

## CHAPTER FOUR

# *Da'at*: Universalizing a Hasidic Value

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### Seeking Universal Truth in Particularist Sources

Each of the three great religions of the Western tradition is based upon a narrative that stands at the centre of its faith. For Judaism, it is the Exodus from Egypt and the receiving of Torah at Mount Sinai; for Christianity, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ; for Islam, the *hijra* and the revelation to Muhammad. Each sees its own narrative as standing at the centre of human history as the 'greatest story ever told', and its truth (however that term is conceived) is vital to all the faithful. Each of these faiths also bears a long history of more abstract theological truth claims, involving such issues as the unity (or trinity) of God, providence, divine authority for the rule of law, the importance of good works, and so forth. In these, the traditions may be shown to have much in common with one another, making for interesting conversation across religious lines. But the core narratives seem to stand in eternal competition with one another, and it is in their utter loyalty to them that the faiths and their faithful remain most deeply divided.

Much of contemporary interfaith dialogue takes place around the more commonly shared issues of moral teaching. There the well-intentioned participants often feel they are on safer ground. On these matters, there may be differences in style and formulation, but the essential claims are very close. Questions of theology, especially around the sacred narratives, are much more challenging, and are thus thought best avoided. The problem is that this often leaves these noble attempts at dialogue quite far from the place where the core communities of the faithful pitch their tent. Their faith lies precisely in the narrative core of their respective traditions, and it is from devotion to these events that the spiritual life gains its inspiration.

On the face of things, this is true of the mystics within our traditions as well. Mysticism develops at the very heart of a particular tradition, among

devotees who come to know and love God through the particular tales and beliefs which constitute that tradition's core, as well as through the practices embodying them. But, living deep within the tradition, these mystics may feel little need to defend the narratives, which are assumed to be true on the historical plane. They are more interested in penetrating into them, searching for deeper meanings and eternal truths. For them, the narratives are highly spiritualized, and devotion to them is completely intertwined with their reassignment as part of a quest for oneness that transcends all symbols and unites all of being. It is only the scholar of religion, examining the mystics' teachings in ways that would be unfamiliar to them, who seeks to distinguish between what appear through the scholarly lens to be distinct strands of thought: utter devotion to the particular truth of a tradition and an opening to a soaring sense of oneness that reaches infinitely beyond it.

Here I would like to examine the thought of one such mystical figure within Judaism, a spiritual teacher who understands the unity of all being, yet comes to it through the path of hasidism, the very heart of Jewish pietism, which was originally completely exclusivist in its religious claims. It is from this unlikely source that I seek insights that might be helpful in moving our contemporary theological and interreligious conversation towards a deeper level of communion. I say from the outset that the contemporary hasidic faithful, in the unlikely event that they might come upon an essay like this, would be surprised, even dismayed, to see me using 'their own' hasidic writings in a theological setting with which they would be quite unfamiliar. But this does not deter me. I stand in a tradition called neo-hasidism,<sup>1</sup> itself now reaching back more than a century, in which scholars and teachers have drawn freely on the hasidic sources, standing on their foundation and building upon them as we do with all the prior generations of traditional Jewish wisdom. We neo-hasidic scholars are non-literalist when it comes to the wisdom we have gained from the original hasidic masters. That is to say that it is not of vital import to us whether a particular encounter recorded in a hasidic tale happened just as told or not; the import lies in the wisdom learned from it. Once we have learned that our faith can survive such non-literalism regarding the hasidic masters, we are willing to apply it to earlier sources as well.

The key hasidic writings were composed in eastern Europe, beginning in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Although historians rightly con-

<sup>1</sup> On neo-hasidism see Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (eds.), *A New Hasidism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, forthcoming).

sider hasidism to belong to the early modern period of Jewish history,<sup>2</sup> the creators of the movement saw themselves as standing completely within the ancient rabbinic tradition, and were entirely faithful to the claims of both halakhah and aggadah. They did assert the right of each generation to interpret the tradition anew, but in doing so they remained highly conservative regarding praxis, while taking much greater risks in theological formulations.<sup>3</sup>

These sources take it for granted that the pursuit of serious spiritual life is something that belongs to Jews alone. While they were composed in a region that was rife with intense Eastern Christian piety, including monasticism, the religious, cultural, and linguistic walls separating Jews from Christians were so high that we have found no evidence of any attempt or ability to peer across them.<sup>4</sup> Eastern European Jewry of this period lived in spiritually splendid—and materially not so splendid—isolation. A neo-hasidic reading of them will necessarily have to expand and universalize their teachings, and that is fully my intent here. But first we will need to examine the sources and try to achieve an understanding of them in their own context.

The particular hasidic work under consideration here is the collection of homilies entitled *Me'or einayim*, 'The Light of the Eyes', authored by R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1729/30–1797) and first published in Slavuta, Ukraine, in 1798. The author was the paterfamilias of the many hasidic dynasties with the family name Twersky; these dominated much of Ukrainian Jewish life in the nineteenth century and continue to play a major role in

<sup>2</sup> A full history of hasidism, long a desideratum of Judaic scholarship, is David Biale (ed.), *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See my treatment of this theme in my 'Hasidism and Its Response to Change', *Jewish History*, 27/2–4 (Dec. 2013), 319–36. On halakhah within the hasidic world, see Maoz Kahana and Ariel Evan Mayse, 'Hasidic *Halakhah*: Reappraising the Interface of Spirit and Law', *AJS Review*, 41/2 (Nov. 2017), 375–408. On hasidic 'risk-taking' in the theological realm, see Arthur Green, 'Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat', in Peter Berger (ed.), *The Other Side of God* (New York: Anchor Books, 1981), repr. in Arthur Green, *The Heart of the Matter* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015). These and other essays of mine are available electronically on my website, <artgreen26.com>.

<sup>4</sup> Several attempts have been made to trace such cross-cultural influence, but they remain quite unspecific in their conclusions. These include T. Ysander's *Studien zum Bestschan Hasidismus* (Uppsala, 1933), Yaffa Eliach's 'The Russian Dissenting Sects and their Influence on R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, Founder of Hasidism', *PAAJR*, 36 (1963), 57–83 (roundly denounced by Gershom Scholem), and most recently Igor Tourov, 'Hasidism and Christianity of the Eastern Territory of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth: Possible of [sic] Contacts and Mutual Influences', *Kabbalah*, 10 (2004), 73–105. See also several studies that touch on this matter in Glenn Dynner (ed.), *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).

the transplanted hasidic communities of today. He is considered a disciple of both the Ba'al Shem Tov (the Besht) and the Magid of Mezhirech (Miedzyrzecz), the key founding figures of hasidism, but several of his theological views and attitudes hew most faithfully to the original teachings and attitudes of the Besht.<sup>5</sup> Like nearly all the early theoretical works of hasidism, the *Me'or einayim* is a collection of homilies on the weekly Torah portions, with various addenda. These were originally oral sermons preached in Yiddish.<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew text is a digest of the homilies, prepared for publication by a disciple, in this case R. Elijah of Yurewicz.

The theology emerging from these hasidic sermons weaves together the highly personalist faith of classical rabbinic Judaism, where God is mostly depicted as Father and King, with a strong thrust of mystical panentheism. The mysterious and transcendent God is present and needs to be discovered everywhere, in each moment and in every deed. Hasidic teaching has about it a sense of devotional adventure, a mission of seeking out sparks of holiness throughout the world. While each soul's spiritual journey is unique, many may be inspired by the teachings and personal example of the righteous, the *tsadikim*, themselves the speakers of these sermons.<sup>7</sup> For our author, as for all the original hasidic masters, this teaching applied exclusively to the deeds of Jews. But I say again, in the neo-hasidic spirit, that our goal is to apply the teaching universally. Our licence to do so, I would claim, lies within the very panentheistic language of the hasidic sources. If God is indeed everywhere, as they constantly insist, God cannot be absent from the consciousness—and even the religious praxis—of most of humanity.

