

# The Ḥasidic Homily: Mystical Performance and Hermeneutical Process

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## I

Eastern European Ḥasidism, a movement that was to forever change the face of Judaism, emerged onto the stage of history in 1772, with the proclamations of the first bans against it. The issuing of these bans meant, of course, that the phenomenon of a broad-based popular Ḥasidism had been brewing for some time, until its influence had reached a point where the authorities were no longer willing to tolerate it. Ever since the passing of the great wonderworker and spiritual teacher Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov in 1760, various individuals and groups had sought to take up his mantle and spread teachings in his name. While the emerging Ḥasidic movement claimed to be based on the mystical experiences and revelations of the *Besht*, as he is called, it was conveyed by a series of remarkable preachers and their oral sermons, later published as homiletic texts. To study the thought and religious life of Ḥasidism is to study those sermons and the men who preached them.<sup>1</sup>

The Ba'al Shem Tov was an oral teacher who left virtually no writings behind.<sup>2</sup> He supposedly claimed, in fact, that the true mysteries of Judaism could not be written down, but belonged to the realm of the ineffable. In saying so, he was standing on the ground of ancient tradition: Jewish masters had once claimed that the Mishnah, originally an oral code not to be written, was "Israel's mystery."<sup>3</sup> Unlike Scripture, which was shared with the rival early Christian church, the emerging Oral Law was known and revered by Jews alone.<sup>4</sup> Writing it down would threaten that unique proprietorship. "Things that are oral, you are *not permitted* to commit to writing."<sup>5</sup> But the Ba'al Shem Tov's adumbration of the claim was quite different. Mishnah, and later Talmud for that matter, once written down and even printed, retained their place, even growing in stature. Some will claim that a greater rigidity entered the halakhic process once texts were fixed in this way, but the essential body of legal teaching, as well as *aggadah*, or non-normative lore, was preserved. The Ḥasidic claim here is that *by definition*, as soon as secret lore is written down it is no longer secret, and thus loses its essential value.

The point is illustrated, as Ḥasidic teachings often are, by a story told about the Ba'al Shem Tov.<sup>6</sup> One night the Besht had a dream in which he saw a demon prancing about him, carrying a book in his hand. "What is that book?" the master asked. "This is your book; you wrote it," replied the demon. Then the Ba'al Shem Tov knew that someone had violated his orders and had written the teachings down. He called all of his disciples together and demanded to see the notebook. Finally one of them confessed and handed it over. The master read it from cover to cover and proclaimed: "There isn't a single word here that I said."

What did the master mean by that remarkable statement? His denial may be read in at least two different ways. Perhaps he was saying that the mysterious words spoken were too recondite to be conveyed by pen and ink, and simply had no meaning once they were written down. The mysteries are by definition not amenable to the medium of writing; once they are found in books, they have *ipso facto* lost their mysterious nature. There are comments in the theoretical writings of early Ḥasidism to back up this view. "Why are the writings of Kabbalah called *hokhmah nistarah*?" one repeated formulation asks. "They are found in books and anyone can read them. The true 'hidden wisdom' cannot be written down..."<sup>7</sup>

Another, perhaps more "existential," reading of the Ba'al Shem's statement would claim that each teaching was offered at a particular moment, to a certain individual who needed to hear it, and in circumstances that were lost once the teaching was abstracted from its original setting and placed in a book. The Ḥasidic master is, if anything, a teacher who operates in concrete situations, seeking to deepen and challenge the spiritual life of each of his disciples. Once teachings are generalized and de-contextualized, as is necessarily the case with book-learning, they are easily misappropriated, often having a very different effect on latter-day readers from that intended by the master in the moment they were first spoken.

While the Besht may have been opposed to the conversion of his teachings into books, the irony of history is that his oral statements are preserved for us only because of writing and printing. His ban on writing did not last very long in Ḥasidism. Manuscript collections of Ḥasidic teachings, many attributed to the Besht himself, were certainly passing from hand to hand by the early 1770's.<sup>8</sup> In 1780, twenty years after his master's death, the Ba'al Shem Tov's beloved disciple Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoye published *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, the first collection of Ḥasidic teachings to appear in print. The book was considered highly controversial<sup>9</sup> and its appearance caused the rabbinic authorities to renew their earlier-proclaimed bans against the emerging movement. But within the following two decades, some tens of Ḥasidic books appeared in the little

printing houses that dotted Jewish townlets of the western Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> That pattern continued, until Jewish mysticism's great scholar and bibliophile Gershom Scholem estimated several decades ago that the Ḥasidic library numbered more than ten thousand volumes, a number surely far exceeded by now. Each Ḥasidic master, each descendent of the original disciples who held sway in a particular town or neighborhood, had to have at least one volume published in his name. When the *rebbe* did not publish books in his lifetime, a volume was composed of teachings gathered by disciples after their master's death.<sup>11</sup>

Ya'akov Yosef followed the *Toledot* with two more volumes of collected sermons,<sup>12</sup> all of them studded with quotations from his master. The disciple seems to be a very faithful and cautious transmitter, distinguishing words "that I heard from my master" from those "I heard *in the name of* my master." The quotations are mostly aphorisms or fragments of parables, brief words of wisdom that often come in the form of new and surprising readings of classical Jewish or Kabbalistic texts. These quotations of the Besht found in the writings of the *Toledot* (as its author is called) and a few others<sup>13</sup> comprise most of what we know of the inspirational figure behind this most dynamic and transformative religious movement.

In thus legitimizing the written word, Ḥasidism may be seen as a divergent Jewish movement of popular mysticism re-assimilating itself to a tradition in which written texts and their study formed the very lifeblood of men's piety.<sup>14</sup> But despite the acceptance of the written and printed word as vehicles for the dissemination of Ḥasidic teachings, the movement at its heart remained committed to oral communication. It was well remembered that the teachings had originally been delivered orally and that those who had heard them were sometimes transfixed by the experience. When passing on a tale or a "good word" spoken by a master, it was always considered more authentic if one could say: "I heard this from *reb* so-and-so, who heard it from his master, who was present when it was said," etc., rather than: "I read this in a holy book." Rather seldom in the published works of Ḥasidism before the late nineteenth century does one find a reference to an earlier printed work from within the movement. In fact, the great majority of Ḥasidic books themselves were abbreviated Hebrew transcriptions of what had originally been oral Yiddish teachings, generally delivered at the master's table before a gathered throng of disciples on a Sabbath or festival.<sup>15</sup> Some such homilies might have lasted an hour or longer, periodically interrupted by singing, the pouring and consumption of cups of vodka uplifted in the master's honor, and brief exchanges of blessing. While some masters spoke from prepared notes, spontaneity—or at least its appearance—

was very much valued on such occasions, which were ideally to be seen as a sort of revelation.

## II

While we do not have any actual account of such an event by Ḥasidic masters or disciples, we are in possession of a most remarkable description by a onetime visitor who chose not to become a disciple, indeed who opted for a radically different way of life. I refer to a chapter in the autobiography of Salomon Maimon (ca. 1753–1800), Kantian philosopher and member of the Berlin *haskalah*, or “enlightenment,” circle. As a precocious adolescent sometime in the 1760’s, young Maimon made a visit to the center of a “new sect,” led by a certain Rabbi B. in the town of M. This surely refers to Dov Baer of Mezhirech (1704–1772), the figure whose disciples actually forged the Ḥasidic movement as a historical phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Published only many years later (1793), the description in Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte* is a unique source that tells of a memory seemingly undimmed by the passage of time. Because of its singular importance, it makes sense to quote it at some length:

I resolved therefore to undertake a journey to M\_\_\_, where the superior B\_\_\_ resided. At last I arrived at M\_\_\_, and after having rested from my journey I went to the house of the superior under the impression that I could be introduced to him at once. I was told, however, that he could not speak with me at the time, but that I was invited to his table on Sabbath along with the other strangers who had come to visit him; that I should then have the happiness of seeing the saintly man face to face, and of hearing the sublime teachings from his own mouth. Although this was a public audience, yet, on account of the individual references which I should find made to myself, I might regard it as a special interview.

Accordingly, on Sabbath I went to this solemn meal, and found there a large number of respectable men who had gathered from various quarters. At length the awe-inspiring great man appeared, clothed in white satin. Even his shoes and snuffbox were white, this being among the Kabbalists the color of grace. He gave every newcomer his greeting. We sat down to table and during the meal a solemn silence reigned. After the meal was over, the superior struck up a solemn inspiring melody, held his hand for some time upon his brow, and then began to call out, “Z\_\_\_ of H\_\_\_, M\_\_\_ of R\_\_\_,” and so on. Every newcomer was thus called by his own name and the name of his residence, which excited no little astonishment. Each recited, as he was called,

some verse of the Holy Scriptures. Thereupon the superior commenced to deliver a sermon for which the verses served as a text, so that although they were disconnected verses taken from different parts of the Holy Scriptures they were combined with as much skill as if they had formed a single whole. What was still more extraordinary, every one of the newcomers believed that he had discovered, in that part of the sermon which was founded on his verse, something that had reference to the facts of his own spiritual life. At this we were of course greatly astonished.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that we have a second early account of a Ḥasidic gathering,<sup>18</sup> also written by an outsider (in this case a fierce opponent of Ḥasidism), that describes the same method of collecting verses around the table and linking them all into a homily, shows that this was a regular practice in Ḥasidism's early days, clearly one intended to impress those assembled, especially the first-time visitors. What we are witness to by way of Maimon's memoir is in fact a highly orchestrated performance, including a delay meant to build up anticipation; dramatic costume, down to the shoes and snuffbox; and a high-wire feat of homiletic virtuosity.

