother [Binah, intelligence], etc. until faith which is called two faithful legs [*netzah* and *hod*] and pleasure in serving God, which is called Yesod [foundation]. (R. Jacob Joseph of Polna 2011: 86A)

This quote offers an example of how to interpret the sefirotic tree as psychological modes of human experience from one of the Besht's closest disciples. A generation later, R. Hillel Halevi Malisov of Paritch (1795–1864), one of the great thinkers of Habad Hasidism, wrote:

> The way of the Besht and the Maggid [Dov Ber of Mezeritch] was [to continue the [understanding] of the revelation of the Divine light [as taught in Lurianic Kabbalah] in multiple revealed forms, [as the verse says] 'from my flesh shall I see God' (Job 19, 26), which refers to the vitality of the soul in the body which is drawn in through concealed and revelation. However, the [other] kabbalists spoke only of the light in its source. (Hillel of Paritch, Pelah HaRimon 2: 78)

Again one finds the idea that the goal of Hasidic thought was to explain Lurianic Kabbalah from the perspective of the psyche, which he refers to as 'the vitality of the soul in the body' (Idel 1995: 227, 236–238). As Scholem wrote:

> To put it as briefly as possible, the distinctive feature of the new school [Hasidism] is to be found in the fact that the secrets of the Divine realm are presented in the guise of mystical psychology […] kabbalism becomes an instrument of psychological analysis and self-knowledge. (Scholem 1941: 336)

There are those who argue that Hasidism mostly ignored Lurianic Kabbalah (Green 1996: 443). Two things need to be noted here. One is that there are many facets to Lurianic Kabbalah, and the fact that Hasidic thinkers mostly ignored the Lurianic *kavanot* on the prayer book is not evidence of ignoring its theosophy. Secondly, the Hasidic thinkers were heterogenous to a large extent. There were those who incorporated large parts of Lurianic Kabbalah into their thinking, such as the Rebbes of Habad from R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi until R. Shalom Dov Ber, as well as R. Nahman of Breslav, R. Klonimus Kalman Epstein, and the Rebbe Komarno, or those who used kabbalistic ideas found in earlier Kabbalah without the use of Lurianic concepts.

4 Kabbalah versus Hasidism

Hasidism believed in the dissemination of Hasidic ideas to all. It was the ultimate democratization of mystical texts, and all were encouraged to study Hasidic text. However, there was one caveat: the actual Lurianic writings were off limits. Since Hasidim saw its interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah as the most authentic, and since Lurianic Kabbalah is very anthropomorphic in its descriptions of the upper worlds, and since Hasidim is a popular movement, there was a fear that the average person would reap no benefit from studying Lurianic Kabbalah, or it might even do more harm than good. Only certain elite scholars were allowed to study these texts. That is why even in a well-stocked contemporary Hasidic library there will be numerous books of Hasidism, especially among Habad libraries, but no Lurianic or kabbalistic books on the shelves. This is explained in the writings of the Besht's close disciple, R. Dover Ber the Maggid of Mezeritch (Międzyrzecz):

> Once, the rabbi was rebuking someone who taught Kabbalah in public. The man answered by way of question: 'Why then do you teach Kabbalah publicly as well?' The rabbi answered: 'I teach everyone to understand that what is written in Etz Hayyim [Lurianic Kabbalah] exists as well in this world and in Man, but I do not teach the ideas from their elevated source as in the text of Eitz Hayyim. You, however, are making spiritual ideas

> sound corporeal in a way that the mouth should not speak about the upper worlds'. (R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1967: 36B)

The idea here is clear. One can speak of the mysteries of Kabbalah as taught by Hasidism but one may not use the language of Lurianic Kabbalah as it will confuse the masses in its corporeal style. This idea is reinforced a generation later by the R. Menahem Mendel (1789–1866), known as the Zemah Zedek of Habad:

> For this reason the Besht forbade learning kabbalistic books, because one who does not know how to abstract the ideas from their physical description, degrades the study into physical notions by describing Godliness by way of their feeble minds in detailed attributes. So even though the words of the Ari of blessed memory are faithful and true and when he calls the Shekhina [Divine presence] the attribute of malkhut this is correct and so to the divine name El in in hesed (kindness) and Elohim in Gevurah etc. [but it is not to be understood literally]. (R. Menahem Mendel (Zemah Zedek) 1970: 115B; see also Peikarz 1978: 330–331; 1990: 157–180)

5 Issues in Hasidic theology

Much has been written about the Hasidic ideas of man's service in the eyes of God. However, this entry will address some of the Hasidic philosophic innovations and worldviews.

5.1 Perceptions of monotheism

Jews have always been monotheists, but the comprehension of what monotheism means has developed over the generations. Abraham's children were monotheists and so were the children of Israel who entered Egypt; however, possibly under the influence of Egyptian culture, the question of whether God has an image – or alternatively, whether one can pray to God by way of an image or an icon – became unclear. Therefore, when the pressure of Moses' absence after forty days on the mountain took its toll and spread panic, the making of a golden calf as a conduit in which to reach God was tolerated. Despite the fact that the text claims that only three thousand people took part in this ceremony, Moses blamed the entire people for being accomplice to this act, broke the newly-received tablets of the law, and warned the people that God has no image and therefore cannot be worshipped through one. This is the first phase or adjustment. The second conceptual change happened under the influence of Jewish philosophy. Maimonides wrote in his laws of repentance (Mishneh Torah, Knowledge, Laws of Penitence 3:7) that it is a sin to even imagine an image of God in one's mind. He was opposed on this by Abraham ben David of Posqieres, as well as by Joseph Albo and others, who felt that even if one who

conceives God as having an image in their mind is wrong, it should not be called a sin, since the Bible itself is full of anthropomorphic descriptions of God. However, Maimonides was able to bring about this conceptual change in which even the thought of a corporeal God in one's mind was considered a sin, which is the second phase. However, the second phase, with all its sophistication, still adopted a worldview in which the human being is on earth (see Ps 115, 116; Eccl 5:1) and God's abode is in heaven; even if that meant the higher intellectual spheres in which God is the prime mover who contemplates Himself. The third Phase was the Zoharic literature which emerged in thirteenth-century Spain. In this literature, God is referred to as one who 'encompasses all worlds' and 'permeates all worlds' and 'there is no place void of his existence'. This new perception was so radical that it was not understood until the sixteenth century, in which Isaac Luriah asked the question that if God encompasses all, permeates all, and there is no place void of his being, how did He find a place in which to create a world? The solution to this problem is the famous Lurianic doctrine of *tzimtzum*. It was the kabbalistic thinkers of the eighteenth century who were the first to realize the full meaning of this doctrine. If God actually permeates all reality, then it is imperative to understand the *tzimtzum* as a metaphor. However, what does this actually mean from an ontological point of view? Does reality actually exist or is it an illusion? Are we a figment of God's imagination?