<sup>5</sup> I am currently completing an annotated translation of the *Me'or einayim*, forthcoming from Stanford University Press. For a detailed consideration of R. Menahem Nahum's place amid the teachings of his two masters, see the introduction to that volume.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the process from Yiddish oral sermon to printed Hebrew text, see my 'The Hasidic Homily: Mystical Performance and Hermeneutical Process', in Bentsi Cohen (ed.), *As a Perennial Spring: A Festschrift Honoring Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm* (New York: Downhill, 2015), 237–65. Further detailed discussion is found in several works by Ze'ev Gries, including *The Book in Early Hasidism* [Hasefer bereshit haḥasidut] (Tel Aviv: Hakibuts Hame'uhad, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> A fuller account of early hasidic theology is to be found in the introduction to my *Speaking Torah: Teachings from Around the Maggid's Table* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2013), 28–59. A book-length study of these themes is Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth-Century Hasidic Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

## The Language of Religious Awareness

In the *Me'or einayim*, the key term for describing this quest for God is *da'at*, the word that lies at the heart of our investigation here as well. *Da'at* is a nominal form of the verb stem *y-d-*, usually translated 'to know', hence, 'knowledge'. Its use in a theological context (and this is true for much of Judaism's religious vocabulary) is rooted in the biblical book of Deuteronomy, the last of the five books that constitute the Torah: 'You have been shown to know' (4: 35); 'Know this day and set it upon your heart that Y-H-V-H is God' (4: 39); 'Y-H-V-H has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear, until this day' (29: 3). The later, much-quoted 'Know the God of your father and serve Him' (1 Chr. 28: 9) implies that worship requires prior 'knowledge' of God. The biblical usage of *y-d-* in these contexts connotes a faithful awareness of divine presence and causality. This is not mere intellectual knowledge. It is our witness to the divine hand in the events of history, especially in the lot of Israel, that is the object of such *da'at*. But the verb also carries along with it a sense of intimate knowledge, recalling its use also with regard to carnal knowing: 'Adam knew his wife Eve' (Gen. 4: 1).<sup>8</sup>

Theology, or a self-conscious reflection on what this *da'at elohim* ('knowledge of God') might mean, was not a major preoccupation in the formative centuries of rabbinic Judaism. As is well known, the rabbinic community constituted and defined itself around halakhah, or a path of praxis, rather than around fine points of theological distinction. The theology that did flourish was largely in the narrative and homiletical modes, deepening the power of the Exodus-Sinai narrative, along with certain other key episodes of biblical history—Creation, the patriarchs, the wilderness Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, destruction, and exile. These became the tropes around which the midrashic imagination was spun. To be sure, the rabbis had robust debates about these narratives, conversations that were filled with theological content. But they treated the diversion of views on them with much latitude, seeing little need to resolve or restrain them.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This linkage is made explicit in many passages of the *Me'or einayim*, including 'Devarim', p. 298 (all page references are to *Me'or einayim*, 2 vols., ed. Y. S. Oesterreicher (Jerusalem, 2012)). See below. The association of religious awareness with sexual intimacy tempts one to seek in the kabbalistic and hasidic world-view a parallel to kundalini yoga in Indian tradition, but we have no indication that such praxis ever existed among the Jewish mystics. The exclusion of women from the study and knowledge of the esoteric tradition was quite total, meaning that it was essentially fantasy and longing for this perfect union that motivated the male devotees, rather than physical experience.

<sup>9</sup> There is a vast scholarly literature on the theology of the aggadah, opening with Solomon Schechter's *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud* (London, 1901), and

As Jews became exposed to Graeco-Arabic thought, beginning in the tenth century CE, *da'at elohim* was given new prominence and a new meaning. Was it permitted, the rabbis of that era asked, to engage in theological enquiry, discussing the most intimate of religious matters,<sup>10</sup> according to methods and assumptions put forth by non-Jews? They, after all, had not received revelation as we had; they had no 'chain of tradition' that took them back to an authentic experience of the Deity. What was there to learn from the methods, first of the Muslim Kalam and later of the Neoplatonists and especially of the Aristotelians, who put forth logical arguments that seemed totally cut off from the claims of biblical and rabbinic tradition?

The response of Jewish philosophers (themselves leading rabbis in many cases) over the course of five centuries was quite vigorous.<sup>11</sup> True knowledge of God was required for proper worship.<sup>12</sup> Such knowledge could be best acquired through philosophical reasoning, allowing one a pure and true notion of the Deity, especially one freed of any accretions that might be remnants of a pagan conception. Based upon some key biblical passages that spoke of the Divine as being without image (Isa. 40: 18, 25; 46: 5), and building upon the aniconic tradition embodied in halakhah, they offered reason

including E. E. Urbach's monumental *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975). Most significant to this reader is Abraham J. Heschel's *Torah min hashamayim*, translated as *Heavenly Torah, as Refracted through the Generations*, trans. and ed. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum, 2006), an eye-opening guide to discovering the theological underpinnings of countless debates on seemingly small narrative points within the rabbinic corpus. Although Heschel's attempt to divide all of rabbinic thought into two overarching schools is to be treated with caution, his ability to uncover the theological underpinnings of narrative discussion remains unparalleled.

<sup>10</sup> Metaphysics would inevitably lead one into the realms of *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah*, cosmogony and theosophy, described already in Mishnah *Hagigah* 2: 1 as esoteric subjects to be taught only to the most qualified and trusted of disciples. There is a vast literature on the meaning and later treatment of these terms. See, inter alia, David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988), and the bibliography listed there. On the experiential basis behind the designation of these as esoteric teachings, see Nehemia Polen, 'Why Would Someone Cut Plants in Paradise? "Four Entered Pardes" in Light of 1 Enoch 6–8' (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> A classic summary is Shimon Bernfeld's *Da'at elohim* (Warsaw: Ahiasaf, 1922), although it has been superseded by several more recent surveys of medieval Jewish philosophy.

<sup>12</sup> This is the point of Simon Rawidowicz's important essay, 'Philosophy as a Duty', included in his *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974). See also Herbert A. Davidson, 'Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation', in S. D. Goitein (ed.), *Religion in a Religious Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), 53–68.

(itself a divine gift) as a useful tool in clarifying one's own notion of God, allowing for a more refined sense of worship as well. The most influential voice of this philosophical school was Maimonides, who listed knowledge of God as first among the commandments, and who placed the *Sefer hamada*, 'Book of Knowledge' (or perhaps better 'Book of the Mind'),<sup>13</sup> which includes a brief outline of Jewish Aristotelian theology, at the head of his great code of Jewish practice, the *Mishneh torah*.<sup>14</sup>

The kabbalists, whose writings first emerged amid the anti-philosophical reaction of twelfth-century Provence and northern Spain, may nevertheless be characterized as intellectualist mystics. They reasserted the biblical link between *da'at* and two other terms for intellection, *hokhmah* and *binah* (or *tevnah*). Several Torah verses describing the erection of the wilderness Tabernacle speak of its construction having been carried out in *hokhmah*, *tevnah*, and *da'at*; Bezalel, the overseer of this project, was especially graced by God with a combination of these. (The linking of these three is reconfirmed in 1 Kings 7: 14.) It is not clear that the biblical sources really refer to distinctive functions in using the three terms together; they might simply mean 'with great skill'. But the medieval reader, ever seeking guidance from Scripture, worked to discern between them.<sup>15</sup>

The kabbalists now turned these terms around, seeing them not primarily as human tools with which to know God, but as descriptions of the divine mind itself. *Hokhmah*, *binah*, and *da'at* were elements within the mind of God, stages of progressive divine self-manifestation as the Deity emerged from utter mystery and incomprehensibility to form the personified image

<sup>13</sup> See Bernard Septimus, 'What Did Maimonides Mean by Mada?', in Ezra Fleischer et al. (eds.), *Me'ah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky* [Me'ah she'arim: iyunim be'olamam haruḥani biyme'i habeinayim lezekher yitshak tverski] (Eng. and Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 83–110. This very careful study suggests that the primary use of *mada* (a cognate of *da'at*) is 'cognition' (p. 87 n. 19), but that it can also be rendered as 'mind' or 'opinion', depending upon context. Cognition in Maimonides includes both rational and imaginative faculties. *Da'at* itself is less common in his writing. In standard medieval Hebrew (that of the Ibn Tibbon translators) it, or its alternative form *de'ah*, is often used for 'opinion', but Septimus claims that Maimonides generally eschews this usage.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding Maimonides' purpose in this, Septimus (*ibid.* 110) refers us to the formulation of his teacher Isadore Twersky, who spoke of it as a 'conjoining of talmudic law and philosophical spirituality'.