The Yiddish language as spoken by the Ḥasidic community has a special term for this event, a usage found only among Ḥasidim. The phrase is *zogn Toireh*, "to say (or speak) Torah": "*Der rebbe zogt Toireh*," "the master speaks Torah." A non-Ḥasidic teacher might say a *devar Torah*, "a word of Torah," or even just a *vort*, "a word," meaning a brief exposition of a Torah teaching, but he will not *zog Toireh* in the same sense as a *rebbe*. Here is a linguistic expression of a theological viewpoint: the *rebbe's* speech is a continuation of the great font of revelation that opened at Sinai, reading Deuteronomy 5:19's "*kol gadol ve-lo yasa*"<sup>19</sup> to mean "a great voice that has not ceased."

While Maimon became quite dismissive of the act he had witnessed, indeed seeing it only as a made-up "show,"<sup>20</sup> within the Ḥasidic community it was clear that "performance" was to be seen rather as "revelation," reflecting two very different ways of viewing the same dramatic event.<sup>21</sup> For an internal Ḥasidic description of the *rebbe's* "speaking Torah" as divine revelation, we could hope for no better description than that of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav.

One who wants to interpret the Torah has to begin by drawing unto himself words as hot as burning coals. Speech comes out of the upper Heart, which Scripture calls "the rock of my Heart."<sup>22</sup> The interpreter [first] has to pour out his words to God in prayer, seeking to arouse His mercies, so that this Heart will open. Speech then flows from the Heart, and interpretation

of Torah comes from that speech ... As that Heart's compassion is aroused, it gives forth blazing words, as Scripture says: "My heart blazes within me; the fire of my words burns on my tongue."<sup>23</sup>

The *rebbe* prepares for the event of his *derashah*, in other words, not by preparing a text, but by preparing himself. If his prayer is answered, God the great Heart or the great font of revelation will open to him, and new teachings, the likes of which no ear has ever heard, will come forth from his lips. This sort of revelatory venture lay at the heart of early Ḥasidism's self-image; the words the *rebbe* spoke were to have within them something of the fire and light that Torah contained in the moment it was first spoken at Sinai.<sup>24</sup>

The Ḥasidic sources, very concerned with language and its sacred potency, frequently discuss "the words of Torah and prayer" in the same breath. This grouping together implies that Torah should be spoken with the same passion that words of prayer are uttered. The Ba'al Shem Tov himself had taught that every word of prayer contains entire "worlds, souls, and divinity," and that the person reciting them should seek "to unite with them all and to raise them up."<sup>25</sup> The same was ideally to be true of Torah. While this applied to any act of Torah study, usually carried on aloud, singly or in pairs, the *rebbe's* public utterance of teaching was a charismatic event that exemplified the *kavvanah* with which words of Torah were to be spoken. It was thus entirely appropriate that this be an event of high drama, and the Ḥasidim eagerly expected it to be such.

The ultimate encomium for such public teaching was a phrase derived from earlier sources but applied in Ḥasidism to this dramatic preaching moment: "The Shekhinah speaks from within his throat" or "from his mouth."<sup>26</sup> Here it is no longer the *rebbe* offering his own interpretation of Torah. He has rather become a mere mouthpiece for the divine voice that is using his person as a vehicle of continuing revelation. This understanding fits well with a tendency toward spiritual passivity found in some sources in early Ḥasidism and discussed by Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer.<sup>27</sup> Thus the human voice in prayer, for example, is compared to a *shofar*, or ram's horn, through which God trumpets the sound. True prayer, like Torah, is spoken by God *through* us mortals; both may be seen as God's ongoing gift to us, rather than our own offering to God. The same is true, ideally, of the preacher's voice.

Whatever we may believe about the revelatory element within the Ḥasidic *derashah*, it nevertheless also remains an impressive feat of human oral performance. Here we should return to lessons from the oral performance studies mentioned above (note 21) as applied by several scholars to the ancient oral traditions of rabbinic Judaism. There

too remarkable accomplishments of memorization and oral recitation seem to have taken central stage. While scholars now see written and oral efforts combined in the transmission of rabbinic tradition, the role of oral tradition was very significant through the Talmudic period. Written communication of traditions won out toward the early Middle Ages, especially given the vast dispersion of Jewry after the Muslim conquests.<sup>28</sup> But it never quite wholly vanquished the value placed upon the oral, which migrated toward the esoteric teachings of Judaism, remaining alive down to Ḥasidism.

The oral transmission of secrets was characteristic of the earliest known circles of Kabbalists (or perhaps even proto-Kabbalists) in the twelfth century.<sup>29</sup> This is a major reason why giving a scholarly account of Kabbalah's origins remains so difficult, working only from the written evidence. In the mid-thirteenth century, Naḥmanides was thought daring for including esoteric materials in his written commentary on the Torah, a work intended for broad dissemination. But he belonged to a highly conservative school of Kabbalistic thought, one that thought both media of communication, written and oral, should be employed only to convey secrets passed down from one's master, and not to innovate.<sup>30</sup>

The Ḥasidic homily stands very much in the other school of classical Kabbalah, represented most strongly by the Zohar. The oral performance of Rabbi Shim'on and his little band, as recounted throughout that work, is intended precisely to say something new and original, not merely to preserve and transmit the old. For a *derashah* to be of interest, both to the highly literate and critical among its hearers, as well as to readers of the written transcripts, it has to say something new, even startling, about the Torah passage on which the preacher speaks. This applies equally to the homiletic texts that make up the bulk of the Zohar corpus and to those who sought to imitate and continue them over the centuries that followed, right down to Ḥasidism. The divine font of revelation, though eternal and unchanging, is nevertheless a *mayan ha-mitgabber*, a fountain overflowing with *ḥiddushim*, ever-new teachings and interpretations.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of the early Ḥasidic masters, the high drama involved in the act of publicly "speaking Torah" surely served to stimulate and challenge the innermost resources of the preacher; just as it prepared his audience to listen intently. This magical combination of the sacred moment at the Sabbath table,<sup>32</sup> the eager anticipation of the assembled crowd, and the mythic powers attributed to the *zaddik* aroused the muse of creativity/inspiration/revelation and allowed the *derashah* to flow forth.

If we look at the volume of collected homilies of any early Ḥasidic master, however, we see something quite different. The sermons of the *Toledot* read more as abstruse learned treatises than as explosive revelations. It

is hard to imagine that they were in fact delivered orally at all, at least in the form in which we have them. But even more semi-popular works such as Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl's *Me'or Einayim* or Ze'ev Wolf of Zhytomyr's *Or ha-Me'ir*, where one can indeed hear the oral preacher's voice (in Yiddish)<sup>33</sup> within the Hebrew text, are made up of long and artfully constructed homilies, not just brief words of transformative inspiration. The ability to raise four or five objections to the wording of a biblical verse, then traverse several diverse quotations from elsewhere in the Bible and the rabbinic corpus, and wind up showing how a correct reading of each contributes to a resolution of the original questions raised (this is the typical structure of later Jewish homilies) is not the sort of thing that happens in the flash of a prophetic moment. This particular homiletic style, which dominated in Eastern Europe, in fact goes back to the sixteenth century and is especially associated with the famous preacher and Bible commentator Rabbi Mosheh Alsheikh of Safed.<sup>34</sup> The *Toledot* was an extreme practitioner of it, but its influence may be seen throughout the Ḥasidic corpus.

### III

Our search here is for the nexus between these three aspects of Ḥasidic preaching: the revelatory/creative insight, the performance/setting that calls it forth, and its crafted extension into a full homily, delivering a spiritual or moral message. We want to examine especially the question of how charisma or spiritual enthusiasm is carried through into the sermonic vehicle. Is there a brief moment of insight that is then extended into a longer sermon? Might the *derashah* in its entirety be seen as the product of a charismatic overflow? Is there evidence left in the written words we have of the way a rapt audience might have heard them? How does one seek out such things, especially when working with Hebrew transcriptions of talks delivered in Yiddish, and undoubtedly abbreviated transcriptions at that? The difficulties make one wonder about the possibility of resolving these questions. Nevertheless, the attempt will be of value, hopefully not only informing us about the Ḥasidic homily itself, but perhaps shedding some light on mystics and their use of oral language to express both a truth and an experience that by definition go beyond words.

As mentioned above, a good number of quotations in the Ba'al Shem Tov's name consist of brief, novel interpretations of well-known biblical verses or rabbinic sayings. It will be worthwhile to offer a few striking examples of these. Some of the subtlety of re-interpretation will necessarily be lost when rendered in English translation, but a careful reading should allow the point to come through.



## 1

תקעו בחודש שופר... כי חוק לישראל הוא, משפט לאלהי יעקב.