5.2 Ontology and acosmism

R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), student of the Seer of Lublin and the founder of Habad Hasidism, writes:

> Any discerning person will understand perfectly how each creature and being (*nifal*) is considered as void (*ayin*) and nil (*efes*) in comparison with the power that activates it and His mouth's breath which resides within every creature and gives it constant existence, recreating it from actual non-existence (*ayin*) to being. The reason why all things created and activated (*nifal*) appear to us as existing and [ontologically] real, is due to the fact that we are incapable of seeing the Divine power and His mouth's breath in every being, by way of our bodily eyes. However, if the eye were granted permission to see and perceive the Divine vitality and spiritual force that resides in every creature from God's mouth, we would not see any physicality or corporeal aspect of any creature, for it would be nullified from existence in comparison with its vitality and spirituality. For without this spiritual force, it would be completely void (*ayin*) and nil (*efes*) as before the six days of creation […] Therefore, there is truly nothing besides Him. (1976: 78A).

This idea is totally harmonious with his opinion that the *tzimtzum* is a metaphor and that God did not contract or remove His existence from this world but merely hid it. Therefore, in Hebrew, 'world' (*olam*), comes from the root *alum* or 'hidden'. This type of thinking

brought researchers, such as Tamar Ross (1982: 156) and Mordecai Pachter (1989), to ponder whether Hasidic thinking in the eighteenth century was acosmic: is the world just a figment of our perception, and if so, what is actually real? Even the Lithuanian kabbalists who opposed the Hasidic movement were in total agreement with the legitimacy of this type of thinking. R. Hayyim of Volozhin, who took issue with R. Sheur Zalman in his book *Nefesh Hahayyim*, admits that from God's point of view our world might not exist. However, he warns against trying to enter such a frame of mind since it interferes with the way Jewish law presents the world as one run by a hierarchy of places which are sacred, secular, or neutral and places which are unclean or impure. Therefore, he concludes that from our point of view the world exists and that is obviously how God wants us to see it (*Nefesh Hahayyim* gate 3, 4; Itzkovitch 1973). The question of how this type of thinking might interface with eighteenth-century philosophy of Immanuel Kant and George Berkley has also been raised (see Ross 2014: 126).

5.3 God, human beings, and nature

A slightly different approach is found in the famous letter of the Besht to his brother-in-law, Abraham Gershon of Kitov (1701–1761): 'In every letter there [can be found the levels of] worlds, souls and Divinity' (published in *Ben Porat Yosef*, 1844 127B). When the Besht writes 'in very letter', it is equal to saying 'in everything', since from a kabbalistic point of view the world was created from the letters of the Hebrew language. In Hebrew, a thing is *davar*, which is from the root *dibur*, which is speech. The book of Formation (*Sefer Yetzira*) states that God created the universe by means of twenty-two letters and the numbers one to ten (Book of Creation, ch. 1.1–2; later kabbalists explained the digits as referring to the supernal *sefirot*). This idea has roots in Rabbinic literature in the Midrash letters of Rabbi Akiva and Genesis Rabbah (1: 1.10). Therefore, the idea is that in everything in this world there are three levels. These levels are: 'worlds', which refers to nature; 'souls', which refers to the human psyche and consciousness as well as its spiritual root; and 'Divinity', which refers to the Divine vitality which is the basis of all life. These three levels are a different variation of the discussion above concerning the relation between ontology and Divinity. Without making a judgement on the ontological reality of nature, it presents an outer to inner dissection of reality. The human being is caught between the *mundos sensibilis* (the sensible world) and the inner Divine presence. This struggle between the desire to live in a spiritual realm as opposed to the world of the senses created a Hasidic expression, that the Hasid should live in a pendulum state of '*in velt oys velt*' (a Yiddish term referring to the ability to live in this world but keep one's mind above the world of senses). After all, the Besht said that 'where one's thought resides, so do they' (*Keter shem Tov* 90). This type of awareness of godliness was the basis of the Hasidic perspective on seeing God's immanence as permeating reality.

5.4 Knowledge of God

For Maimonides (1138–1204), as for most Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages, the epitome of belief in God was the knowledge of God. (Not all Jewish philosophers were discussed by Hasidic thinkers; however, Maimonides, due to his prominence both in the field of philosophy and Jewish law, was discussed by kabbalists such as sixteenth-century Moses Cordovero and also by Hasidic thinkers such as the Zemach Zedek, mentioned below.) In this sense, belief was the blind faith in which one grew up in a world where everyone believed in God, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. However, knowledge of God entailed proving one's belief to oneself in a rational way. It involved a movement from belief to conviction (*mu'atakada* in classical Arabic; Shuchat 2008: 45–46). In modern post-Kantian Europe, faith was seen as a leap beyond reason. This thinking filled the intellectual atmosphere and was somehow also able to permeate the insular Hasidic thinkers. R. Menahem Mendel of Lubavich, known as the Zemah Zedek, after arguing that the existence of the soul is obvious since we feel a life source within ourselves, writes: 'Therefore we cannot refer to this as a "belief" because it is obvious; for faith can only be in something which is above knowledge' (*Derekh mitzvotekha* 45a). This hybrid thinking, which still recognizes the place of reason in metaphysics but ultimately denies the relationship between faith and knowledge, is a precursor to modern thinking. In general, Hasidic thought, like kabbalistic thought, is symbolic and metaphoric but does utilize rational arguments. This is possibly a direct influence of Cordoverian thinking in his work *Eilima Rabati*. However, Hasidisim does not see rationalism as a road to ultimate knowledge of life, and definitely not of metaphysical knowledge. This was an idea shared both by the students of the Vilna Gaon as well as the Hasidic masters. For Hasidic thinkers, as for kabbalists, reason is what a human being uses to understand the world, but it is not the ultimate measure of truth. For a rationalist, like Maimonides, Al-Farabi, or Thomas Aquinas, rationalism is an objective measure of truth. Therefore, logical principles such as the exclusion of the middle are objectively correct. After all, one cannot say that someone both exists and does not exist. One also cannot say that today is yesterday. Therefore, God cannot both exist and not exist.