<sup>15</sup> See Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and others on Exod. 31: 3. The talmudic assertion that 'Bezalel knew the permutations of letters by which heaven and earth had been created' (BT *Ber.* 55a) stood in the background of this. The Sages understood the *hokhmah*, *binah*, and *da'at* attributed to him by the biblical text as pointing toward something greater than simply architectural skills.

known in biblical-rabbinic tradition. These stages or *sefirot*, always numbered ten, were the subject of endlessly refined contemplation; their unity became the chief focus of devotional intent in kabbalistic Judaism.<sup>16</sup>

Not all systems of kabbalah counted *da'at* among the ten. This, in fact, was a subject of much dispute among Jewish mystical teachers over many centuries.<sup>17</sup> For those who did, however, it came to function as a principle of linkage, drawing together the more abstract and elusive aspects of the divine self, *hokhmah* and *binah*, with the more vividly portrayed 'lower' aspects of divinity, depicted in imagery derived from the realms of time and space, drawn in colours of both emotion and gender. *Da'at* came to be associated with the third letter of the Tetragrammaton, *vav*. But the letter *vav* also serves as 'and' in Hebrew; thus *da'at* came to symbolize linkage or conjunction, especially between the unknowable, transcendent mystery of the Godhead and its manifestation in divine personhood. Numerically, *vav* is six. Sometimes it is taken to be the inclusive principle of the six intermediate *sefirot*, those representing the six 'days' of the cosmic 'week', or the *sefirot* ranging from *hesed* to *yesod*. Thus it links the mysterious God, beyond all human knowing (*hokhmah* and *binah*, representing divine transcendence), with *malkhut* or *shekhinah*, the 'sabbath' or fulfilment of divinity, God's kingdom as immanent within the created world.

This is the (significantly simplified) kabbalistic legacy as it was understood by the early hasidic masters. They saw themselves as heirs to the entire extended tradition; their homilies regularly drew upon canonical sources from all quarters, not distinguishing between their age or original contexts. Anything within the tradition, including occasionally even philosophical formulations that the kabbalists had opposed, was fair game, to be marshalled forth in the course of hasidic discourse. But the hasidic authors did make one very distinctive move.<sup>18</sup> They applied the kabbalah-enriched legacy chiefly to

<sup>16</sup> For an account of the *sefirot* and the symbols associated with them, see Isaiah Tishby and Yeruham Fishel Lachower, *Wisdom of the Zohar* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1989), i. 269–307. See also my briefer discussion in *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 28–59.

<sup>17</sup> For a brief introduction to this matter, see Tishby's discussion in *Wisdom of the Zohar*, i. 242–6.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that all the hasidic authors were alike in their discussions of *da'at*, any more than they were in many other matters. The treatment of *da'at* in the *Me'or einayim* very much reflects the language of the Magid, as attested by many passages in the writings directly attributed to him. In the *Toledot ya'akov yosef, da'at* (with the association to Gen. 4: 1) is used to invoke the relationship between the sage or preacher and his flock. He must bind himself to them in that fully immediate sense, not just in hoping that his words will influ-



the human rather than to the divine realm. Their interest was not in metaphysics, but in devotional psychology. *Da'at* was then again what it had been prior to kabbalah, an effort of the human mind. But now it had a very different quality to it than it had for Maimonides or others of the philosophical schools. *Da'at* was an awareness of God that linked one to the upper universe. It had little to do with reason. It was an aspect of the human mind that evoked and aroused the same quality that existed within God, thus becoming a mystical awareness, an opening of the human mind that permitted one to be united in oneness to the universal Self that fills the world.<sup>19</sup>

### Reading the *Me'or Einayim*

With this background, we may begin examining a few key texts from our *Me'or einayim*. Bear in mind that we are examining this highly particularistic text seeking to pose such universal questions as 'What is the nature of the religious mind? What role does awareness have in personal liberation and in the linking of the soul to its divine source? How does the quest for *da'at* affect the way I am to live my daily life?' Our attempt here is to find in our author a person who is much concerned with these universal religious questions, despite their heavy garbing in the specifics of Judaic forms. We then might better be able to see him as a distinctive type of creative religious personality, one who might be compared and juxtaposed with parallel figures in other traditions. Let us remember to keep our focus trained on the question of what this author might be teaching us, while circumventing the obstacle of 'But his truth claim is not the same as mine!'

Our consideration of the sources will proceed in the following order. First we shall look at texts that establish the nature and object of *da'at*. Of what do we seek to become aware? Just what do we mean by awareness, and where does it lead? Next we will turn to *da'at* and its relationship to the life of devotion. How does awareness of this deeper truth shape the way we stand in God's presence and serve? Here we will look at *da'at* and its relationship to the emotional life that is so much a part of religion. That will take us onward

ence their future conduct. See Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Toledot ya'akov yosef* (Jerusalem, 2011), 'Shelah', iii. 906–7, and 'Vayelekh', *ibid.* 1343. This reflects his greater interest (compared to the Magid and R. Menahem Nahum) in the social aspect of hasidic teaching. The influence of the Magid in R. Menahem Nahum's formulation of *da'at* does not conflict with other ways, as indicated, in which he remains closer to the teachings of the Besht.

<sup>19</sup> In the kabbalistic mindset, 'an awakening from below' stimulates a parallel response from within God. Thus an act of human *da'at*, awareness of God, arouses *da'at* within the divine mind as well.

to the realms of joy and pleasure. Does awareness bring one to greater happiness, and how is that expressed? Following these considerations, we will come back to an examination of the *Me'or einayim* through a contemporary theological lens and ask what its author has to teach us.

We begin with one of the author's clearest statements of his mystical cosmology:

Creation took place for the sake of Torah and for the sake of Israel.<sup>20</sup> Its purpose was that Y-H-V-H be revealed to Israel, that we become aware and know [*yedu*, a verbal construct related to *da'at*] of His existence. Even though His true nature lies beyond our grasp, once we recognize [*yedu*] that God exists we will do everything for His sake, fulfilling 'know Him in all your ways' [*da'ehu*; Prov. 3: 6] and becoming united with Him. There is no other and there is nothing without Him! There is no place devoid of Him. 'The whole earth is filled with His glory' [Isa. 6: 3]!<sup>21</sup>

God's glory, however, is a designation for His garments.<sup>22</sup> The whole earth is filled with God's garments. This aspect of divinity is called *adonay*, related to the word for 'fittings' by which the Tabernacle was held together.<sup>23</sup> This is God's presence as it comes down into the lower and corporeal rungs.<sup>24</sup> Our task is to unite it with the source from which it came, with Y-H-V-H, Who calls all the worlds into being.<sup>25</sup>

In all our deeds, be they study or prayer, eating or drinking, this union takes place.<sup>26</sup> All the worlds depend on this: the union of God within—*adonay*—with God beyond—Y-H-V-H. When these two names are woven together, the letters of each alternating with one another, the combined name Y'HDVNHY is formed, a

<sup>20</sup> *Genesis Rabbah*, 1: 7. Here we see the religious exclusivism assumed by sources written long before they were taken up by hasidism.