Blow the ram's horn on the new moon ... for it is a statute for Israel, a judgment of Jacob's God.<sup>35</sup>

The Besht reads this to mean: "Sound the trumpet of renewal (*hodesh/hiddush*), for God's judgments have become *hok*, "habitual and fixed forms of behavior," for Israel.<sup>36</sup> In other words, blow the renewal *shofar* to break through the *hok* ("חוק" – "statute"), the carved-out complacency into which God's judgments have fallen. This reading might be taken as a banner of Hasidism as a movement of spiritual awakening. The early sources often refer to routinized religious behaviour ("מצוות אנשים מלומדה"<sup>37</sup>) as the great enemy of true piety.

## 2

ומצריים נוסע אחריהם.

Egypt pursues them.<sup>38</sup>

"Egypt pursues them"—"Like a person who goes to another place to be freed of his troubles—but they pursue him. This is like a woman about to give birth. She goes to a different place to escape the birth pangs, but they follow her."<sup>39</sup>

Noting both that the verse is in the "present" tense and that it is "Egypt" following the Israelites, not just "the Egyptians," the Besht dramatically personalizes the Exodus story. Every person is like Israel fleeing Egypt, thinking you can change your lot by changing place. But your "Egypt" has a way of following after you. You can't escape it any more than that poor woman trying in vain to run away from the pain of birthing. The Exodus story is thus dramatically made relevant to the personal life of the individual.

## 3

ומבשרך לא תתעלם.

"Do not turn away from your own flesh."<sup>40</sup>

The verse (well-known from the Yom Kippur *haftarah*) urges the would-be faster to "bring the miserably poor to your home; clothe the naked whom you see," since they are "your own flesh," part of the same human (or Israelite) community. The Besht quotes this verse in a letter to his disciple Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef,<sup>41</sup> urging him to abandon his ascetic practices and excessive fasting: "Do not turn away *from your own flesh*" meaning, listen to the needs of your body.

The Besht engages with rabbinic sources in the same mode of radical re-reading:

## 4

[כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה?] בית הלל אומרים: כלה נאה וחסודה!

[What does one sing when dancing before the bride?] The House of Hillel says: "A lovely and gracious bride!"

The Besht's comment: "Know in detail how the sparks of holiness have fallen and how to raise them up."<sup>42</sup> The "bride" here has become the Shekhinah; the "dance" is that of living the religious life according to the Kabbalistic system. One should not just have the general good intentions of "a bride such as she is," as the House of Shammai says one should sing, but one should know the actual steps of the *tikkun* process. Interestingly, this reading shows the Besht as a practicing Kabbalist, a stance that was to be abandoned early on in Ḥasidism in favor of a generalized "Beit Shammai" approach, one calling for *kavvanah* rather than *kavvanot*.<sup>43</sup>

## 5

קדשי קדשים - שחיטתן בצפון.

The most holy sacrifices are slaughtered on the north [side of the altar].<sup>44</sup>

The Besht: "The evil urge approaches a sage (or *zaddik*) dressed up as the good urge, encouraging him to do a *mizvah*."<sup>45</sup> The most holy of people, in other words, are "slaughtered" by the Evil One *ba-zafon* (re-vowelizing "בצפון" as *ba-zafon* - "on the north"), in hidden ways, tripped up by sins when they let down their guard.

Each of these readings represents a "flash" of insight, a daring new way of understanding a familiar text. They are experienced by both speaker and hearer as a sort of minor "revelation," an example of the dynamic, living quality of Oral Torah. While in most cases no formal claim of revelation is made for them, there are a few statements of the Besht quoted by the *Toledot* where the master claims that he received the teaching from his own master.<sup>46</sup> Since the Besht had no living teacher, the reference is presumably to the biblical prophet Ahijah of Shiloh, the master of Elijah,<sup>47</sup> who was said to visit the Besht and share revelations with him. The revelatory quality of these brief teachings also is in character with the Besht of his famous letter, describing a heavenly journey, an encounter with the messiah, and an account of secrets learned that he is not at liberty to reveal.

The two leading disciples of the Besht took different paths of incorporating their shared master's way with the sources. Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef is the faithful transmitter, embodying hundreds of quotations such as the above within his sermons. He is primarily a literary figure; we have no recollections of his preaching orally in a particularly impressive manner. He earned his livelihood as a rabbi, not a preacher, in an age

when these were separate roles. His lack of success at—or interest in—oral performance may partially account for the fact that he had few direct disciples. His writings are, as mentioned above, collections of sermons clearly prepared for the printed page rather than for oral delivery. They are often highly dense and complex, rarely having the same sharp punch as the brief oral teachings of his master. Despite becoming a follower of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Ya'akov Yosef seems not to have been able to abandon either his high register of homiletic style or his elitist view of spiritual leadership. Nevertheless, there are passages within the *Toledot's* writings where the message of the Besht comes through loud and clear. In those homilies we see his brief insights expanded into an articulation of mystical theology.

Such a text is the very opening teaching of the first printed Ḥasidic work, *Toledot on Parashat Be-Reshit*. It will provide us with a good case study of the relationship between the original creative flash (in this case the Besht's) and its elaboration in his disciple's writing:

The Talmud teaches that Joseph came forth from prison on the New Year (Rosh ha-Shanah), as it is written: "He placed testimony in Jehoseph as he went forth upon the land of Egypt."<sup>48</sup> To interpret this: I have quoted below the *Tikkunei Zohar*<sup>49</sup> on the verse "I YHWH have not changed"<sup>50</sup>—"but with regard to sinners God does indeed change, hiding in various garments, coverings, and shells. These are the 'chaos,' 'void,' and 'darkness' (mentioned here in the second verse of Genesis)." Thus Scripture says: "I will hide my face from them."<sup>51</sup> But to those who depend upon Him and His Shekhinah, He indeed never changes. Thus there are various garments and coverings in which God hides. But I have also written below that **I HEARD FROM MY TEACHER**:<sup>52</sup> "If a person knows that the blessed Holy One is hiding there, there is no hiding at all, for 'all the workers of evil split apart.'<sup>53</sup> That is why it says: 'I shall hide, hide My face from them' (ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני מהם)<sup>54</sup>—He will hide from them so that they do not know that God is hidden there."

Similarly **I HEARD FROM HIM** that "the words 'the enemy said: I shall pursue, catch, divide the booty' ('אמר אויב ארדוף אשיג אחלק')<sup>55</sup> are five consecutive words beginning with the letter aleph. The Cosmic Aleph hides there, just as in the name Sama'el."<sup>56</sup>

Once a person comprehends this great principle, there is no curtain dividing him from his God in time of Torah study and prayer. Even as various distracting thoughts arise in his mind, [he will realize that] these are garments and coverings in which God hides. But once the person knows that God is there in hiding, there in fact is no hiding at all.

Now the word *ha-shanah* (“the year,” as in Rosh ha-Shanah, the New Year) is numerically the equivalent of *Satan*, plus one more. That one refers to the Cosmic Aleph who is hidden there, as we have said. This now tells you how Joseph came forth from prison on the New Year. Once Joseph knew the “New Year,” namely that “the year” was equal to Satan plus one, that the Cosmic Aleph, the “Head of the Year,” was hidden there among the shells, or Satan, [he understood that] “His kingdom rules over all,”<sup>57</sup> vanquishing those shells. This indeed is the “New Year.” Once he knew this, all those workers of evil, the prison-house of the Shekhinah, split apart. So too, on the physical plane, Joseph came forth from prison, truly smashing the shells by this awareness. Thus Scripture’s “he placed testimony in Jehoseph”—this awareness caused the letter hei to be added to his name, which then contained Jeho (or the YHW of YHWH), the secret of knowledge. This was his name when “he went forth upon the land of Egypt.”

The homily is constructed around a single insight, communicated by the Besht in two interpretive quips. The message is that God is hidden everywhere, even in the works of evildoers or in the words of the wicked. Once you realize God is hidden, however, that hiding is at an end. Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef has applied this teaching to a devotional issue, that of distracting thoughts in the midst of prayer or study, a matter of great concern to early Ḥasidism, as well as to the liturgical calendar, neither of which is mentioned by the Besht in this context. The mystical message is entirely simple, and is in fact the core insight that defines Ḥasidism: *Leit atar panui minneh*, in the Zohar’s language: “There is no place”—and this is expanded to include “no moment,” “no act”—“devoid of God.” This bold assertion is to be put to the test by going toward the limits, the moments when God seems to be most hidden. These are created by the Evil One, represented within the individual by the evil urge, but also darkly pointed to in Genesis. They include one’s thoughts of sin, defilement, temptation. The point is to discover that these too are filled with energy whose source is none other than the Divine. It is precisely this seeking and pushing of the limits that makes Ḥasidism, especially in its earliest and boldest versions, a path of spiritual adventure that so greatly fascinated young men such as Maimon, oppressed by a harsh regimen of asceticism and self-deprecation that characterized mystical Judaism in the generations prior to the Besht.

We pick up the thread of the teaching a bit farther down in the homily:

It is known that the letter aleph refers to wisdom and thought, as in the verse: “I will teach you (”אאלפך,” *a’alefka* – “I will *alef*

you”) wisdom.”<sup>58</sup> That is why the word for “in the beginning” is rendered in a Targum<sup>59</sup> as “in wisdom.” That refers to the letter aleph, through which “God created heaven ...” All the twenty-two letters are garments for one another. Aleph is garbed within bet (two), since bet comprises two alephs. Gimel (“three”) is three alephs, and so forth, **ASI HEARD FROM MY TEACHER**. The beginning of Creation thus came about through the aleph, or wisdom, through which all was created: “You made them all in wisdom.”<sup>60</sup> The letters spread forth from above to below, and in this way He created all creatures, through the twenty-two letters aleph through tav. Anything created through a letter closer to the Source is higher, down to that which was created through tav, the last letter: the lowliest of beings.