Maimonides is only willing accept one illogical premise which he refers to as a miracle, which is that God created the universe *ex nihilo*, out of nothing (Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 2.25). In general, however, he maintains that there cannot be paradoxes, even from God's perspective, since what we know to be true is so. The Zemah Zedek, taking his cue from R. Solomon ben Aderet (1235–1310), argues that one can claim only that paradoxes are impossible in relation to the realities of human life. For example, a person cannot both ride a horse and not ride a horse at the same time. However, concerning God there is no need to say that paradoxes are not possible. One only need say this in areas that relate to belief, meaning that one will not say that God exists and also does not exist. However, to say that God can never prove to us as possible things that seem to us as impossible is not a solid argument. The Zemah Zedek adds that, just as human knowledge

is limited, so too the idea that God is pure knowledge is empty human conjecture. Just as Kabbalah teaches that the inner human soul, *Keter*, is above wisdom (*hokhmah*), so too God's essence is above all forms of knowledge. This break with rationalism, especially in metaphysics, is true to Hasidism's stance as being mystical and suspicious of hard rationalism. The Zemah Zedek's stance is still quite moderate. R. Nahman of Breslov took an actively anti-rationalist stance in his *Likutei Moharan* (especially part one, Torah 64). For R. Nahman, reason will always confront a brick wall in speculating about the universe in metaphysical matters. He argues that the Jewish people are called Hebrews (*ivri*) since they have learned to skip over (*la'avor*) rational speculation and take a leap of faith. In his story of the 'Wise Son and the Simpleton' (*Sipurei Maasiyot mi'shanim Kadmoniyot*), the wise son becomes arrogant and doubts faith, but the simple son, who is the honest of the two, also learns to be wise.

6 Hasidic approach to mysticism

Until now we have spoken of Hasidic thought primarily in light of Lurianic Kabbalah, as a school of thought that sees Lurianic Kabbalah as a metaphor whose prime symbolic meaning is interpreted in the realm of the human soul. However, there is another side to Hasidism and that is the role of the Zaddik as a mystic. In Western research, mysticism is seen as the attempt to reach direct revelation with God or with a spiritual dimension. As Mircea Eliade wrote, '[m]ysticism boils down to the seeking and finding of God' (Danca 2007: 9). However, Kabbalah has three main trends: the theoretical (or theosophic), the experiential (or ecstatic or prophetic), and the practical (or theurgic). Since the inception of the Kabbalah in the Middle Ages, theosophic Kabbalah has been the main occupation of its thinkers and writers. Ecstatic Kabbalah, so prominent in Jewish esotericism of antiquity, was sidelined, with few exponents – the most well known being Abraham Abulafia of thirteenth-century Castile. However, techniques to reach mystical encounters are well documented in his writings, as well as in the writings of the Heikhalot literature from the Talmudic period. The Besht seems to have had an attraction to this ecstatic form of Kabbalah and was known to have studied Heikhalot literature. His use of Divine names to reach astral experiences is also in line with Talmudic literature of this sort (B. Haggigah 15B, Tosafists comments), as was mentioned above. The followers of the Besht were also attracted to these techniques, and eventually the Hasidic masters were seen as spiritualists who could see the root of one's soul or even read minds (see Idel 1995: 53–65). As Arthur Green writes, 'we students of Hasidism sometimes forget that we are dealing with mystics, people who see the inner life as primary and who come to "know God" through inner experience' (Green 1996: 442; see also Elior 2006: 6).

H. Pedaya differentiates between two forms of ecstatic mysticism in Hasidism, which she refers to as 'introvert' or passive, which involves a form of self-nullification and/or unio-mystico, and 'extrovert' or active, in which the identity of the self remains. The latter is

how she describes the Besht's mystical encounters, and the former the maggid's mystical encounters (Pedaya 2005: 79–82). Immanuel Etkes writes that the early Hasidim flocked to the Rebbes since they saw them as possessing the divine spirit (*ruach Hakodesh*; Etkes 2016: 44–45). It was the interface between Hasidism's mystical tradition and the popular movement that it produced which became what Garb referred to as the four features of Hasidism: focus on personal power of individuals, the centrality of language, openness to magical applications, and responsiveness to the needs of the community (Garb 2020: 114). This type of spiritualism was opposed by the famous student of the Vilna Gaon, R. Hayyim of Volozhin (Shuchat 2020: 274), and is a testimony to its prominence. The idea of seeing the root of one's soul, describing one's spiritual path, or tolerating the bending of certain rules of Jewish Law for the benefit of the greater spiritual good, were prominent issues of contention. This latter issue was referred to as *aveirah lishmah*, or a transgression for heaven's sake, a term found in Talmudic literature referring to sins done as a means to a worthy end. This may be seen as pushing a controversial theme, but for Hasidism it was a way to bring renewed vigour and enthusiasm to the experience of religious life. There were Hasidic thinkers such as R. Klonimus Kalman Epstein (1753–1823) who criticized the attempt to describe *Zaddikim* as miracle makers and spiritualists, and preferred to see them as spiritual guides instead (Epstein 1976; Deut 12:20).