<sup>21</sup> The clustering of these expressions of divine unity and immanence has about it the ring of an ecstatic outcry. See the discussion of this passage in Green, 'The Hasidic Homily', 254 ff.

<sup>22</sup> *Tikunei zohar*, 22 (65a). The natural world as a cloak for the divine self that lies within it is a classic pantheistic formulation, widespread in Jewish mystical sources. See *Tanya*, 2: 1: 'The words and letters [spoken by God in creation] stand forever within the heavens, garbed by all the firmaments.'

<sup>23</sup> He is playfully deriving the divine name *adonay* not from *adon*, lord, but from *adanim*, the fittings or joints by which the Tabernacle boards were held together. The immanent God is the inner structure of the universe, just as the *adanim* were within the *mishkan* as microcosm.

<sup>24</sup> *Tikunei zohar*, 70 (128a).

<sup>25</sup> Here he returns the Tetragrammaton to its original verbal form: *hamehaveh kol havayah*.

<sup>26</sup> The coupling of 'study or prayer' with 'eating or drinking' is a bold, perhaps even intentionally provocative, statement of hasidic ideology. Physical acts have the same possibility of unifying the Divinity, as do prescribed acts of piety. The uplifting of the corporeal and its transformation into spirit is the very essence of devotion. See the full treatment of this idea, called by modern scholars *avodah begashmiyut*, in Zippi Kaufmann, *In All Your Ways Know Him* [Bekhol derakheikha da'ehu] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009).

name that both begins and ends with the letter *yod*.<sup>27</sup> 'You have made them all in wisdom' [Ps. 104: 24], and *yod* represents that wisdom or *ḥokhmah*,<sup>28</sup> the prime matter from which all the other letters are drawn. God created the world through Torah, meaning the twenty-two letters. *Ḥokhmah* is the primal source of those letters. Just as materials are required for any creative act, which is to say all deeds derive from an original matter, so Creation itself emerges from Wisdom. Hence *ḥokhmah* is called by the Sages *hyle*,<sup>29</sup> from the words *hayah li* ('it was with Me'). All things were within Wisdom; from it they emerged from potential into real existence. Even though the *alef* is the first of the letters [and thus one might expect that it should be used to designate the first of all substances], *alef* itself is constructed of two *yods* with a diagonal *vav* between them.<sup>30</sup> That first *yod* refers to primal *ḥokhmah*, the prime matter in which all the worlds were included. The *vav* [shaped like an elongated *yod*] represents a drawing forth and descent of *da'at*,<sup>31</sup> the actualization of that potential. Thus were all the worlds created, finally forming the second *yod*, called the lower *ḥokhmah* or the wisdom of Solomon. This is the aspect of *adonay*, divinity as descended below, garbed in all things, alluded to in 'the whole earth is filled with His glory'.<sup>32</sup>

When you do all your deeds for the sake of Y-H-V-H, you draw all things in the lower world—that is, in the lower *ḥokhmah*—near to the font of the upper *ḥokhmah*, the Creator Himself, who calls all the worlds into being. By means of *da'at*, you fulfil 'know Him in all your ways'. This *da'at* is a unitive force;<sup>33</sup> it joins together the lower *yod* and the upper *yod*, the primal point. Then the entire universe forms one single *alef*: *yod* above, *yod* below, and *vav* between them. That is why God is called 'the cosmic *alef*'.<sup>34</sup>

The passage speaks at once in terms of metaphysics and devotional psychology. Indeed, these are not separable in the classic kabbalistic world-view, where the inner movements of the devotee's soul affect the condition of the

<sup>27</sup> The combining of these two names as an object of meditation is a widespread practice among Lurianic kabbalists. It is found on meditation charts (*shiviti*) and is reflected in many printings of the prayer book, particularly those in use among the Sephardi communities. A reference to this formula also found its way into the *Shulḥan arukh* ('Oraḥ ḥayim', 5), the classic sixteenth-century legal code of Jewry, greatly increasing its later influence.

<sup>28</sup> i.e. the letter *yod* of the Tetragrammaton represents *ḥokhmah*; see *Tikunei zohar*, introduction, 5a.

<sup>29</sup> The author has no idea that *hyle* is a Greek word carried over into medieval Hebrew usage, and he seeks to offer a Hebrew etymology for it. Cf. Nahmanides on Gen. 1: 1.

<sup>30</sup> Zohar i. 26b.

<sup>31</sup> Zohar iii. 29b.

<sup>32</sup> Note the complete identification of *shekhinah*, or the lower *ḥokhmah*, and the lower, including the material, world.

<sup>33</sup> *Vav* in Hebrew also indicates 'and', the conjunction that joins one object to another. It is thus a natural bridge to bring together the upper and lower forms of *ḥokhmah*.

<sup>34</sup> *Me'or einayim*, 'Bereshit', 21 ff.

divine cosmos. The text is playing on the graphic appearance of the letter *alef*, as written in the Torah scroll or in printed Hebrew; it has the appearance (with a bit of imagination) of two *yods* connected by a diagonal *vav*. When you, the worshipper, through your devoted deeds, use your *da'at* ('mind' or 'awareness') as a contemplative *vav* or connector, drawing together the upper *yod* of the abstract and mysterious Y-H-V-H and the lower *yod* of the indwelling divine presence (*shekhinah*), you are bringing about that union on the cosmic plane as well. Human awareness is a cosmic force, one on which the worlds depend.

It is written: 'Be aware of [*da et*] your father's God and serve Him' [1 Chr. 28: 9]. Our Sages derived great matters from every *et* in the Torah.<sup>35</sup> Here too they derived that it is essential that worship take place with complete *da'at*. A child, who has no *da'at*, is also one 'whose sexual climax is not considered ejaculation'.<sup>36</sup> This means [symbolically] that the union and coupling above cannot be completed by him. 'Without *da'at*, the soul is not good' [Prov. 19: 2]. One remains a minor whose actions do not become attached to their unitive root; only a person with complete *da'at* can bring about this union and draw the upper forces together. He too then draws near and becomes attached above, along with the letters.

This is *da et*: bring *da'at* into all the letters, from *alef* to *tav*.<sup>37</sup> *Da'at* means union, as in 'Adam knew [*yada*] his wife Eve' [Gen. 4: 25]. This means attaching the letters to our blessed Creator, who is here called 'your father's God'. 'And serve Him': this is called complete service, that of drawing near the blessed Holy One and His *shekhinah*.<sup>38</sup> The letters are called a palace [*heikhal*], also to be read as *heh kol*, the five openings of the mouth, meaning speech, which 'contain all'.<sup>39</sup> This refers to the blessed Creator, who is called All, since He includes all. God dwells amid the letters when you speak with *da'at*. This is the 'great sign' [or 'large letter'], spoken with expanded awareness. But without such *da'at* it is considered 'small' or 'minor'. Thus said my teacher, the Besht,<sup>40</sup> on the verse 'Ask for a sign [*ot*] from Y-H-V-H

<sup>35</sup> BT *Pes.* 22*b*. The particle *et* here indicates the direct object to follow.

<sup>36</sup> BT *San.* 69*b*. He has no *da'at*, which can mean 'knowing'. This can have a sexual as well as an intellectual connotation. Here the link between the unitive power of intellectual awareness and the ability to achieve sexual union is made explicit. Maturity of mind is analogized to sexual maturity. The linkage of these is very common throughout the Jewish mystical tradition.