But a person who seeks to come before God moves from tav to shin, following the reverse alphabet tashrak,<sup>61</sup> until finally he comes to the aleph, the dwelling-place of the single, universal One. Thus Scripture says: “Out of the belly of Sheol I cried forth to You.”<sup>62</sup> God’s spiritual presence is there within the aleph. Wrapped in that aleph, it brought forth light. That is the light (אור) coming from the aleph, the light of emanation (אצילות). Then the aleph wrapped itself in the bet and brought forth (ברא) the world of Creation, as is taught in the book *Kanfei Yonah*; see there.<sup>63</sup> Afterward the wrapping proceeded further, bet being wrapped in gimel, as lower worlds than that world of Creation were brought forth. This proceeded until He was wrapped in the letter tav, creating the lowest worlds, “kingdom within kingdom.”

Therefore Scripture says: “In the beginning”—meaning “through wisdom” or “through the aleph”—“God created *et* the heavens.” That particle *et* is made up of aleph and tav, referring to the twenty-two letters from one to the other, in which God’s spirit, which is also called “heaven,” dwells. God is wrapped up and garbed in these twenty-two letters, creating “the earth,” referring to all material things...

God looked and saw the wicked generations to come and He hid the light. It was hidden from sinners within various “shells.” But to the righteous, who themselves are called *elohim* (“god”), He is not hidden at all. Thus we find that God said to Moses: “See I have made you an *elohim* to Pharaoh.”<sup>64</sup> Of Jacob too it says: “The God of Israel called him *el*”<sup>65</sup> (literally, “god”). The same is true of other righteous beings, from whom God is never hidden. That is why Scripture says: “God said: Let there be light, and there was

light.” As soon as it enters the minds of those who are aware, who are called *elohim*, that God is hidden [even in the lowest creatures], then “all the workers of iniquity are rent asunder”<sup>66</sup> and God’s light is revealed. “And there was light.” May the blessed Lord atone.

Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef has constructed for us an elaborate homily on the opening verses of Genesis, reading them to mean that God reveals Himself to the godly, while being hidden from the wicked. That hiddenness of God, while it seems real and absolute enough to the sinner, is ultimately an illusion, to be seen through by the wicked as well, as they repent their superficial view of reality. All the Ba’al Shem Tov said, again going back to the core “revelation” in this text, is that in the Hebrew alphabet, which represents numbers as well as verbal sounds, each letter contains all that come before it. It is the simplest and most obvious statement of mathematical reality, that all multiple entities are composed of single units. The ultimate single unit is God, “the Cosmic Aleph” or One. This is another way of returning to the core claim of Ḥasidism, that God is hidden within everything, even the realm of evil, and underlies all that exists. The Ḥasid’s task is to reverse the process of Creation, wending his way back up from *tav* to *aleph*.

What has the disciple added to the master’s insights? Mostly he offers contextualization rather than original thought. His well-constructed homily is in this case (an exception rather than a rule in his works) delivered with a light enough touch that the reader is not frustrated by over-complexity or the need to hold multiple questions in mind to see that they are resolved. Ya’akov Yosef has taken a very basic teaching of his master, and applied it to such concrete matters as distracting thoughts in prayer and the meaning of *Rosh ha-Shanah*.<sup>67</sup> Most significantly, he has tied it into the opening verses of the Torah, thus giving it pride of place as a kind of opening invitation to read his book, one that is promising to interpret Torah in this dynamic new way. While the Besht’s single insight has been extended into an elaborate sermon, that insight remains the key point that the disciple seeks to make.

#### IV

The Besht’s other leading disciple, Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirech, takes a rather different path. His writings (edited only posthumously and much less carefully than those of Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef) contain relatively few quotations from his master. In his case, both the initial insights and their expansion into homilies are his own, spoken at settings like that described by Maimon. He inherits from the Besht the ability to reinterpret biblical verses in startlingly creative ways

as well as the original master's penchant for teaching through parables, especially those involving fathers and sons. He develops the Besht's mystical insights into much more of a full-blown theology, one that well served the generation of his disciples who went forth to create the Hasidic movement.

The text we will examine is one of the Maggid's best-known homilies. I choose it for two reasons: its mystical insights and the fact that it seems to fit the Maimon description of how the homilies were constructed. It is based on flashes of insight into two totally unrelated biblical verses, then linked to several others. It is quite likely that this sermon, with both its strengths and its weaknesses, emerged from the method described by Maimon in his scene of verses being called out around the Maggid's table.

"Make for yourself two trumpets (*hazozerot*) of silver."<sup>68</sup> This means two half-forms (*hazi zurot*).<sup>69</sup> This follows, "on the throne there was an image like the appearance of a man, upon it from above."<sup>70</sup> Man is only dalet mem (*dam* – "blood"), but (divine) speech dwells in him. When he cleaves to the blessed Holy One, the Cosmic Aleph, he becomes *adam* ("human").

The blessed Holy One has reduced (*zimzem*) Himself through multiple worlds in order to be one with man, who (otherwise) could not withstand His brilliance. The person has to separate himself so fully from all corporeality that he may rise up through all those worlds to become one with God. Only when his existence is thus negated may he be called *adam*. This is the meaning of "on the throne (*kise*) there was an image," for He, the blessed One, is hidden (*mekhuseh*) there,<sup>71</sup> as in the "cloud and crackling fire."<sup>72</sup> "Cloud" means that at first darkness prevails over the person, one who is unable to pray in ecstasy. Then the "crackling fire" comes along, the ecstasy. This is the image on the throne, where He is hidden.

The link between the two verses, one from Numbers and the other from Ezekiel, is crucial here. The "two half-forms" of the trumpet verse are none other than God and man. God is the Cosmic Aleph, while man is only *dam*, what we would call "flesh and blood." In order to make the complete form of *adam*, they need to be joined together. But that *adam* is not just the human form, but the manlike object of Ezekiel's vision, the figure seated on the divine throne. God and the person together constitute this single figure.

Now the Maggid goes on to expand this very daring theological claim:

"An image like the appearance of a man," for that which is awakened in him [in the moment of ecstasy] is also awakened

above in Him, be He blessed. If love is awakened in the *zaddik*, so too is love awakened in all the worlds. The same with the other attributes.<sup>73</sup> This occurs when one brings oneself, with great purity, up above all the worlds to become one with Him. He, be He blessed, thinks only of doing good for man, as in, “the whole world was created only to serve me.”<sup>74</sup> All the upper worlds and all the [divine] qualities are in his domain; he stands within them as a king amid his troops. Of this King David said: “Your pious ones shall sing.”<sup>75</sup> But the Zohar asks: “Is it not the Levites who sing?”<sup>76</sup> But whatever the *zaddik* wants, the blessed Holy One wants as well. Even the sexual unions of the patriarchs that are mentioned contain within them an entire Torah. If the verse “Jacob came unto Rachel”<sup>77</sup> or “Jacob loved Rachel”<sup>78</sup> were missing, the Torah scroll would be unfit. For they did everything while cleaving to the blessed Holy One, who derived pleasure from them. From this Torah was made. Torah and the blessed Holy One are one. Even though this act is so highly corporeal, God takes pleasure in it.

This later section of the homily is quite weakly strung together and is quite irrelevant to the essential argument for the union of God and man, to which he will return at the end. It appears that the preacher was struggling in a less than wholly successful way to include all the verses called out to him. It is easy to imagine someone calling out Psalms 132:9, “*va-ḥasidekha yerannenu.*” After all, that was exactly what he was witnessing, and that call would have been viewed as a compliment to the scene. But the Jacob and Rachel verses might have been called out by a wag, perhaps a young man with something other than Torah on his mind. The Maggid does manage to incorporate them, but only awkwardly. His message regarding involvement with or detachment from the corporeal world also seems inconsistent. Place is further made, amid talk about transcendence and otherworldliness, for the powers of the *zaddik* in shaping God’s will, that which was so felicitously described by Joseph Weiss as “the great Maggid’s theory of contemplative magic.”<sup>79</sup>

The homily then comes to its strong conclusion, ignoring these seeming interruptions and returning to the original insight:

These are the “two trumpets of silver.” Man is half-a-form because he is only *dam*, “blood.” The blessed Holy One is called the Cosmic Aleph. When they cleave together they make up a complete form. The word *keseif* (“silver”) also can mean “desire” (*kissufim*). Desire the blessed Holy One always, and the Holy One will love you.



But let us consider the main part of this teaching through the lens established earlier, the relationship between the flash of interpretive insight and its homiletical expansion. The pair of verses leads the Maggid toward a somewhat radical theological claim, namely that the image seen by the prophet on the divine throne appears manlike because it is in fact composed of the union of God and humanity, a reflection of the prophet's own humanity raised up in the ecstatic moment of his prophesying.<sup>80</sup> Is this a theological *idea* that the Maggid had previously conceived, now reinforced by a clever use of Scripture? Or is it an insight that came to him in this creative flash of interpretive genius, one flowing *from* his reading of the verses rather than one placed onto it? There is no sure way of answering that question, but I would suggest that we not be too quick in choosing the seemingly obvious former option. These charismatic preachers were deeply caught up in the moment of interpretation, and one often has the sense that the idiosyncrasies of the verse before them pull them along in a certain direction of thought. (Is that in fact the “revelation?”) The high drama of the performance itself, I would suggest, added to the inspiration felt by the preacher in such a moment, keeping him on an ecstatic high and calling forth from within him the fullest of his creative ingenuity—or, if you prefer, the mysterious inner divine word.