7 Nomos versus pneumatics in Hasidic thought

R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch says in the name of the Besht: 'When a person is connected to God (Davuk) and at that moment a thought enters their mind this is a bit of the holy spirit [*ruah hakodesh*]' (R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1974: 2). Again it says:

> The Besht said that the lofty things that he was able to have revealed to him was not due to studying many tractates and halakhic works [*poskim*] but rather due to praying with great devotion and through that he merited a lofty level. (R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1974: 5)

As mystics, the Besht and his disciples took the notion of 'the holy spirit' as a form of divine inspiration that can happen even in modern times quite seriously. R. Hayyim Vital wrote in the sixteenth century, that a true kabbalist is one who merits to receive knowledge through the Divine Spirit (Vital 1974: 4A). This form of revelation, whether through the soul of Elijah or in other ways, is how the Besht is described in Shlomo Ben Abraham of Levitzk's introduction to *Maggid Devarav le'Yaakov* (1971: 2A). Whereas R. Hayyim Vital claimed that certain kabbalists merited the holy spirit in order to embellish their understanding of Kabbalah, the Hasidic world took a bolder stance, suggesting that the Zaddikim had the ability to bend the law at times, since they could perceive the spiritual realm and act accordingly. The most famous example of this was *aveirah lishmah*, mentioned above. *aveirah lishmah* or a 'transgression for heaven's sake' is a Talmudic idea (Nazir 23B) in

which one commits a transgression in which the end justifies the means, such as Yael the Keinite in the book of Judges who slept with Sisera, the enemy of Israel, in order to kill him. This idea was borrowed by Hasidic thinkers to justify bending Halakhic rules in certain cases. The Besht was quoted as saying: 'There are times when the fulfilment of a mitzvah entails a small element of transgression and one should pay no heed to the evil inclination in its endeavours to stop one from fulfilling that mitzvah' (*Tzava'at Harivash*, 1998: 15–16). The most quoted example is a seemingly minor issue, in which one may recite the morning prayer later than its designated time if the Zaddik informs you that the morning hours are not an opportune time for your specific soul to achieve *devekut* in prayer. Since Halakhah does not differentiate in practice between Rabbinic or Torah based laws, this was considered an antinomian approach. R. Jacob Issac, the Seer of Lublin (1745–1815), wrote:

> For hasidut is love and it is with all of one's soul. Therefore, one should not worry about the shma or about prayer even if it is recited after its [proper] time, for this is out of the love of God, for one does this to get a better connection or in order to praise better, or even if he thinks that this will be better in God's eyes not to recite the shma or prayers [now]. Even if his evil inclination tells him this is wrong, he should not worry about any punishment for an act done out of the love of God to do His will, for God wants the heart and 'greater is a transgression for the sake of heaven'. (Horowitz 2015: 337)

The above text claims that if one feels they will connect better to God if they recite the morning Shema prayer past its time, they should not worry about the law, for it is the evil inclination telling them to abide by the letter of the law. In addition, R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Isbica (1801–1851) wrote:

> One who guards themselves from the evil inclination and guards themselves from sin with all their might to such an extent this it is impossible to guard oneself any more than they already do and despite this the evil inclination pushes them to do a [wrong] act, this must have been God's will. (R. Mordecai Leiner of Izbica 1995: 145)

This is a further step, claiming that even a wrong act for the wrong reason could be a good deed (Magid 2003: 201–248; Mondshine 1996: 301–320). In contradistinction to this notion, R. Hayyim of Volozhin was not only opposed to all forms of ecstatic Kabbalah in his time, but also claimed that the Talmudic idea of *aveirah lishmah* was only valid until the giving of the Torah (*Nefesh Hahayyim*, middle gate, between 3 and 4, chapter 7, 2A–3B; Itzkovitch 1973). Mondshine argues in defence of the Hasidic practice that there are two types of *aveirah lishmah* (a sin for the sake of heaven), one intended for *Zaddikim* only, the other for ordinary people (Mondshine 1996: 320). R. Zvi Elimelekh of Dinow

(1783–1841) presents this as ‘a tradition handed down by holy men’ (Mondshine 1996: 320). There were those who argued that the tension between Hasidism and Halakhah can be described as the struggle between the *pneuma* of the mystic and *nomos* of the legalist (Kahana and Mayse 2017: 380–381). Moreover, Kahana and Mayse argue that the Hasidic approach to Halakhah should be seen as an outgrowth of Lurianic Kabbalah, since Lurianic Kabbalah created ritual which permeated Eastern European Jewry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. ‘More specifically, in Hasidism we find that Lurianic or Ashkenazic pietist customs once restricted to individuals were transformed into central elements of the communal Hasidic ethos’ (Kahana and Mayse 2017: 383). This puts each zaddik into the position of one who can achieve this form of holy spirit as did the Ari:

> When one devotes his mind to the blessed creator, God will send that person thoughts regarding what he must do, as it says: ‘Cast your burden upon God’(Psalms 55:23). If that person truly wants desires and longs [to perform] some pious practice, presumably it must be necessary, for God has delivered it into his thoughts. (R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1974: 2B)

The idea of taking the issue of Hasidic anti-nomism not as a unique phenomenon but as an extension of an earlier phenomenon in Jewish history is likely correct. It is also true that Lurianic Kabbalah introduced a new prayer book, Nusah Haari, and even practices (most being stringencies) as did the Ari. However, it would be more appropriate to go back further in Jewish history and see this controversy within the context of the broader issue of whether Divine inspiration (*ru’ah hakodesh*) or revelation can alter Halakhic decisions. This is an issue which begins in the Talmud in the story of the Oven of Akhnai, in which R. Joshua claimed that we do not allow miracles or heavenly voices to interfere with halakhic decision-making (Baba Metziah 49B) and continues with the question of whether Halakhic customs from the Zohar and the Kabbalah can influence Jewish Law. This is a well recognized tug of war, since in the end of the day the Torah is the will of God and the Halakhah claims to translate that will into practice, so the religious mentality is such that it will always seek a more direct source. The question is whether this is justified or not – and in the context of Hasidism it is imperative to examine in which way and under what conditions this was allowed, some of which was discussed by Kahana and Mayse 2017 (see also Katz 1986; Benayahu 1980; Greis 2000; Leibes 1995: 581–605; Shuchat 2007: 449–483; Hallamish 2000: 117–180).