<sup>37</sup> *Et* in Hebrew is composed of the two letters *alef* and *tav*, the beginning and end of the alphabet.

<sup>38</sup> An understanding of R. Menahem Nahum's reading of this verse provides a good summary statement of his religious message: 'Know the God who is present within all your worldly desires, those existing in everything from *alef* to *tav*, and use that desire to draw the *shekhinah*, the lower world, into union with the blessed Holy One, the single Root of all being.'<sup>39</sup> This interpretation is based on linguistic traditions rooted in *Sefer yetsirah*.

your God' [Isa. 7: 11]: You should supplicate the blessed Holy One that He give you a letter [ot], [one of the] letters that cleave to 'Y-H-V-H your God', so that you merit to link them to their Root. . . .

We know that Torah is called 'good'; this is the 'goodly gift in My treasure-house'. That is awareness [*da'at*], the secret of Torah that is given on the sabbath. This is 'go and inform them [*hodi'am*]'; let them see to bring *da'at* into themselves [i.e. to heighten their awareness].<sup>41</sup> . . .

This is entirely about *da'at*, as in 'with *da'at* chambers are filled' [Prov. 24: 4]. You understand with your mind that there is nothing but God, that 'His glory fills all the earth' [Isa. 6: 3] and there is no place devoid of Him. You do not budge or turn aside from this attachment; our path is that of always being present to Y-H-V-H. But the one who turns aside from Y-H-V-H and toward other gods has consciously taken God out of there [the place where he is], making it empty. Space is indeed void and empty without God's living presence, which fills all the worlds.<sup>42</sup>

Again we see the strong link between the sexual and contemplative meanings of *da'at*. It takes a mature mind to draw together all the letters of the alphabet, representing all of creation. Israel needs to cultivate this quality, 'to bring it into themselves'. The content of *da'at* is what we might call 'cosmic consciousness', the awareness that the world is utterly filled with divinity, and that this abundance is bound to its transcendent and mysterious source. This requires a maturity of mind, a *da'at* that can reach a state of *gadlut* rather than being trapped in *katnut*. This pair of terms plays an important role in the hasidic discussion. *Gadlut* (literally 'bigness', but derived from a usage meaning 'maturity' or 'adulthood') points to an expanded consciousness, an opening of the mind that allows us to see beyond our ordinary state of perception, to penetrate to a deeper and unitive vision of reality. *Katnut* ('smallness' or 'immaturity') is the ordinary state of mind, that in which we conduct our daily lives.<sup>43</sup>

This awareness carries within it a demand for self-transcendence. It is no longer the ego-self who is the significant actor on the stage of life, but rather the flow of divine blessing, which animates one in each moment. Even our devotional offerings should not be seen as gifts that we bring to God, but rather as reflections of the universal divine energy that we allow to be manifest within us.

<sup>40</sup> Attested only here.

<sup>41</sup> On the sabbath we serve as sons, having been given the ability (*da'at*) to rummage freely amid our Father's treasures.

<sup>42</sup> 'Ki tisa', p. 199 ff.

<sup>43</sup> The best discussion of these states is that of Mordechai Pachter, '*Katnut and Gadlut* in Lurianic Kabbalah' (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 10 (1992), 171–210.

We need to understand why the truly righteous have it fixed in their minds that they may not ask for anything on the basis of their deeds, but only for unearned compassion. We begin with the verse: ‘Do not say “It was my own strength and the power of my hand that caused me to attain all this.” Remember that it is Y-H-V-H your God who gives you the strength [*ko’ah*] to act so powerfully’ [Deut. 8: 17–18]. Onkelos renders this into Aramaic to mean: ‘It is He who has given you counsel to attain these possessions.’ According to this translation, the verse means that every Israelite should have faith that in all matters, physical as well as spiritual, including our livelihoods and worldly affairs, the clever counsel that comes into our minds before we act has been sent to us from the holy place above, to guide us in our path. . . .

All of this comes about only through *da’at*. Be aware that all your strength, including the power to act or to speak any word, comes about through the vitality given you from above. Without this you would not be able to move a single limb. Your speech flows into you from the World of Speech above,<sup>44</sup> contracted into the human mouth, as is said, ‘He fixed them in the mouth.’<sup>45</sup> Thus Scripture says: ‘O Lord, open my lips’ [Ps. 51: 17]. The Ari<sup>46</sup> understood this to mean that it is *adonay*, the World of Speech, that speaks from within the human mouth, as we have explained at length elsewhere. This is God’s *shekhinah* dwelling within us. . . .

All this takes place through the arousal from below. Having faith and awareness that the mouth of Y-H-V-H is speaking within you allows you to receive the compassion that is generated and carried forth in this way.<sup>47</sup>

Passages such as this—and there are many like it throughout early hasidic literature—point to a radical totalization of the classical faith in divine providence. God not only looks after us and provides for our needs; God is the real actor behind everything that takes place in the world, including actions that we, at first glance, clearly perceive to be our own. But behind this notion, which may seem to be simply an extension of a theologically orthodox claim, lies a mystically charged alternative notion of self and of the relationship between self and other. If every movement of our limbs and every word we speak is really the working of a divine force that transcends us, acting upon us from within, our own identity as a wholly separate self is deeply called into question. That is exactly as it should be. The mystic is one who does not place ultimate faith in the reality of the human self. Each person is one of the infinite variety of masks behind which the One hides itself and through which

<sup>44</sup> A reference to *malkhut* or *shekhinah*, the tenth *sefirah* and the locus of divine self-articulation. The terms *olam hadibur* and its parallel *olam hamahshavah*, to appear below, are widely found in the writings attributed to the Magid himself and in those of his circle.

<sup>45</sup> *Sefer yetsirah*, 2: 3.

<sup>46</sup> The famous kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–72).

<sup>47</sup> ‘Va’ethanan’, pp. 321–4 (excerpted).

it is revealed. In hasidic parlance, our seeming individuality is the result of *tsimtsum*, in effect a divine hiding that takes place so that we will go on living our human lives and fulfilling our human tasks, including that of worship. But the deeper reality, that towards which true *da'at* always points, is that there is only a single Actor on the cosmic stage.

This view of reality leaves us with many challenges, including the well-known one of moral responsibility. The *locus classicus* for that conversation in hasidic teachings (and in many earlier commentaries) is the tale of Pharaoh's role in the Exodus from Egypt. If God has indeed 'hardened Pharaoh's heart', why is the earthly ruler held responsible for his actions? The same applies to all of us and all our deeds, and there is much discussion of this, with various resolutions offered. No true mysticism can allow a mystical notion of non-selfhood to absolve one of moral responsibility. But this notion also has vast implications in the realm of interpersonal ethics, or what Judaism calls 'commandments between person and person'. It cannot be the ultimate otherness of the person before us that is the source of moral resolution, as in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, since the final truth is one that reaches beyond the distinction between 'self' and 'other'. Rather, it is the ultimate oneness of being, the faith that the other and I are fellow limbs of the single body of cosmic Adam, that makes my betrayal of him or her a foolish act of violence against my own deeper self.<sup>48</sup>

## The Mystical Ethos: Love, Awe, and Delight

This very personal consideration of *da'at* takes us to the realm of what hasidism refers to as *midot*, which means both personal qualities and religious emotions.<sup>49</sup> Here we first have to return to the theosophic model on

<sup>48</sup> Here the religious exclusivism of kabbalistic tradition becomes impossibly inconsistent, even in its own terms. The clear biblical understanding that all humans are descended from Adam is reinforced by the Talmud's 'Why was the human created singly? So that no person could say to another: "My ancestor was greater than yours"' (Mishnah *San.* 4: 5). Nevertheless, the kabbalistic and hasidic sources regularly refer to all the souls of *Israel* as included within the soul of Adam, linking them to the 613 commandments of Israel's Torah etc. Rather than claiming that non-Israelite souls descend from elsewhere, they mostly seem to simply ignore the question. This incongruity may serve to mask a discomfort with saying openly what has ancient roots in the tradition: that the souls of non-Jews are born of demonic or 'unclean' unions, including possibly that of Adam and Lilith. In that case, while descended from the first human, they would still not be part of his 'true' or 'holy' seed. It is difficult to determine whether this discomfort is due to a moral stance or is simply something one thought was unsafe to write openly in works that underwent censorship.