The devotional message proceeding from this confluence of verses is that both God and man are *hazi zurot*, each incomplete without the other. God's love for man is as much a result of *kissufim*, longing or desire, as is our love of God. The Maggid then attaches this insight to the act of prayer, the moment in which the brightness of ecstasy shines through the darkness. Prayer gives way to a full mystical experience in which God and the person are revealed as one. That application reminds us of Ya'akov Yosef's applying the Besht's insight to wayward thoughts in prayer. Both are taking a teaching gained through an interpretive “flash” breakthrough and applying it to a moment in the devotee's life of prayer, a process about which their hearers were regularly seeking guidance. Dov Baer then goes on to relate the verse to a favorite theme of his: God's love for the *zaddik*, his ability to shape the divine will, and the holiness he may find even within the material world.

## V

In both of the Besht's disciples, we have seen homilies built around insightful readings of specific biblical verses and then expanded to underline well-known religious messages that the authors seek to deliver. I think it fair to say that in both of these *derashot*, among the more successful efforts in their collected writings, there is some lag in

enthusiasm between the tone of the original insight and its extension into applied devotional instruction. Such is the nature of sermons everywhere. This is made truer, of course, if you have people calling out verses that you will then have to include in your talk.

I therefore want to conclude with one more text in which that lag is much less noticeable. For this I turn to another early Ḥasidic figure, one who reputedly had met the Besht but was primarily a disciple of Dov Baer. I refer to Rabbi Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl, progenitor of the Twersky clan that dominated much of Ḥasidic life in the western Ukraine throughout the nineteenth century. Rabbi Naḥum's book *Me'or Einayim*,<sup>81</sup> published in 1798, shortly following his death, is considered one of the classics of Ḥasidic literature. We turn again to a homily on the first pericope of the Torah, *Parashat Be-Reshit*, one of several in this work that treat the Torah's opening verse. This teaching—it is, to be sure, a section of a homily rather than the entire text—is an extended reflection on the divine names YHWH and Adonai.

“In the beginning God created...”<sup>82</sup>

... Creation took place for the sake of Torah and for the sake of Israel.<sup>83</sup> Its purpose was that YHWH be revealed to Israel, that we come to know of God's existence. Even though God's true nature lies beyond our grasp, once we recognize that God exists, we will surely do all our deeds for the sake of heaven. Thus will “know Him in all your ways”<sup>84</sup> become a reality, as we seek to be united with the One. There is none other and there is nothing else! There is no place devoid of God! “The whole earth is filled with His glory!”<sup>85</sup>

This glory, however, is manifest in the many divine garments; the whole earth is a garbing of God. It is the One who is within all those many garments. This aspect of divinity is called Adonai, related to the word *adanim*, used for those “fittings” by which the Tabernacle was held together. This is God's presence as it has come down into the lower and corporeal rungs. Our task is to unite it with the Source from which it came, YHWH, who calls all the worlds into being. In every act of devotion, be it study or prayer, eating or drinking, we bring about this unification. All the worlds depend on this: the union of the God within—Adonai—with God beyond, YHWH.

While opening with a fairly conventional Midrashic statement of creation for the sake of Israel, Menaḥem goes quickly to a calling out of “מלוא כל הארץ כבודו” – “the whole earth is full of His Glory,” which becomes a watchword of Ḥasidism's immanentist spirituality. But, like

all the Ḥasidic preachers, he winds that back to a sense of transcendence. Here we have a clear statement of Ḥasidism's panentheistic mystical truth. There is no place devoid of God and the goal of Israel's service is to discover the divinity immanent throughout existence and to unite it with the transcendent mystery beyond.

When these two names are joined together, the letters of each alternating with one another, a combined name is formed: YHDWNHY, both beginning and ending with the letter yod. "You have made them all in wisdom,"<sup>86</sup> and the yod represents *ḥokhmah*, or wisdom, the prime matter out of which all the rest of the twenty-two letters are drawn forth and through which the world was created ... hence it is called by the sages *hyle*, from the words *hayah li*, "it was with Me [!]." All things were within it and from its potential they emerged into real existence.

Now, since aleph is the first of the letters, [one might have expected that it would designate the primal substance]. But aleph itself is constructed of two yods, with a diagonal vav between them.<sup>87</sup> The first yod represents supernal *ḥokhmah*, the primal wisdom in which all the worlds were included. By means of the vav, which is a drawing forth of consciousness<sup>88</sup>, all potential was brought to actuality and all the worlds were created. Thus was the final yod formed, the lower *ḥokhmah*, or the Wisdom of Solomon. This is the name Adonai—as we have explained, divinity garbed in all things and filling all the worlds.

When you do all your deeds for the sake of heaven, you draw everything in the world, or in the "lower wisdom," close to the upper wisdom, which is the blessed Creator, the One who calls all into being. Through the consciousness of fulfilling "know Him in all your ways"—and to "know" means to be linked or joined—you link the lower yod to the upper, that sublime point. Then the world and all within it form one single aleph. That is why God is called "the Cosmic Aleph."

What I find distinctive in this text is an attempt to sustain an echo of ecstatic speech through several paragraphs of intertwined insights into words and letters. By tying the two divine names together, a trope well-known in Kabbalistic tradition, he has drawn the hearer into the great mystery of the holy names, a high register of mystical discourse, though in rather accessible fashion. With a yod both opening and concluding that combined divine name, he comes to an identification of the world prior to Creation (or emergence from within *ḥokhmah*) and that which exists after Creation, the extant world as "lower *ḥokhmah* (corresponding to *malkhut* or Shekhinah). For the Ḥasidic preacher, and especially

Menaḥem Naḥum, there is no distinction between Shekhinah and the lower world, brimming with divine immanence. This point is further made by the presentation of all of being, above and below, linked by the symbol of the Cosmic Aleph. Here that aleph does not only represent God, as we saw in the *Toledot*, but embraces the entirety of being, Creator and creation fully united in oneness. The vav form at the center of the aleph, but also the letter of conjunction (the “and” of the Hebrew language), joins the upper yod, the creative Source of being, and the lower yod, the world as created, into unity.

The sustained intensity in this text is hard to demonstrate, but nevertheless seems palpable. It is borne partly by the esoteric quality of the subject matter, the two divine names and the secret composition of the aleph. My sense is that in the oral moment a high tone of intensity accompanied the revelatory content of these secret teachings. One can imagine the original hearers experiencing “the Shekhinah speaking through his throat” throughout this prolonged discussion.

Alas, we latter-day readers of the Ḥasidic sources are capable only of a doubly veiled glimpse into that highly intense and powerful moment of sermon performance. First, we are *readers* rather than *hearers*. And we have none other than the Ba’al Shem Tov himself telling us that the battle is more than half lost by that fact alone. “There isn’t a single word here that I said!” Further, we are reading these sources in Hebrew translations of oral Yiddish speech (and now you, my readers, in an English rendition of the Hebrew!). The Hebrew of the Ḥasidic writers was stilted and formal, their vocabulary quite limited, and their grammar simply awful. How much richer must these teachings have been in the juicy Yiddish of oral presentation! Alas, we will never know.<sup>89</sup> And yet, despite all those veils, an echo of ecstasy may still be heard, if we train ourselves to listen carefully.

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 It was Joseph Weiss who first noted the role of traveling preachers in the dissemination of religious ideas in the early modern period. See his discussion in his seminal essay “The Beginning of the Emergence of the Hasidic Path,” in *Ziyyon* 16 (1951): 105–146, reprinted in *Chapters on Ḥasidic Dogma and Its History [Perakim be-Torat ha-Ḥasidut u-v-Toledoteha]*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1971) 122–181. See especially 49–56 (125–132 in Rubinstein edition).