8 The role of the zaddik

There are those who see the Hasidic notion of the zaddik as totally novel in Jewish history – although, as Green points out (1977: 331–337), elements of this can be seen early on. In the Pentateuch, the zaddik refers to one who is exonerated from any misdeed (see Gen 20:4, Deut 25:1), but in Proverbs the zaddik becomes the one whom God will save from

the evils of life (Prov 4: 18–19 and 10:25). In the Talmud as well, R. Elazar ben Shamua states that the zaddik is the pillar upon which the world stands (Haggigah12b) and that the whole world stands on the merits of *Zaddikim* (br. 17B). It adds that 'God saw that the zaddikim were few so he rose and planted them in every generation' (Yoma 38b). The Talmud even believes in the spiritual abilities of a zaddik, 'who decrees and the Holy One Blessed Be He fulfills their bidding' (Taanit 23A). The Hasidic notion of the zaddik also entails someone who is a spiritual guide. There are those who suggest that this could have had an outside cultural influence as its origin (Tourov 2004: 74–76, 89–97). In the early days of Hasidism, the zaddik was not portrayed as a lone mystic but as one who, as Abraham, reached out to defend and uplift the people (Nigal 1999: 243). This can be deduced also from R. Nahman of Breslov's story 'The Prince Who Thought he was a Turkey', in which the wise man (the Zaddik) is able to uplift the prince back to human princely status. The Zaddik descends to the people to uplift them and teach them how to transcend what they see as themselves. The idea of the descent of the zaddik to uplift others predates Hasidism (Peikarz 1978: 280–285). However, the Hasidic idea is that not only does the righteous person enter Gehinom after death in order to redeem the wicked and uplift them, as was mentioned in early kabbalistic literature, but even in this world the zaddik descends in order to uplift the wicked (Peikarz 1978: 288–289). Sometimes this descent happens involuntarily in order for the wicked to be redeemed, and sometimes it is voluntary; however, in such a case it must be done in haste to guard the zaddik from potential sin (Peikarz 1978: 288–289; see also Dresner 1960: 148–190). Dresner, basing himself on the writings of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonne, describes the various tasks of the zaddik which go well beyond giving spiritual guidance to his community:

(1) Renewal of the individual and the community: Dresner claims that the insular Hasidic community was an attempt to rectify flaws that they saw in communal life and its functionaries and not just to address spiritual issues of the individual. Therefore, the zaddik plays a central role as a community leader.
(2) Facing up to the crisis of the times: Dresner argues that the crisis was not just the loss of hope in a generation filled with antisemitism, but a moral breakdown in which, 'the people had fallen away from Torah and respect for the rabbis, the rich ruled with an iron first, the cantors sang but did not pray, the teachers were not sincere, the butchers unreliable, the rabbi arrogant' and therefore a radical approach was needed.
(3) The zaddik as a spiritual leader.
(4) Finally, the zaddik as a paradigm for the greatness that Man can achieve if he is close to God. However, one is not to rely wholly on the zaddik but to learn from him (Dresner 1960: 113–140).

Elior describes the zaddik as the one who teaches his followers: 'to recognize reality as lying beyond sensory perception' and to 'the divine infinite […] implicit in being' (Elior

2006: 127). The zaddik, according to this, was a single charismatic individual who embodied the ideal. One who acts by virtue of divine mystical inspiration and abundance of *hesed* (Divine grace), enabling him to breach the boundaries of perception and attain a knowledge of God (Elior 2006: 127, 128). Elior enumerates four characteristics of the Zaddik:

(1) Charisma or divine election.
(2) Responsibility to his followers, his Hasidim as a spiritual brotherhood.
(3) Embodiment of the tension between divine transcendence and immanence by connecting his followers with the spiritual world.
(4) Finally, bringing Godliness and holiness into the material world. (Elior 2006: 130)

The zaddik was also seen by the masses as a sort of miracle man and healer; however, this type of depiction was not always well received by Hasidic leaders, as mentioned above in the name of R. Klonimus Kalman Epstein of Cracow (Epstein 1976; Deut 12:2).

9 Worshipping God through physicality (*avodah begashmiut*)

Judaism is a religion with 613 commandments. A minority of them are commandments of the heart; most are practical, and break up into three categories: between the individual and God, between people, and between the individual and his or her self. Hasidism wondered about the status of non-commanded actions. This is discussed in Rabbinic literature as early as the Talmud (b Brakhot 63A), that one should connect to God in all aspects of life, however this holds a special place in Hasidic thought. Tzippi Kaufman connected the Hasidic idea of worshipping God in physicality to the Hasidic concept of Divine immanence. If God ‘permeates all’ and ‘there is no place devoid of Him’, as the Zohar states, then every aspect of the world should potentially play an important role. The Talmud says that even the idle talk of scholars needs to be studied, and the Jerusalem Talmud says that in the world to come, ‘one will give an account why they did not want to enjoy the benefits of this world’ (j Kiddushin 4, 12 2–3) which seems to support this idea; however, in Hasidic writings this notion takes on various forms. Due to its centrality in early Hasidic thought, research on this topic has been abundant. Martin Buber saw *avodah begashmiut* as imbuing regular day-to-day actions with religious meaning. Gershom Scholem argued that worshipping God in physicality was not about seeing nature as sanctified but rather redeeming the Divine sparks from nature, something which not everyone knows how to accomplish. Buber argued that the idea of uplifting the mundane to the level of the spiritual was a novel Hasidic idea. Arthur Green argued that the Hasidic idea of the immanence of God necessitates the idea that God is to be found also within creation, and that nature is but an illusion hiding Divinity. However, since Jewish Law (Halakhah) teaches limitations, not everything found in nature is allowed to human beings. Gedalia Nigal claimed that *avodah begashmiut* was reserved only for unique and spiritual

individuals due to the dangers therein. This is also the position of Mendel Peirkarz. Rivka Shatz-Oppenheimer argued that in Hasidic thought there never was a departing from the Halakhic norm of seeing a hierarchy in nature of good and evil, holy and profane, pure and impure, and therefore the idea of looking for Divinity in physicality was a notion that already existed. In the writings of R. Elimelekh of Lizensk, there are cautionary words that such actions are only for the *Zaddikim* and not for the commonfolk (Kaufman 2009: 244). This was also the opinion of R. Meshullam Feivish, a student of a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch (Mezhyrichi, Shatz-Oppenheimer 1971: 1409). To illustrate, here are two examples of *avodah begashmiut*:

(1) Using the physical world for the service of God. Jewish law uses the natural world to perform most of the commandments, such as animal skin for tefillin, Torah scrolls, or wool for the fringes on one's garment, so that this is not a novel idea to Judaism.
(2) Actual sanctification of the material world to uplift it to the level of the spiritual. For example, eating in order to study Torah or in order fulfil a commandment, or performing the action while in a state of total devotion to God.