<sup>49</sup> The essay by Septimus referred to in n. 13 above also discusses the use of the terms *de'ot*

which the psychological discussion is based. We will recall that there *da'at* is the final link within the primal triad that may be called 'the mind of God', *hokhmah–binah–da'at*. It then serves to join those to the next six *sefirot*, representing the qualities or attributes of the personified God. These include *hesed* (compassion), *din* (judgement), *tiferet* (glory), *netsah* (triumph or eternity), *hod* (beauty), and *yesod* (fundament). These six are manifest in the religious personality as love of God, awe, integrity, triumph over evil, gratitude, and (all-inclusive) righteousness. The lower *midot* are all seen as rooted in the first two, love and awe. Their cultivation and proper balance is taken to be the very essence of devotional life. They are called the 'two wings' on which prayer ascends to heaven. The relationship of these two to *da'at* is depicted vertically; they are directly below *da'at* on the sefirotic chart. But that relationship is then charted in both directions. Within the human soul, love and awe derive from *da'at*; they cannot exist without it. But in the striving to reach towards God, they are necessary steps on the rung upwards; one cannot attain *da'at* without the proper balancing of love and awe in one's religious life.

In understanding this [Jacob's dream], we must first remember that the source of Torah and the font of wisdom from which we receive the revealed word is in the thought of God Himself; God's *hokhmah* and *binah* are the World of Thought. There the Torah exists in a completely hidden way, not revealed at all. In that place there exists neither speech nor language. In order to be revealed as word, the Torah must pass through *da'at*, that which is to bring it from the World of Thought into the World of Speech. *Da'at* includes both love and fear, both compassion and rigour. It is because Moses represents *da'at* that the Torah so frequently says: 'The Lord spoke unto Moses saying, "Speak unto the children of Israel".' We have shown this elsewhere as well: It is through Moses, who represents *da'at*, that the hidden Torah is drawn forth from the World of Thought to be revealed to the children of Israel in the form of speech. This is the meaning of 'Y-H-V-H spoke to Moses': by means of *da'at*, the revelatory power of speech has become one with the hidden source of wisdom.<sup>50</sup>

and *midot* in medieval Hebrew to refer to moral qualities. *Midot*, literally 'measures', has this linkage already in mishnaic Hebrew, as attested by multiple examples in Mishnah *Avot*.

<sup>50</sup> A most interesting and noteworthy statement of the author's theology of revelation. God 'speaking' to Moses now comes to mean that Moses, as *da'at*, is the channel that brings language and expression to that which had formerly been beyond speech. A key question here is whether we are speaking of Moses as a symbolic realm within God (an ideal type of 'Moses', parallel to 'Abraham the Elder' as depicted in *Me'or einayim* in *parashat* 'Hayei sarah') or as a particular human being. In the latter case, he is also one who is present, as our author frequently says, in every generation. Thus the process of revelation, the bringing of transverbal mystery into speech, continues in the words of the *tsadik*. The ensuing discussion makes it quite clear that the latter is intended. All Torah learning, as sacred verbal activ-



For this reason the Zohar tells us that 'any word spoken by a person without fear and love does not fly upward'.<sup>51</sup> As we have said, *da'at* contains both love and fear; only through it can the revealed word be joined to its sublime and hidden source, that which lies beyond our reach.

This is why a person who studies Torah or prays, pronouncing the letters of Torah with both love and fear, can invoke the presence of *da'at*. This allows for a drawing forth into his mind and speech from the World of Thought, the font of wisdom. *Hokhmah* and *binah* flow into him from above. The Torah he speaks becomes one with the Source above. His words go right up to their very root above by means of the *da'at* that he evokes in studying with love and awe. As this [newly] revealed Torah flies upward, it becomes wholly united and completely one with its root. Study lacking this *da'at*, undertaken without love and fear, of course is not the same. Here the words that are being revealed are cut off from their root; there is no one to draw from the wellsprings above into the word that is being revealed. Therefore this word of Torah will also not be able to rise and become one with its Source, so that it might draw down upon itself the flow of fine oil coming from the World of Thought, the root of Torah in the highest world. This is the meaning of 'does not fly upward'.<sup>52</sup>

Here we see the central role played by *da'at* in the full panoply of the hasidic religious imagination. As the lowest link in the divine mind, it is the self-articulation principle of divinity. In *da'at* the abstract thought of Y-H-V-H is turned into language, becoming the revealed Torah. Hence it is identified with Moses, the bearer of that revelation. But we can attain that Torah, in the truest sense, only through love and awe, which will arouse our own *da'at*, causing us to understand that our own words, spoken in the course of Torah study, are part of the divine self-revealing process. The two emotions thus serve as our 'wings', raising up our own speech and uniting us with cosmic Torah, ultimately with the mind of God. *Da'at*, or 'mind', is thus the meeting place, in God as well as in the person, between the deepest secrets of the pre-conscious intellect and their expression in the life of emotion and deed.

ity, is a part of the unceasing stream of revelation. The linkage of both Jacob and Moses with *da'at* is widely found throughout kabbalistic and hasidic sources.

<sup>51</sup> *Tikunei zohar*, 10 (25b), referring to words of Torah. In hasidic sources, especially the *Me'or einayim*, this is casually expanded to embrace all of human speech, if conducted in holiness.

<sup>52</sup> 'Vayetse', pp. 100–1. Learning and teaching Torah is a pneumatic act that totally depends on the emotions aroused in the course of it. Although our author has said elsewhere that one should study even without such intent, clearly this is the goal. We should note here that in pre-modern Yiddish there is no separate verb for teaching; *lernen* means both 'learn' and 'teach'. The same is true of his use of *lomed* here. He seems to be using it to refer to the *tsadik*'s public teaching.

Particularly characteristic of the *Me'or einayim* is the sense that this turning of the heart towards God, in the quest for *da'at*, is a pleasurable activity. As I have shown elsewhere, Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl is the hasidic author who remains most faithful to the attitude of the Ba'al Shem Tov regarding asceticism and self-denial.<sup>53</sup> Both of them are open to a rather hearty appreciation of this-worldly blessings. This includes the legitimacy of taking pleasure in one's own spiritual life. This is indicated in the letter of the Besht to his brother-in-law, Gershon of Kutu, one of the few unimpeachable documentary sources for his words.<sup>54</sup> There he compares the ascending union of worlds, souls, and divinity to the union of two human bodies in the physical act of love. 'If the physical is pleasurable, how much more so [the spiritual union]', he says. The *Me'or einayim*, recalling the association of *da'at* with the love-act of Adam and Eve, invokes this sentiment in numerous passages.