- 2 The exception consists of several letters, one of which in particular is usually deemed to have great historical importance. For a synoptic English translation of the different versions of this text, see Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2005) 272–288. For another translation, see: Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 106–108. See also the contributions of Yehoshu'a Mondshein, "An Early Version of the 'Ascent of the Soul' Epistle by the Besht," in *Migdal Oz* (Kefar Habbad, 1980) 119–126; Haviva Pedaya, "The Holy Epistle of the Besht: Textual Versions and Worldview: Messianism, Revelation, Ecstasy, and Sabbatianism," in *Ziyyon* 70 (2005): 311–354. However, Ze'ev Gries has recently argued that scholars have overstated the centrality of this letter. See: Gries, "Between the Surgeon's Blade of the Historian and the Brush of the Literary Researcher," in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 5 (2000): 411–446. The recent article by Jonathan Dauber offers an excellent point of entry into the wealth of scholarship on this subject: "The Baal Shem Tov and the Messiah: A Reappraisal of the Baal Shem Tov's Letter to Rabbi Gershon of Kutov" in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15 (2008): 210–241. For the other, less theologically rich but still historically important letters from the Besht, see: Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism* 114–122. A cache of letters purporting to have originated from the Besht's circle was discovered after the Russian Revolution, but this so-called Kherson archive was later conclusively proven to be patent forgery. See: Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism," *History and Theory* 27:4 (1988): 119–159.
- 3 *Midrash Tanhuma*, Tisa 34.
- 4 On rabbinic authority and the Oral Law, see: Michael S. Berger, *Rabbinic Authority: The Authority of the Talmudic Sages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 16–26; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1961). One opinion in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 59a) is to forbid the study of Torah by gentiles, an idea that continued to reverberate in later Jewish law. This is immediately followed by a second opinion, in which a non-Jew who learns Torah is likened to the high priest himself. However, the idea that the Jewish people are in possession of "mistorin" (mysteries) seems to have taken on new life in early medieval *midrashim*. See: *Midrash Lekah Tov*, ed. Buber, Song of Songs 2:7; *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, Balak 25; *Midrash Tehillim*, ed. Buber, no. 114. On the broader question of orality and the Mishnah, see: Samuel Safrai, "Oral Tora" in his *The Literature of the Sages* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 35–120; and Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), as well as the exemplary treatment of a particular tractate by Elizabeth Shanks Alexander in *Transmitting Mishnah: The Shaping Influence of Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For an interesting study of the parallels between Jewish and Christian usage of oral traditions, see: Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), especially 59, 74–86, 160–174. See also William Graham's important work on the relationship between orality and scripture *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 5 BT Gittin 60b. Concomitantly, "things that are written (i.e. Scripture) you may not quote orally (from memory)." See: Michael Wygoda's stimulating article "Things that Are Recited Orally You Are Not Permitted to Write Down: On the Transmission of a Forgotten Law" [*Devarim she-be-al Peh I Atta Rashai le-Omram Bi-khtav: Al Gilgulah shel Halakhah Nishkahat*], *Dimmui* 26 (2006): 48–63.

- 6 It is found in *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, the earliest and in some circles canonical collection of Ba'al Shem Tov tales, first published in 1815. See: *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1991) 230; trans. Dan Ben Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970) 179. There has been much scholarly discussion in recent decades over the use of *Shivḥei ha-Besht* as a historical source. While clearly a work of hagiography (as the title plainly states) and containing obvious fictional elements, its authors had great familiarity with the historical setting of the Besht's career, including intimate knowledge of both persons and events. Still, I offer the ensuing tale as suggestive of the Besht's views rather than as historically verifiable. On the use of tales, I am sympathetic to the views summarized by Jonathan Garb in his *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 77, and sources quoted there. A holistic approach to the study of Ḥasidism must certainly embrace the tales as sources representing a distinctive view or level of discourse within the movement. This may be done without treating them as accurate historical representations of events.
- 7 *Keter Shem Tov* (Brooklyn, 2004) 138–139, no. 240b; *Yosher Divrei Emet* (Jerusalem, 1974) 122, no. 22. For discussions of this passage, see: Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 58; Miles Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth: Rabbi Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh and the Rise of Hasidism in Eastern Galicia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 117. The tension between revelation and concealment, or more specifically, the writing down of mystical secrets once passed down as oral traditions, is well attested in the history of Kabbalah. It surfaces as early as Yizḥak the Blind's vehement protest against the writings of Azri'el and Ezra of Gerona, whom he accuses of spreading precious esoteric knowledge best kept hidden. See: Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (Jewish Publication Society and Princeton University Press, 1987) 394–396. Yehuda Liebes has demonstrated that a similar tension is clearly present in even such a lengthy, full-developed literary work as the Zohar. See: Liebes, "The Messiah of the Zohar: On R. Simeon bar Yohai as a Messianic Figure," in *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 26–30. For broader discussions of this phenomenon in early Jewish mysticism, see: Elliot Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 166–224. Cf. the later studies by Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 157–188; and Eitan Fishbane, "Tears of Disclosure: The Role of Weeping in Zoharic Narrative," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 11 (2002): 25–47.
- 8 The most important research into this manuscript literature has been undertaken by Ze'ev Gries. See his *Books, Writers, and Stories in Early ḥasidism* [*Sefer, Sofer, ve-Sippur be-Reshit ha-ḥasidut*] (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 1992). An important earlier contribution was made by Shlomo Zucker in "An Early Hasidic Manuscript," *Kiryat Sefer* 49 (1973/1974): 223–235.
- 9 In a technical sense, because it appeared without the usual rabbinic approbations (*haskamot*), but more genuinely because of its severe broadside attacks against both rabbinic and lay leadership within the Jewish community. See: Samuel Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) 63–73, 75–112.
- 10 A convenient guide to the printed literature of Ḥasidism before 1880 was recently published privately by the booksellers Stefanski: Ḥayyim Stefanski, *Reshimat Stefanski le-Sifrei Ḥasidut* (Modi'in, 2012).

- 11 Such was the pattern early in the movement's history, including the writings of such highly revered teachers as Dov Baer of Mezhirech (ca. 1704–1772; *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 1781), Elimelekh of Leżajsk (1717–1786; *No'am Elimelekh*, 1788), and Menahem Naḥum of Chernobyl (ca. 1730–1797; *Me'or Einayim*, 1798). Even such clearly non-intellectual figures as Barukh of Medzhibozh, the Besht's grandson, and Zusha of Anipol, people who were hardly known at all for their teachings, had volumes appear in their names, though long after their deaths.
- 12 *Ben Porat Yosef* (Korets, 1781); *Ẓafanat Pane'aḥ* (Korets, 1782). A fourth collection, *Ketonet Passim*, was published quite late (Lwów, 1866), but scholarship has confirmed its authenticity. See: Samuel Dresner, *The Zaddik* (see note 9 above) 250–252.
- 13 See Mosheh Ḥayyim Efrayim of Sudlykov's *Degel Maḥaneh Efrayim* (Korets, 1810). Reb Efrayim, as he is called, was a grandson of the Besht, and his work is one of the best early repositories of oral traditions from his grandfather. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezhirech, one of the Besht's foremost disciples, quotes from his teacher rather sparingly. For an illuminating comparison of the relationship between the Besht and these two important students, see: Pedaya, "The Ba'al Shem Tov, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, and the Maggid of Mezhirech: Guidelines Toward a Religious Typology" [*Ha-Ba'al Shem Tov, Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef mi-Polana'ah ve-ha-Maggid mi-Mezritsh: Kavvei Yesod le-Gishah Tippologit Dati*], *Da'at* 45 (2000): 25ff., and especially 27. The reported teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov have since been collected together and published in a number of anthologies, most famously in a work called *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, composed in the early twentieth century and published in Lodz, 1938, on the very eve of the Holocaust that was to destroy Polish Jewry. While that helpful collection is widely used, some of its attributions to the Besht, especially the many derived from the Komárno/Żydaczów tradition, need to be treated critically. See Menachem Kallus's new translation and bilingual edition of a large portion of this work: *Pillar of Prayer: Guidance in Contemplative Prayer, Sacred Study, and the Spiritual Life, from the Baal Shem Tov and his Circle* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2011).
- 14 On the distinction between male and female forms of piety among Eastern European Jews, see the brief remarks in "Piety," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 27 October 2010, 2 July 2013 <<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Piety>>. David B. Siff's "Shifting Ideologies of Orality and Literacy in Their Historic Context: Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav's Embrace of the Book as a Means for Redemption," *Prooftexts* 30 (2010): 238–262, came to my attention too late for full consideration in this article, but is worthy of the reader's attention.
- 15 See the remarks by Ze'ev Gries, *Books, Writers, and Stories in Early Ḥasidism* (see note 8 above) 27–29; and Arthur Green, "On Translating Hasidic Homilies," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 63–72.
- 16 See my article "Around the Maggid's Table: Zaddik, Leadership, and Popularization in the Circle of Dov Baer of Miedzyrzec," *Ziyyon* 78:1 (2013): 73–106. An English version appears in my collected essays *The Heart of the Matter* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2014).
- 17 *Solomon Maimon: An Autobiography*, trans. J. Clark Murray (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 167–169. This source has been much examined and discussed in all historical discussion of early Hasidism. Among more recent treatments, see especially those by Ritchie Robertson, "From the Ghetto to Modern Culture: The Autobiographies of Salomon Maimon and Jacob Fromer," in *Polin* 7 (1992): 12–30; Adam Teller, "Solomon Maimon's Autobiography: A Re-evaluation," in *Gal Ed* 14 (1995): 13–22; and David Assaf, "A Girl! He Ought to be Whipped': The Hasid as Homo Ludens," in *Let the Old Make Way for the New: Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Eastern European Jewry Presented to Immanuel Etkes, Vol 1: Hasidism and*