There seem to be additional forms of this as well:

(1) Fulfilling physical needs in order to concentrate on spiritual needs.
(2) Reacting to occurrences that were beyond one's control to bring them back to the spiritual root. For instance, thoughts of transgression of the physical where one uplifts the thoughts to their spiritual roots in order to rectify them. This could be in the instance of one beholding a beautiful object or a beautiful person, or engaging in idle talk etc. which could lead to desire, lust, or gossip – in other words, something negative which arises not as a necessity but from an occurrence. In traditional kabbalistic thought, one should strive to sanctify themselves in the physical necessities of life such as eating, drinking, and marital sexual activity. However, in Hasidism this category was extended to include even such occurrences mentioned above in which the individual tries to uplift their sight, imagination, and thoughts to their supernal, spiritual root in the sefirotic world in order to neutralize the negative affect of the occurrence. This therefore appears to be a category reserved only for the saintly (see Kaufman 2009: 264).

Therefore, even if the verse in Proverbs says: 'In all your ways shall you know Him [God]' (Prov 3:6), in the writings of the Besht, *avodah begashmiut* is considered an act of worshipping God both with our good and evil inclination (Shatz-Oppenheimer 1971: 1408). This is a way of saving one from 'overwrought spiritualism and retreat from the real world'. There is a second idea here that, in order to overcome the captivity of the material world, it is imperative for one to learn how to live within it (Shatz-Oppenheimer 1971: 1408). In addition, the zaddik, who can uplift matter by focusing his mind on the spiritual root while being involved in the mundane world, can uplift matter in an identical sense of Lurianic

Kabbalah's notion of uplifting the sparks of spirituality that have fallen into the physical world from the shattering of the vessels (Shatz-Oppenheimer 1971: 1409).

10 Prayer as a nexus to inner life

Idel wrote: 'one of the most conspicuous transformations of Judaism, characteristic of eighteenth-century Hasidic spirituality, is the special emphasis it placed on prayer in religious life' (2008: 7). Idel goes on to describe five different views or models of prayer in Hasidic literature:

(1) Prayer as a form of spiritual ecstasy in which there is almost a total loss of awareness of self;
(2) A clinging to God by way of the letters and their sounds as a technique to integrate one's soul in the divine realm – language is therefore the main vehicle of this activity;
(3) *Oratio infusa*, as he calls it, in which the reciting prayer with intent connects the inner supernal voice of the Divine Shekinah (Presence), uniting the individual with the level of *malkhut* (Idel 2008: 36–37);
(4) A theosophical–theurgical model in which one's prayer causes the union of two Divine powers, as in Cordoverian or even Lurianic *kavanot*;
(5) The individual is connecting or paring with the higher worlds in an ecstatic and almost sensual manner referred to as *zivugim*. (Idel 2008: 78–79)

Idel does not try to harmonize the models but sees them as different approaches within Beshtian Hasidism. There have been other important discussions of Hasidic prayer. Loewenthal (1998) discusses three types of meditative prayer in Habad Hasidism. Scholem discussed Devekut in early Hasidism (Scholem 1949), Weiss (1985) discussed Hasidic *kavanot*, and Jacobs wrote a volume in Hasidic prayer (Jacobs 1972). In addition, R. Shatz-Oppenheimer (1964) wrote on Hasidic contemplative prayer. The following few sources are examples of Hasidic descriptions of prayer.

> It is incumbent upon every person to study and prepare themselves to pray even the sabbath songs in a soft voice, and to scream quietly, and to say the words of sabbath songs and of study with all their might, as it says; 'all my bones shall proclaim God who is like unto you' (Ps 35:10). This scream which comes about by clinging and unio mystica (*devekut*) must be in silence. (R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1974: 1)
>
> For it really is an innovative idea that Man can cling to God. For his body and many outer shells (*klipot*) separate him from God. For even if His glory fills the universe, it is enclothed in many things. However, by the words that exit his mouth, one can break through all the barriers that separate him. (R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1974: 4)

In the writings of the Maggid, prayer is a nexus to clinging to God. It is an inner movement of the soul which needs a great amount of concentration and energy. If one has merit, the inner soul will shine and rise up to the higher levels (R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1974: 11). In general, the Hasidic movement did not promote following the Lurianic Meditations (*kavanot*) in prayer (see Idel 1995: 149, 152–154; see also Kallus 1997: 151, 165, who claims the Besht had extensive knowledge of Lurianic *kavanot* and possibly utilized them during prayer). However, one was to meditate on the words of the prayer and to vocalize them, for within themselves they contain a spiritual force (Idel 1995: 163). The Maggid claims that by concentration on the words instead of on the Lurianic *kavanot* one can reach beyond the *kavanot* (Idel 2008: 27, quoting *Likutim Yekarim*) and uplift one's thoughts in an attempt to cling to God (see Idel 1995: 160–163). This connection repairs the world at large. The individual should attempt to pray on behalf of the whole community and in doing so they will be answered for their own needs as well (Idel 1995: 66). The greatest nemesis of prayer is evil thoughts. Therefore, prayer requires a great deal of concentration to overcome them, for they are the external world's attempt to permeate one's consciousness during prayer. One must attempt to empty their mind of these thoughts until they are annulled, allowing the union with God (*devekut*). Prayer is described as having two levels: speech (*dibur*) and thought (*mahshava*). One visualizes and contemplates the words until reaching a level of stillness in which even their thoughts cease to ponder particulars. At this point one connects with the Divine world of thought in which the ego (*ani*) becomes nought (*ayin*), referred to as *bitul hayesh*, allowing mystical engagement (Shatz 1971: 1412). Prayer therefore is a ladder to reach *devekut* or union with God. This *devekut* was the route to mysticism, even for the non-mystic. Through *devekut* one can reach the highest spiritual levels.