We know the secret of Egyptian exile: *da'at* was in a reduced and exilic state. They did not have the fullness of *da'at* to serve Y-H-V-H with pleasure and expanded consciousness [*mohin gedolin*], as in 'Know the God of your father and serve Him' [I Chr. 28: 9].<sup>55</sup> *Da'at* may refer to [sexual] union and pleasure, as in 'Adam knew [his wife Eve]' [Gen. 4: 1]. But in Egyptian exile, their *da'at* was greatly diminished.<sup>56</sup> This was the narrow strait [*Mitsrayim/metsar yam*]; awareness, flowing from the mind of *hokhmah*, was reduced to a narrow current . . . In coming forth from Egypt they emerged from that narrow strait, and awareness [*da'at*] was increased and broadened. Thus 'And God knew' [Exod. 2: 25]; knowledge of God was exalted.<sup>57</sup> Thus [of Israel in Egypt] Scripture says: 'You matured and grew' [Ezek. 16: 7].<sup>58</sup> It was their mental capacity for great awareness that grew and developed, allowing them to serve our Creator with pure and shining pleasure. This is the joy of commandment and devotion. Therefore 'a handmaiden at the sea saw what [even] Ezekiel did not,<sup>59</sup> for their service was that of growing awareness, coming forth from that reduced state and thus into joy.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Arthur Green, 'Buber, Scholem, and the *Me'or 'Eynayim*: Another Perspective on a Great Controversy' (forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> The letter, including its various recensions, is translated and discussed in Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 272–81.

<sup>55</sup> See n. 38 above. A similar understanding of the verse is possible here.

<sup>56</sup> *Bekatnut me'od*, i.e. they were like minors, unable to achieve coitus.

<sup>57</sup> Notice this bit of 'predicate theology': God's knowing is subtly translated into human knowledge of God.

<sup>58</sup> This verse is quoted in the Passover Haggadah, where it refers to Israel's state during the Exodus from Egypt.

<sup>59</sup> *Mekhilta*, 'Beshalah', 15: 3.

<sup>60</sup> 'Devarim', p. 298. For a parallel text on the relationship of *da'at* and exile, see Jacob

The pleasure here is that of becoming aware, of the mind's expansion and opening. But it is also one of intimate union with God, bearing an aura of spiritualized sexuality. One might think of it as the *delight* of enlightenment. But the pleasure of expanded *da'at* does not remain with the person alone.

Rashi interprets the beginning of the blessing [of Gen. 27: 28] with 'and' to mean that God will give again and again.<sup>61</sup> To understand this, it is known that true service of God is in the mind [*da'at*], as Scripture says: 'Know the God of your father and serve Him' [1 Chr. 28: 9]. Such knowing is pleasurable, for the service of God with an expanded consciousness brings forth pleasure from the World of Pleasure. It is well known, however, that if joy is constant its pleasure is diminished; it has to suffer some interruption.<sup>62</sup> When a person serves God with a true feeling of spiritual pleasure, that feeling rises up to the Creator Himself, and He too takes delight in the one who serves Him so joyously. Pleasure is called forth in the Root of all, just as it has been present in that particular part of the all [i.e. the individual worshipper]; now that part is joined fast to Him. There is no real pleasure without this attachment; [and this attachment] arouses the same pleasure in the Root itself. But in order that the joy not be constant [and thereby ruined], his former consciousness is taken away from him as a higher or more expanded mind is given him in its place. This is called the second expansion.<sup>63</sup>

The spiritual pleasure felt by the individual in the course of opening the mind to this expanded state enters into 'the Root', or the mind of God, as the worshipper is joined to it. Like the sexual pleasure to which it is analogized, it belongs to both parties in the coupling. But here that has to be the case also since individuation itself is partly illusory; the person has been a 'part' of the whole, or a branch of the Root, all along. Mystical attainment is nothing other than a discovery of this ancient and eternal truth. The joy of the devotee thus is the joy of God, and in his very enjoyment he is performing the work of 'giving pleasure to his Creator', as the teachers of many generations have

Joseph of Polonnoye, *Toledot ya'akov yosef*, 'Vayakhel', 481–2. On the redemption of *da'at* from exile in Egypt, see also *Magid devarav leya'akov*, no. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Rashi on Gen. 27: 28, citing *Bereshit rabah*, 66: 3.

<sup>62</sup> 'Constant pleasure is no pleasure' is a saying attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov; cf. *Magid devarav leya'akov*, no. 125.

<sup>63</sup> 'Toledot', p. 90. On the origins of the term *gadlut sheni*(!), see Hayim Vital, *Peri ets hayim*, 'Hag hamatsot', 1. In this way our author explains the irregularity of states of expanded consciousness. They have to be diminished, and thus one needs to go through spiritual falls in order to again make the effort that will allow one to rise yet higher. For a parallel text on the joyous expansion of the divine mind due to human devotion, see *Magid devarav leya'akov*, no. 45.

admonished him to do. This linking is posed as a response to those more dour voices within the hasidic camp that railed against 'pleasure-seeking' in the religious life, insisting that such pleasure should be given to God alone. The *Me'or einayim* understands that no such opposition between divine and human pleasure exists in the mystical perception of reality.

## Conclusion: Reading the Hasidic Mystic in a Cross-Traditional Context

Our brief journey through the pages of a hasidic classic has hopefully given the reader a sense of the ways in which a passionate mystical devotion is expressed in the highly intellectualist context of rabbinic Judaism. The mystics of this tradition seldom speak confessionally about their own experiences. Everything they say is a weaving together of earlier sources through an interpretative lens. At the same time, the preacher is calling his readers (and originally 'hearers') to a religious life marked by a constant striving for awareness, an effort of both mind and heart. This path is meant to lead to a life of devoted service, but one that, at the same time, is filled with joy and a sense of intimacy with God. *Da'at* serves as the point of encounter between the transcendent God and the mind of the worshipper, but also between the intellectual effort to conceive of a highly abstract notion of the Deity and the intense emotionality of standing in God's presence.

The remaining question is how we make use of these materials in a contemporary religious (and interreligious) context. There is much talk in today's seekers' circles about the cultivation of awareness, or mindfulness, as an essential task of religion. There is also a quest in our world for a connection between such mindful attention and the ways in which we live, including the moral and ethical dimensions, even the political. We hear a new and ever more urgent call these days for the union of the spiritualist and activist agendas. Perhaps the wisdom of the early hasidic masters, revivers of a spiritual core within a tradition always deeply committed to this-worldly action, will have something to teach us in such an age.

The *Me'or einayim* presents us with a Western religious figure whose primary interest is this cultivation of constant spiritual awareness. For him that means the presence of Y-H-V-H underlying all that is and discoverable in the soul's encounter with each and every moment and object of existence. Our preacher's focus is always on the present, rather than on the past. Yes, of course he believes that the children of Israel were actually in Egypt and were

brought forth by the hand of God. But the force of that faith lies in the challenge to the devotee: Have *you* yet come forth from your own inner Egypt, the narrow straits (playing on Mitsrayim/*metsar yam*) that constrict your vision and keep you from discovering that ‘the whole earth is filled with His glory’? Surely he is certain that Moses and Israel built a portable tabernacle in the desert that served as their spiritual centre through forty years of wandering. But the question that he raises in sermon after sermon is: Are *you* turning yourself into a *mishkan*, a portable dwelling-place for the divine presence, in every moment of your life?

*Emunah*, or faith, has a significant place in the *Me'or einayim*, alongside *da'at*. But if we look at its use and context in most cases, it too is focused on the present rather than the past.

You must have full faith that the glory of God fills all the world, that there is no place devoid of Him and none beside Him. Then, by means of that faith, you will come to a longing and desire to cleave to God. This state is referred to as *naḥal*, a stream or valley, containing also a hidden reference to the verse ‘Nafshenu ḥiktah laY-H-V-H’ [‘Our soul waits for Y-H-V-H’; Ps. 33: 20].<sup>64</sup> In this way you come to your root, the spring at the well of living waters. And this is the meaning of ‘the servants of Isaac digging in a valley’ [*naḥal*]. They were digging in ‘our soul waits for Y-H-V-H’.<sup>65</sup>

It is faith in the constancy of divine presence, including the extended notion of providence described above, that opens the doorway to cultivation of *da'at*. This relationship between faith and awareness is symbolically represented by the association of *emunah* with *malkhut*, the tenth *sefirah* and the gateway into the upper realm.<sup>66</sup> As the journey into God begins with *malkhut*, so does the cultivation of one’s own spiritual life begin with faith. *Da'at* is a higher rung, open to those who have first entered through the gateway of faith.

The question then becomes one of method. What tools does the mystic offer for the task of creating and maintaining this awareness? On one level, R. Menahem Nahum would certainly respond that the entirety of Jewish practice, the pathway called *halakhah*, is precisely such a set of tools. Living all of one’s daily life in accord with the Torah is meant to sensitize one to the faith that there is no part of existence or moment within human life from which

<sup>64</sup> In Hebrew, the three letters that begin the three words of this verse spell out *naḥal*. It is faith in divine immanence, the ever-present flowing stream of Y-H-V-H, that causes one to thirst for even more, to ‘wait for Y-H-V-H’.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Toledot’, p. 85.

<sup>66</sup> *Emunah* in the *Me'or einayim* is almost always a human attribute, described in *malkhut*-like language as a gateway and similar. Unlike some others in the Magid’s circle, R. Menahem Nahum does not retain the kabbalistic association of *emunah* as *raza demehemnut*, embracing the entire sefirotic realm.

God is absent. He says this clearly in several passages. Because hasidism was born within the heart of a religious tradition so richly devoted to forms of praxis, it developed rather few unique ritual elements of its own. Instead, it ‘stylized’ the traditional forms of Judaism in its own unique way. But our author’s more specific answer to the question of how to train oneself to awareness would focus on the two verbal practices that live at the heart of his Judaism: *torah utefilah*, or study and prayer.

The sermons are filled with exhortations to study Torah in a proper way, intending always to do so ‘for its own sake’, which means unifying the divine name. For our author, who exhibits no interest in high-powered talmudic dialectics, study seems to focus on the Torah text itself, along with the ability to read it in ever new and creative ways. It also means concentration on the individual words and letters of the text. These are described as palaces that contain the divine light, following the example of the Ba’al Shem Tov, who was able to see the hidden light of creation within the letters of the Torah.<sup>67</sup> The act of study, including this deconstruction of the text’s apparent meaning, is thus transformed into a pneumatic exercise, allowing one to look more deeply into the written word. *Da’at* is developed by means of this deep, and often highly creative, encounter with the text. This sets the tone for the way one is to engage with the created world. Since God is present within every letter of Torah, and it is through Torah that God created the world, intense engagement with Torah is preparation for the ultimate religious task of uplifting and transforming all of reality, bringing it back into harmony with divine oneness.

The same applies to prayer. The letters of prayer are those of Torah, now rearranged in order to reverse direction, ‘journeying’ from the soul back to their source in God. Those letters are also the sacred speech through which God created all the worlds. The words of prayer are carried upward by their humanly given ‘wings’, those of love and awe. But these same emotions that bring us to *da’at* also embody it. They are the first roads that lead forth from *da’at* and take the seeker into it. This leads directly to the key claim in the *Me’or einayim*, that God is to be served not only in moments of prayer and study but through every activity of human life, through everything that was created by those same sacred letters. In prayer, as in Torah, engagement with the word, entering into language as a sacred vessel, enables us to do the same with the world that word has wrought.

<sup>67</sup> This ability is central to two stories in *Shivhei habesht*. See Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (ed. and trans.), *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1993), 48–9, 89–90; cf. *Sefer ba’al shem tov al hatorah* (Jerusalem: Nofet Tsofim, 1997), no. 27, pp. 54–55.

This reading of the *Me'or einayim* as a universal religious text presents us with multiple challenges. Those of us approaching it from within Judaism need to ask whether this spiritual path remains open to generations who can no longer maintain a literal faith in its mythical scaffolding. Modernity views the Torah text as belonging to a certain genre and age of literary Hebrew, including within it views of various schools and oral traditions that abounded in ancient Israel. It understands this planet to be more than four billion rather than six thousand years old, existing aeons before the Hebrew language emerged from its proto-Semitic roots. The human body is not made up of 613 limbs and sinews, corresponding to the commandments of the Torah. The rubrics around which the faith of the *Me'or einayim* was structured seem entirely swept away. Can the building stand once the scaffolding falls away?

For the reader coming from outside the Jewish religious tradition, a different series of challenges is called forth. Can the author's insights be applied to the practices of another tradition? Could we imagine a Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist turning to the *Me'or einayim* as a guide? His essential teachings, that God is present in each moment, that cultivating awareness of this is the key purpose of religious life, and that such awareness leads to profound joy, could all seem to work as cross-traditional truths. The value he places upon inwardness and his wariness of practice without an open heart might also serve as useful reminders to devotees within any ritual-based tradition, all of whom sometimes lose their focus on the true heart of the matter.

The reader of the *Me'or einayim* coming with no body of devotional praxis rather than another one might have a harder time with this work. All the wisdom its author has to teach comes from his struggle with a life of regular daily religious practice, and from living within the context of a sacred calendar that offers a rich menu of diverse sacred moments. Yes, all of these are meant to cast light on the ordinary, on the overlooked human moments, to help one find God's presence in those as well. But the sacred energy applied to them has been transferred from the traditionally sacred to the new expansion of holiness into the everyday. Without an experiential basis in this homeland of the holy, as it were, the transfer and broadening would likely become an empty intellectual enterprise. Nor would it have the font of replenishment offered by religious forms when carried out in a heartfelt way.

Yet still, his call for *da'at* echoes in all of our ears. To be a religious person still demands attention to the awareness that he knew and articulated so well. We feel a deep desire to respond to that call. Can we imagine a religious life based on this call for constant awareness of Y-H-V-H and an open-hearted

response of *hineni*, 'Here I am', to the discovery of that presence? Such a spiritual path would draw richly on the symbolic language of these hasidic sources. It would find nurturance in living quite fully within the garb of any given set of traditional religious praxis. But in doing so it would not depend upon literalist or historicist claims. Like the faith of the *Me'or einayim*, it would focus on the present, not the past. Nor would it need to be exclusivist in its claims.

I believe that the transition from critical modernity to postmodern consciousness helps to reopen this door for us. Knowing all that we do about the origins of our canonical texts, we choose to engage with them with a renewed intimacy, lending them, by means of our covenant with them, the power to evoke a response from deep within us. Yes, we understand that it is we who have invited this response, and that it might have been evoked by other texts, by other genres of human and divine creativity, or even without them. We, as Jews, claim this as our sacred canon. The deeds, forms, and gestures it prescribes become sacred to us, as do its moral demands. We give ourselves to it, as the tradition has given itself to us, a legacy placed into our hands. In engaging with it, both in study and in deed, we constantly seek—and even occasionally find—the presence of the One, nestled amid its words and letters, its stories and commandments.

We rejoice in the knowledge that there are other such religious communities, and that they too live with the great richness of devotion to both sacred text and sacred praxis. The teaching offered here, that all of these faith communities need to reach deeply inward, going beyond themselves, to bring awareness of the One into the heart of the devotee, is one we delight in sharing. In doing so, I should hope that I provide a model here that will encourage others to share such wisdom texts from their own traditions, universalizing them if necessary, as I have sought to do here. We of the small but growing neo-hasidic community within Judaism would be open to learning from such sources, and would welcome the dialogue of devotion, reaching across borders of language, symbols, and faith communities, that such exchanges would engender.

Our author's engagement with sacred language—a sacrality that we now acknowledge arises from our voluntary submission to it—takes us from the specificity of each tradition's many words to what our author calls the primal Word, that which was there before Creation, that which contains all of our teachings, revelations, and insights within it. That Word, bursting forth from the primal point of universal wisdom with all the energy of the Big Bang, blows our self-protective modernist 'shells' into tiny, scattered pieces, and



permits us to again find broken sparks of divine light within all of being. From there we go back to the work of restoring them—and ourselves—to our single Source.