- the *Musar Movement* [*Yashan mi-Penei Ḥadash: Shai le-Immanu'el Etkes*], ed. David Assaf and Ada Rapoport-Albert (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2009) 121–150. Assaf's article contains an extensive bibliography.
- 18 See Rabbi David of Maków's biting description of the court of Rabbi Ḥayyim Haykl of Amdur (Indura) in his anti-Ḥasidic tract *Shever Poshe'im*, published in Mordechai Wilensky, *Ḥasidim and Mitnaggedim: On the History of the Controversy Between Them in the Years 1772–1815* [*Ḥasidim u-Mitnaggedim: Le-Toledot ha-Pulmus she-Beineihem ba-Shanim 532–535*], vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970) 165–166; Immanuel Etkes, "The Early Ḥasidic Court," in *Text and Context: Essays in Modern Jewish History and Historiography in Honor of Ismar Schorsch*, ed. Eli Lederhendler and Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2005) 157–186, especially 170–182, as well as in Assaf's essay quoted in the preceding note, 132–136.
  - 19 The plain-sense meaning of this verse is decidedly ambiguous, yet a more literal rendering might be "a great voice, never repeated." Scholem traced this verse's various interpretations in the works of earlier Kabbalists in his landmark essay "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), especially 298–303. For another perspective, see: Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, trans. and ed. Gordon Tucker (New York and London: Continuum, 2005) 671–672.
  - 20 By the time Maimon wrote this memoir, his visit to the Maggid's court was a distant memory and he had clearly chosen an entirely different sort of life, one almost antithetical to what he saw as the naive and credulous piety of the Ḥasidim. Following the description of the Maggid's table and homily, he goes on to speak of them with some derision. Assaf (see note 15 above) offers a thoroughly convincing account of how the young Maimon completely misunderstood what was going on around him.
  - 21 Thinking about the Ḥasidic homily as dramatic oral performance calls to mind the studies of classicists Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord on bards living in the Adriatic region in the 1930's, illiterate men who nevertheless possessed vast resources of traditional narrative that they would perform for local audiences. Because they were illiterate (Parry and Lord restricted their studies to such), their impressive repertoires raised interesting questions of orality, memory, and composition. As classicists, these scholars were interested in the contemporary balladeers as parallel to the authors of ancient bodies of chanted narrative, especially the Homeric epics. The point made by Lord is that the essential feat was not one of precise memorization. The "singer of tales," having mastered both bodies of narrative content and rubrics of traditional song, essentially re-composed the text each time he sang it. See, inter alia, Albert Bates' *Epic Singers and Oral Traditions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), and for the question of orality in a very different context, Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Transmitting Mishnah* (see note 4 above). My thanks to Rabbi Ebn Leader for suggesting this comparison. Still, as we will discuss below, the Ḥasidic homily represents a different order of creativity. While the preacher references vast bodies of known and memorized materials, the whole point here is to create something new, an original thought or interpretation that has not been expressed before.
  - 22 Psalms 73:26.
  - 23 Psalms 39:3. *Likkutei Moharan* 20:2. Quoted more fully in Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979) 151. This text also is referenced by Jonathan Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (see note 6 above) 43. The reference to a cosmic heart is repeated in Nahman's famous parable of the heart and the spring in his Tale of the Seven Beggars. English translation in Green, idem 301.



- 24 Cf. *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:53; *Leviticus Rabbah* 16:4. Both sources describe rabbis engaged in the study of the esoteric “work of the chariot,” during which experience the words of Torah seem to “rejoice” as they did on the day they were given at Sinai. This phrase also appears in JT *Ḥagigah* 2:1/p. 77a, where although the subject of study is less esoteric, the fiery experience of learning is no less mystical. In at least one teaching the Maggid preserves this original rabbinic context, explaining that impassioned study brings with it an experience that mirrors the original revelation. See *Or Torah* (Korzec, 1804) 6a–b as well as *Kedushat Levi* (Jerusalem, 2005) *Mishpatim*, 315.
- 25 Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht* (see note 2 above) 276–277.
- 26 Perhaps the most famous example of this phenomenon is a remarkable passage in *Or ha-Me’ir*. The author, Ze’ev Wolf of Zhytomyr, records a teaching from the Maggid explaining that when speaking in public, a homilist must forget himself entirely and allow the Shekhinah to speak through him. See: *Or ha-Me’ir* (Korzec, 1798) 2a. For another example see: *Me’or Einayim, Likkutim* 496–497 (Benei Berak, 1997); and the translation of this passage in: Arthur Green, Ebn Leader, Ariel Mayse, and Or N. Rose, *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid’s Table* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2013). This text has been analyzed by Joseph Weiss, who sees it as indicative of the quietistic spirituality common in the Maggid’s circle. See: Joseph Weiss, “*Via Passiva* in Early Hasidism,” in *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, ed. David Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 78–83. The history of this idea begins with a striking ambiguity in Exodus 19:19, which reads: “Moses spoke and God answered him with a voice (*kol*).” *Kol* in this context might be felicitously rendered as “thunder,” but already in the Talmud it was understood to mean “and God answered him with Moses’ voice” (see BT Berakhot 45a). This represents a view of prophecy as possession, the holy spirit taking over the prophet’s own power of speech. Such a view is found in Philo as well (see *De Migratione Abrahami* 7:35). A more proximate source for medieval Jewry may, however, be the Islamic idea that God speaks through the mouth of the prophet. This idea was known to twelfth-century Islamic theologians, though direct influence on Jewish thinkers is difficult to establish. See: Alexander Altmann, “Saadya’s Theory of Revelation: Its Origin and Background,” in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) 151. Cf. Ignace Goldziher, “The Idea of the Shekhinah in Islam” [*La notion de la Sakina chez les Mahométans*], *Reveu de l’histoire des religions* 28 (1893): 7–12, especially 10–12. Scholars have argued for a Jewish antecedent to this notion in Rashi’s commentary on the verse in Exodus. See: R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) 269 (quoting Joseph Weiss); and Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* [*Mikdash Adam: Ha-Hafnamah ha-Datit ve-Izzuv Ḥayyei ha-Dat ha-Penimit be-Reshit ha-Ḥasidut*] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005) 337. However, while Moses speaking with divine assistance may indeed be found there in an embryonic (and decidedly non-mystical) form, it is not until the Zohar that the claim of the Shekhinah speaking from Moses’ throat is made absolutely explicit. See: Zohar 3:7a, 3:265a, *Ra’aya Meheimana* 3:232a; and Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (see note 19 above) 530–531, where he notes the dependence of Ḥasidic sources on these earlier passages. For a discussion of this idea’s influence on prophetic/ecstatic Kabbalah after the Zohar, see: Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 83–86. This is an idea that travels with the popularization of Jewish spirituality. The kabbalistic circles in sixteenth-century Safed opened the idea that the Shekhinah may speak through a human beings to their own elite ranks. For example, Yosef Karo claims to have had divine revelation on a number of occasions; sometimes this

took place in a conversation with the spirit of the Mishnah, yet in others he records an experience of automatic speech in which the “Shekhinah spoke from his throat.” See: Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo* 257–286, especially 269. See also: Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) 60–61, 74. This idea seems to have been less explicitly developed in the writings of Mosheh Cordovero. For Cordovero, automatic speech is a divine gift for those who take upon themselves physical practices that mirror the exile of the Shekhinah, but generally it is a departed sage rather than Shekhinah herself who speaks through the mystic. See: Berakhah Zak, *In the Gates of the Kabbalah of Rabbi Mosheh Cordovero [Be-Sha’arei ha-Kabbalah shel Rabbi Mosheh Kordovero]* (Be’er Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 1995) 18, 200. Ḥasidism further extends the notion that the Shekhinah may speak from amidst one’s throat to Ḥasidic preachers, not simply first-tier intellectual elites, but goes even farther as well. Ḥasidism does not restrict it to prophetic sermons, for it should be remembered that Weiss correctly notes that early Ḥasidic texts often describe the experience of illuminated prayer in similar terms, for in the highest peaks of spiritual ecstasy it is the Shekhinah who speaks through the mystic. While certainly this is a very great and rare phenomenon, it is at least within the theoretical ability of all; see Weiss, “*Via Passiva*” 71–78.

- 27 *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth-Century Hasidic Thought*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). For important critiques of Schatz-Uffenheimer’s interpretation, see: Jerome Gellman, “Hasidic Mysticism as an Activism,” in *Religious Studies* 42 (2006): 343–349; and more recently Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple* (see note 26 above).
- 28 Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), especially 12–87.
- 29 See: Idel, *New Perspectives* (note 7 above) 20–22; Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of Rabbi Yizhak the Blind: A Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalists [Ha-Shem ve-ha-Mikdash be-Mishnat Rabbi Yizhak Sagei Nahor: Iyyun Meshavveh be-Khitvei Rishonei ha-Mekubbalim]* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), especially 1–21.  
On Nahmanides’ relationship to the mystical tradition, see: Daniel Abrams, “Orality in the Kabbalistic School of Nahmanides: Preserving and Interpreting Esoteric Traditions and Texts,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 3 (1996): 85–102; Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition [Al Derekh ha-Emet: ha-Ramban vi-Yiziratah shel Masoret]* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2005); Moshe Idel, “We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 11–34; Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Elevation, Cyclical Time, and Sacred Text [Ha-Ramban: Hit’allut, Zeman Mahzori ve-Tekst Kadosh]* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003); Elliot Wolfson, “By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic,” in *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 14 (1989): 103–178.
- 30 For a particularly rich presentation of this notion, see: Rabbi Menaḥem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Yesamah Lev* (= *Me’or Einayim*, part 2) on Mishnah Avot 6:1 (ed. Jerusalem, 2012, pp. 593–597).
- 31 I do not necessarily agree with Assaf’s view (note 15 above, p. 122) that Maimon’s account is of a *se’udah shelishit* experience. It seems more likely to have been a Friday night table, closer to the time of the guests’ arrival in Mezhirech.
- 32 While the preachers of Ḥasidism are highly literate teachers, far from the relative simplicity of Parry and Lord’s South Slavic bards, it should be noted that their literary-intellectual life was conducted entirely through the reading and study of

Hebrew and Aramaic texts. The Eastern European Jewish elite lived in a bilingual Jewish milieu—one language for study, writing, and prayer; the other for speech. Educated people hardly read at all in Yiddish, which for them was an entirely oral tongue. This might cause us to think of a different construction of the oral preaching process: The stock phrases and formulations are all in memorized Hebrew/Aramaic. But the preacher draws them forth from his mind and shapes an original, Yiddish-structured oral performance out of them. The fact that his Yiddish is an almost entirely oral language may affect the nature and spontaneity of this performance. He is pulling sources out of one language and fashioning something original out of them in another. Of course this sort of rabbinic Yiddish is much richer in Hebrew/Aramaic than is ordinary people's speech. For a good contemporary example, see the many published volumes of the late *Lubavitcher rebbe's Likutey Sichkes*.