The Maggid claims that the Besht attained his spiritual knowledge not through Torah study but rather through intense prayer (*Likutim Yekarim*, 5). He argued that intense *devekut* could lead to revelations of the holy spirit (*Likutim Yekarim*, 5). The main purpose of prayer and Torah study, according to R. Jacob Joseph of Polonne, 'is to cleave himself to the inwardness of the spiritual force of the light of Ein sof which is within the pronounced letters of Torah and prayer' (Toldot Yaakov Yosef 25A, quoted in Idel 2008: 29). The Habad Hasidic thinkers, starting with R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, attempted to return Torah study to its pedestal without losing the importance of *devekut* in prayer. Prayer took on many forms in Hasidic tradition, from the amplified prayer in Karlin, to the rapid prayer in Kotzk, and the rather slow meditative prayer of Habad. In an informative discussion of prayer in Habad, Naftali Loewenthal demonstrated the attempt by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi to bring a form of meditative prayer designed for the masses recited at a slow pace. His student, R. Aharon Halevi, demanded both contemplation and heartfelt emotional ecstasy from his followers. Rav Dov Ber of Habad (1773–1827), in his tract on Ecstasy (*Kuntres Hahitpa'alut*), warns of spurious emotion and instead encourages a more contemplative

form of ecstasy, the highest level being one which is beyond emotion and reached only through self-nullification (*bitul*) and therefore a form of *devekut* reserved only for the elite (Loewenthal 1998: 288–298).

11 Torah study for its own sake (*torah lishmah*)

The Mishnah says that Jewish religious life is based upon the study of Torah, the Divine service (prayer), and acts of kindness (Avot 1, 2). In another source, the Mishnah places Torah study before all else (Peah 1, 1). The Hasidic movement, which stressed clinging to God even in the mundane acts of this world, held prayer on a pedestal, as mentioned above. Therefore, the question and place of Torah study vis-a-vis prayer was of particular interest, especially in the early Hasidic writings.

> When one studies [Torah] they should break ever so often to cling to Him [God] may He be blessed, and despite this we have to study. Even though that during the course of study there is no way to cling to Him, may He be blessed, but one needs to study, for the Torah purifies the soul, and it is the tree of life and if he does not study he will not be able to cling to God. (Baal Shem Tov (Besht) 1998: 29: 11; for a discussion on *Tzava'at Harivash*, see Greis 1977)

In this source, Torah study purifies the soul but does not produce *devekut* (clinging to God): it needs its own meditational moment. This position seems diametrically opposed to that of R. Hayyim Volozhin, the famed student of the Vilna Gaon, who wrote: 'The truth is that the idea of lishmah means [to learn] for the sake of the Torah' (NH 4:3). R. Hayyim felt that the very act of Torah study was a way to cling to God, and therefore there is no need to contemplate one's relationship to God at that moment. The act of Torah study is the relationship itself:

> When engaged in study and contemplation of the Torah, there is certainly no need to pay any thought to *devekut*, for by study and contemplation alone he cleaves to God's will and His word, and God is one with His will and His word. (NH 4:1)

The Besht's grandson, R. Moses Hayyim Efraim of Sudylkov (1748–1800), writes that *torah lishmah* brings about *devekut* not by the intellectual connection to the discussion of Torah or by intense studying, but by studying 'with the proper intent', which is to recognize that it is the will of God that we study his Torah and do so in order to induce 'the full revelation of the Godhead and the submission of evil to the domain of sanctity' (see Goetschel 1996). R. Efraim, like R. Hayyim above, sees the Torah as made up of letters of the Hebrew language, which are the building blocks of the universe (Goetschel 1996: 262–

265), but does not see the intellectual pursuit of the study as the main route to connect to this source.

There are alternative Hasidic approaches to the issue of *torah lishmah* aside from the two mentioned above, as Idel points out. One prominent approach, attributed to the Besht by R. Meir Margaliot, is clinging to God through the letters of the Torah: 'Let his desirable intention concerning study for its own sake be to cleave himself in holiness and purity to the letters' (R. Meir Harif Margoliot, *Sod Yakhin u'Boaz*, 41–42; brought by Idel 1995: 176). This means that Torah for its own sake is for the sake of the letters of the Torah as a means to cling to God. This in turn brings down spiritual vitality by way of these letters, in what Idel describes as a mystical-magical model. This approach can be found in the writings of the Maggid Dov Ber of Mezeritch in the name of the Besht as well:

> A person who reads the Torah and sees the lights of the letters that are in the Torah, even if he does not know the proper cantillation, since he reads with great love and enthusiasm, God does not deal with him strictly even if he does not pronounce them properly. (Dov Ber of Mezerich, *Likutei Yekarim*, Fol 1A; brought in Idel 1995: 179, note 94)

The idea is brought a third time in the name of the Besht by R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnaa, who sees the same rule as regarding prayer:

> He, May He be blessed, concentrated Himself [*tzimtzum*] into the Torah, therefore when one speaks on issues of the Torah or prayer, let him do it with all his power, since by this he unites himself with Him, may He be blessed, since all his power is in the pronounced letter, and He, may He be blessed, dwells in the pronounced letter. (Or HaEmet, 15B–17A; brought by Idel 1995: 180, above note 94 – the inclusion of the letters of prayer is a novelty which actually has a similarity)

Moses Hayyim Sudylkov, mentioned above, brings a similar tradition in the name of the Besht with an addition:

> When one studies the Torah for the sake of God and in order to keep his commandments and abstains from what is prohibited and pronounces the letters of Torah which are names of God […] it is as if the Divine presence dwells upon him. (Efraim of Sydylkov, *Degel Mahaneh Efraim*, 119–120; brought by Idel 1995: 182)

This source is similar to the others in how it sees the letters of the Torah as a vehicle to reach the Divine presence, even if it adds the aspect of studying Torah in order to keep the *mitzvot*. All the Hasidic sources above describing *torah lishmah* as focusing on the letters, brought by Idel and by Weiss, are early sources which point to an Abulafian type of

meditation on the letters as vehicles for reaching *devekut* (see Idel 1995: 182–183, above note 94; see also Idel 1995: 56). However, it should be mentioned at this point that after the first generation of Hasidism there can be found alternative understandings of *torah lishmah*. It should be stated here that it is rather difficult to describe 'the Hasidic' approach to *torah lishmah* since there are a number of approaches. In this sense, Hasidic thinking is less uniform than the students of the Vilna Gaon. As Ada Rapaport-Albert pointed out, after the death of the Maggid of Mezerich, Hasidism became a decentralized movement (Rapaport-Albert 1996: 78–79). Therefore, the sources presented here are either attributed to the Besht or his immediate disciples in this issue. For other approaches to Torah study among the Hasidim see, for example, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi:

> King David of blessed memory would connect the Torah to God, by bringing down influx of eternal light into wisdom and this is the meaning of studying Torah lishmah, meaning for the sake of Torah, as we just explained. (R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi 1979: Pericope Shelah, 47B)

This interpretation can be seen as well in R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi's writings (1976: 9A–10a), where he describes the study of Torah as attaching one's soul to God. R. Shneur Zalman, in *Likutei Torah*, does not focus on the letters per se, and in that sense is closer to Rav Hayyim Volozhin's thinking, but his position differs slightly in the sense that it lacks the rationalist element found in R. Hayyim's position. The source from Tanya can be interpreted in a way that is closer to this concept. (For a discussion of Torah study in the thinking of R. Shalom Dov Ber of Lubavitch, see Wolfson 2013: 89, 93, 99.)

12 The Hasidic movement and its relationship to Hasidic thought

The Jewish communities in Podolia and southeastern Poland experienced horrific events in the second half of the seventeenth century, including the massacre of entire Jewish communities by Ukrainian peasants rebelling against their Polish masters during the uprising of 1648–1662 by Bogdan Khmelnitsky; the Russo-Swedish war, fought for the control of the Polish Lithuanian Kingdom during the years 1654–1655, which resulted in the mass murder of thousands of Jews charged as traitors; the Muslim Tatar incursions into the Ukraine to capture white slaves to market them in the Muslim world, 1660–1699; the Turkish invasion of Podolia 1672–1699; the Great Northern Wall war of 1700–1721, fought between Russia and Sweden on Polish soil, supported by the Russian czar and rejected by the Swedish king; and eventually the vandalism and theft by groups of Ukrainian peasants known as Haidamacks who attacked Jewish neighbourhoods and settlements from 1734–1744 and 1750–1768, resulting in the murder of thousands of inhabitants in the Ukraine and in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. Between the years 1648–1668 it is estimated that over 100,000 Jews perished at the hands of the Cossacks,

as mass pogroms against Jews broke out in the areas from which police forces have been withdrawn and the illiterate Greek Orthodox Ukrainian peasants not only murdered Polish Catholic nobility but also destroyed Jewish synagogues, schools, houses, and communities. In addition to this, the unfortunate event of Sabbateanism and the false prophecy messianic movement of 1626–1676 make it easy to understand how the Jewish communities fell into total despair (Elior 2012: 86). Therefore, the need for a message of hope was vital. The Hasidic movement supplied such a message. It was a popular movement which harboured the message that even the simplest man could be close to God through prayer and devotion and through keeping the commandments with devotion and happiness, for this devotion was as dear to God as the devotion of the greatest saints and the Torah study of scholars throughout history. It is obvious that this message of hope was easily received by the populace. The link between this message of hope and Hasidic thought was that the students of the Baal Shem Tov had no intention of teaching mystical techniques of ecstatic Kabbalah to the masses. However, they did extrapolate techniques that they thought would be suitable as simple techniques of a charismatic nature, such as prayer with song and dance and even somersaults, connecting to the Rebbe (the zaddik), who would be the conduit between the Hasid and God. In addition, communal prayer using the prayer book of the kabbalist Isaac Luriah (Nusah Ha-Ari), reserved until then just for a select few, offered the feeling of belonging to an exclusive group, and stories that were appropriate for the masses, enclosed within them the ideas of Hasidic thought. The goal was to have a spiritual experience, if not a direct experience of revelation as is taught in ecstatic Kabbalah, and to experience a spiritual enlightenment through the devotion of a pure heart before God. The goal was, to quote Scholem, to discover that:

> It is by descending into the depths of his own self that man wanders through all the dimensions of the world; in his own self he lifts barriers which separate one sphere from the other; in his own self, finally he transcends the limits of natural existence and at the end of his way, without, as it were, a single step beyond himself, he discovers that God is ‘All in All’ and there is ‘nothing but him’. (Scholem 1941: 336)

Scholem sums it up succinctly, saying: ‘Hasidism […] represents an attempt to make the world of kabbalism, through a certain transformation or reinterpretation, accessible to the masses of people’ (Scholem 1941: 327–329). This article purposely does not address the controversy between *hasidiut* and their *mithnagdic* opponents, the reason being that the majority of the opposition in Lithuania to Hasidim was to the movement and not as much to the ideas. Some of the alternative ideas of the *mithnagdim* are addressed in the discussions above for purpose of comparison, and not as criticism. The main opposition of the mithnagdim to Hasidism was more on the socioreligious level pertaining to aspects of the Hasidic movement, less on the level of the theology, despite the differing points of view

on certain issues. (For a summary of the socioreligious controversy as found in *mithnagdic* polemic *Zmir Arizim ve-Harvot Zurim*, see Wilensky 1970: 28–29 [vol. 1].)

13 Nuances in Hasidic dynasties – a final remark

Despite its outer appearance of men in black hats, white shirts, and long caftans, the Hasidic world is less ideologically monolithic than it appears. Habad or Lubavitch, one of the more visible groups due to its belief in outreach, is a Lithuanian (today Belarus)-born halakhically based Hasidic group. Its Hasidic approach is heavily based on Lurianic Kabbalah and its thinkers tend to delve into complicated metaphysical problems and issues. Breslov, with a revivalist element to it, is based on the writings of R. Nahman of Breslov, a great-grandson of the Besht. R. Nahman is highly anti-rationalist in his approach and at the same time a genius at mastering symbolic and metaphoric discussions of Rabbinic and Zoharic sources to produce novel ideas. He is also a master storyteller and masks his ideas in the cloak of his stories. Kotzk and Przysucha represent a sort of rationalist elitism. Ger is one Hasidic group that openly embraced orthodox Jewish politics, and in its inner core lies the writings of the famous R. Yehuda Arieh Leib Alter, who, in his work *Sfat Emet*, believed in the inner holy spark of every Jew. Munkatch Hasidim are reactionists who believe in the centrality of Halakahah. Vishnitz entails reactionism and love of the Jewish people, Modzitz – musical Hasidism; Chernobil – zaddik centered; Rozhyn – Majestic and refined Hasidism. Hungarian Hasidism, a later outgrowth than Polish Hasidism, tends to be more strict and reactionary. However, the inner kernel of thought of all these groups begins in the ideas presented above.

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