- 33 See: Kalman P. Bland, "Issues in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Exegesis," in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press: 1990) 50–67, especially 59–63; Joseph Dan, *The Literature of Ethics and Homily [Sifrut ha-Musar ve-ha-Derush]* (Jerusalem: Sifriyyat Keter, 1975) 203, 225–229; Mordechai Pachter, "The Land of Israel in the Homiletical and Moralistic Writings of the Sages of Safed in the Sixteenth Century" [*Erez Yisra'el be-Sifrut ha-Derush ve-ha-Musar shel Ḥakhmei Zefat ba-Me'ah ha-Shesh Esreh*], in *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought [Erez Yisra'el ba-Hagut ha-Yehudit bi-Ymei ha-Beinayim]* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben zevi, 1991) 290–319; idem, "The Theory of *Devekut* in the Writings of the Sages of Safed in the Sixteenth Century," in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought [Meḥkerei Yerushalayim be-Maḥshevet Yisra'el]* 3 (1982): 51–121; Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching 1200–1800: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 14, 412–413; Shim'on Shalem, "An Examination of the Exegetical and Homiletical Methods of Rabbi Mosheh Alsheikh" [*Le-Ḥeker Shitot ha-Peirush ve-ha-Derash shel Rabbi Mosheh Alsheikh*], *Sefunot* 5 (1961): 151–200; idem, "On Research into the Works of Rabbi Mosheh Alsheikh" [*Le-Ḥeker Ḥibburav shel Rabbi Mosheh Alsheikh*], *Sefunot* 7 (1963): 179–197.
- 34 Psalms 81:4–5.
- 35 *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef, Z'av, 77c*.
- 36 Isaiah 29:13.
- 37 Exodus 14:10.
- 38 *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef, Be-Shallah* 47b.
- 39 Isaiah 58:7.
- 40 For a translation, see: Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism* (see note 2 above) 114–115.
- 41 *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef, Bereshit 7a*.
- 42 See: Joseph Weiss, "The *Kavvanot* of Prayer in Early Hasidism," in *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism* (see note 26 above) 69–94; Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (see note 27 above) 215–41. For a very different approach to this question, see: Menachem Kallus, "The Relation of the Baal Shem Tov to the Practice of Lurianic *Kavvanot* in Light of His Comments on the Siddur Rashkov," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 2 (1997): 151–168. See also my article in *Ziyyon* 78, quoted in note 16 above, note 57.
- 43 Mishnah Zevaḥim 5:4.
- 44 *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef, Ki Tissa* 66c.
- 45 See *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef, No'ah*, 13c, at *ke-ferush mori, zikhrono le-ḥayyei ha-olam ha-ba, be-shem rabbo*. Ahijah of Shiloh is identified as the Besht's teacher already in the *Toledot* (Balak, 156a); see the reference by the Besht to his teacher in the Holy Epistle (Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht*, note 2 above, 275). On the relationship between the Besht and his teachers in the writings of the *Toledot* and in *Shivhei ha-Besht*, see: Gedalyah Nigal, "The Teacher and Master of Rabbi Yisra'el Ba'al Shem

- Tov" [*Moro ve-Rabbo shel Rabbi Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov*], in *Mehkarim be-Ḥasidut* (Jerusalem, 1999) 80–90.
- 46 JT Eruvin 5:1/p. 22a). See other sources quoted by L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1946) 317.
- 47 Psalms 81:6.
- 48 *Tikkuna* 26, p. 71b.
- 49 Malachi 3:6.
- 50 Deuteronomy 32:20.
- 51 This phrase, and most others like it, are printed in large, bold square characters that stand out on the page in the original Korzec (1780) edition of the *Toledot*. This intentional editorial choice reflects the author's relationship with the Besht.
- 52 Psalms 92:10.
- 53 Deuteronomy 31:18. The quotation is imprecise, conflated with Deuteronomy 32:20.
- 54 Exodus 15:9.
- 55 אַסְמֵאֵל, the Evil One, bears within him the divine name אַל.
- 56 Psalms 103:19.
- 57 Job 33:33.
- 58 Jerusalem Targum to Genesis 1:1.
- 59 Psalms 104:24.
- 60 A reverse acronym of the last letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
- 61 Jonah 2:3.
- 62 *Kanfei Yonah* (Korzec, 1786) is a work by Rabbi Menaḥem Azaryah da Fano (1548–1620), an Italian scholar of both Kabbalah and *halakhah*. Though he lived in Europe throughout his life, Menaḥem Azaryah was connected to notable figures in the Safed Kabbalistic circle, including Rabbi Mosheh Cordovero and Rabbi Yosef Karo. The original edition is accompanied by an unusually effusive *haskamah* by Levi Yizḥak, indicating that the work was known and respected in Ḥasidic circles.
- 63 Exodus 7:1.
- 64 Genesis 33:20.
- 65 Psalms 92:10.
- 66 Which opens the month of Tishrei, the first three letters of which begin the reverse alphabet going from tav to aleph. (This is not stated in the text but seems to be part of the connection its author had in mind.)
- 67 Numbers 10:2.
- 68 In the Eastern European Ashkenazic pronunciation they sound quite identical: *ḥazi zures*.
- 69 Ezekiel 1:26.
- 70 *Mekhuseh*, from the root ה-ט-כ, appears as though related to "כִּסֵּא" (*kise* – "throne").
- 71 Ezekiel 1:4.
- 72 Hebrew *middot*. This term is a common way of referring to the *sefirot* in classical Kabbalah. However, in mystical-moralistic literature from the sixteenth century on, it reverts to an earlier meaning, describing the character traits of a human being (both emotional and moral). The shared term serves to link the *sefirot* to these personal qualities, which are reflections of the same dimensions as exist in the Godhead. Ḥasidism consistently uses *middot* in both of these senses. Here the Maggid is also following the fundamental Zoharic principle of, "just as something is aroused down below, so is it aroused on high." See, inter alia, Zohar 1:35a, 77b–78a, 3:31b.
- 73 This paraphrase of a rabbinic statement, the source of which is BT Kiddushin 82a–b, is surprising, almost seeming to contradict the point being made. In the original it refers to the animals, which were created solely to serve man, who was in turn created only to serve his Master. Here "me" to refers to man, and for that reason I leave it uncapitalized.

- 74 Psalms 132:9.
- 75 The verse begins with a reference to priests (*kohanecha*), and one would expect it to be followed by “Levites.”
- 76 See Genesis 29:30.
- 77 Idem, v. 18.
- 78 Joseph Weiss, “The Great Maggid’s Theory of Contemplative Magic,” in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 31 (1960): 137–147.
- 79 He may in fact be hinting that the word *mar’eh* in the Ezekiel verse also may be read as *mar’ah*, “mirror,” meaning that the image seen above is a reflection of that which is below. There is precedent for such a reading, but one cannot be sure that it is intended here. Of course it may have been stated more clearly in the oral *derashah* but have been lost in the transcription, a not uncommon occurrence.
- 80 See the translation of Rabbi Menaḥem’s commentary on the book of Genesis: *Upright Practices: The Light of the Eyes*, trans. Arthur Green (New York: Paulist Press, 1982). For additional selections, see idem et al., *Speaking Torah* (see note 26 above).
- 81 Genesis 1:1.
- 82 *Genesis Rabbah* 1:4.
- 83 Proverbs 3:6.
- 84 Isaiah 6:3.
- 85 Psalms 104:24.
- 86 Based on Zohar 1:26b, and discussed frequently in later Kabbalistic literature.
- 87 Vav is graphically an extended yod.
- 88 For an interesting study of a homily from an important Ḥasidic leader preserved for us in Yiddish, see the forthcoming article by Ariel Evan Mayse and his colleague Daniel Reiser, “The Final Sermon of the Rebbe of Ger: The *Sefat Emet* and the Implications of Yiddish for the Study of Hasidic Homilies” [*Derashato ha-Aḥaronah shel ha-Rabbi mi-Gur “Ba’al ha-Sefat Emet” u-Mashma’ut Sefat ha-Yiddish le-Ḥeker ha-Derashah ha-Ḥasidit*], *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 30 (2013): 127–160. I also am grateful to Ariel Mayse for extensive help with the footnotes to this essay.

# As a Perennial Spring

A Festschrift Honoring  
Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm