MIDRASH UNBOUND

Transformations and Innovations

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EDITED BY

MICHAEL FISHBANE

AND

JOANNA WEINBERG

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TWENTY

MIDRASH IN HABAD HASIDISM

NAFTALI LOEWENTHAL

This chapter attempts to examine the continuum joining Midrash, ethos, and spirituality in the Habad school of hasidism, both in terms of the development of theoretical structures linking the midrashic process with personal spiritual quest, and the use of Midrash to impart traditionalist, hasidic, and sometimes eschatological ideas. This relates to the striking interplay of esoteric and exoteric elements in hasidic teaching. For though there are overtly esoteric themes, discussing *sefirot* (divine emanations), spiritual 'worlds', and other aspects of the corpus of Jewish mystical thought, a long tradition in Judaism reserves such teachings for a spiritual elite.[1] Midrash, by contrast, is ostensibly accessible to all, whether as a written text for study or as an oral and popular exposition. Hence it is notable that hasidic teachers in general, and those of the Habad school in particular, use Midrash in order to communicate spiritual teachings in the society at large. Moreover, the particular mode of instruction that hasidism evolved, the hasidic *derush* (exposition),[2] sometimes called *torah* (teaching) or *ma'amar* (discourse), can itself be seen as an extended form of latter-day Midrash. While all the above is relevant to varying degrees in many hasidic groups, this study generally limits its scope to the use of Midrash in the Habad school. Nevertheless, in order to consider this topic in context, we shall begin with a brief overview of the use of Midrash in the broader hasidic movement.

ON MIDRASH IN HASIDISM

Midrash and aggadah have had a prominent role in hasidism from the very beginning of the movement in the middle of the eighteenth century. Many of the sayings

Thanks are due to several of my friends and colleagues for assistance in this project, most particularly Dr Joanna Weinberg and Professors Michael Fishbane and Eve Tavor Bannet. Of course the errors remain my own.

[1] See Mishnah *Ḥag.* 2: 1.

[2] The term *derush* is being used here to described a hasidic exposition or discourse. This term can also be used to describe the entire genre of homiletical teaching, quite apart from the hasidic movement. I am using the term *derash* to mean a single instance of homiletical thought, interpreting Scripture (or sometimes other texts, as I discuss here), which might be found in virtually any Jewish literary context, hasidic or not.

of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (1698–1760), collected in the writings of his disciples, quote talmudic aggadah and phrases from the Midrash as well as sayings from the Zohar.[3] The main collections of teachings of his disciple Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezhirech (d. 1772), who was the central focus of the hasidic movement in its second generation,[4] liberally quote from the talmudic aggadah, *Midrash Rabbah*, and to some extent other *midrashim* such as *Tanḥuma*, and also the Zohar. The first great publicist of the hasidic movement, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye (d. *c.*1784) in his erudite *Toledot ya'akov yosef*, the first printed hasidic work (Korets, 1780), weaves together themes from a very broad range of Jewish literature, including the Zohar and the Lurianic writings, as well as Maimonides' *Mishneh torah* and later halakhic works. In his work, citations from the talmudic aggadah, *Midrash Rabbah*, *Tanḥuma*, halakhic *midrashim*, and later collections of Midrash are abundant. The work *Me'or einayim* (Slavita, 1798), the collection of teachings by Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Tchernobil (d. 1798), who studied with both the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezhirech, refers to a more limited range of literature than does the *Toledot ya'akov yosef*. However, citations from the talmudic aggadah, *Midrash Rabbah*, and *Tanḥuma* are still prominent.[5]

The significance of Midrash for hasidic teachers continued into the later generations of the movement. An outstanding example is seen in the *Sefat emet al hatorah* by Rabbi Judah Leib Alter (1847–1905), grandson of Rabbi Isaac Meir Rothenberg (1799–1866), the founder of the dynasty of the Ger hasidim, centred in Gora Kalwaria near Warsaw. His work *Sefat emet* ('Speech of Truth', cf. Prov. 12: 19), published posthumously,[6] provides a record of the inspired Torah teachings he delivered at his *tisch* (table, signifying a gathering with a hasidic leader) on Friday nights or perhaps at the Third Meal (*se'udah shelishit*) on sabbath afternoons, listed

[3] An early collection of sayings and teachings ascribed to the Ba'al Shem Tov is *Keter shem tov* (Zolkiev, 1794/5), culling fragments from five previously published books. In 1938 *Sefer ba'al shem tov* was printed in Lodz in two volumes, collecting passages from 210 printed works. Menachem Kallus translated and annotated a section of this work in *Pillar of Prayer: Guidance in Contemplative Prayer, Sacred Study, and the Spiritual Life, from the Baal Shem Tov and his Circle* (Louisville, Ky., 2011).

[4] See Ada Rapoport-Albert, 'Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change', in ead. (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised* (London, 1996), 76–140. The main collection of R. Dov Ber's teachings is *Magid devarav leya'akov*, first printed in Koretz, 1781; annotated, critical edn. by Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer (Jerusalem, 1976).

[5] See *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes*, trans. and ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1982), 8. Arthur Green suggests that many hasidic teachers (Habad and Bratslav excluded) would restrict themselves to citing works familiar to the members of their intended audience in order that the ethical and spiritual force of the homily would carry more weight. The familiar works he lists include popular talmudic tractates, *Midrash Rabbah* and *Tanḥuma*, and Rashi's commentary on the Torah.

[6] *Sefat emet al hatorah* (Piotrkov, 1905–8). See Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1998) and Yoram Jacobson, 'From Youth to Leadership and from Kabbalah to Hasidism: Stages in the Spiritual Development of the Author of *Sefat emet*' (Heb.), in Rachel Elior and Joseph Dan (eds.), *Rivka Shatz-Uffenheimer Memorial Volume* [Sefer hazikaron lerivkah shats-ufenheimer], vol. ii (Jerusalem, 1996), 429–46.

year by year, from late 1870 until December 1904. Each teaching begins with a key text and combines a number of such texts in a chain developing a theme. Very often the key text is a brief quotation from *Midrash Rabbah* on the weekly Torah portion, or from *Tanḥuma*, though it is sometimes taken from other midrashic collections. Other key texts might include a verse from Scripture, a phrase from Rashi's commentary on the Torah, a line from Mishnah *Pirkei avot*, or a teaching that he had heard from his grandfather, Rabbi Isaac Meir. Significantly, on virtually every page, there are several quotations and discussions from the Midrash.

The emergence of this unusual focus on Midrash in the *Sefat emet* relates to the interplay of esoteric versus exoteric teachings in the hasidic movement as a whole, and Kotsk and Ger hasidism in particular. While some branches of hasidism, in particular the Habad school and also their some-time opponent Rabbi Tsevi Hirsch of Zhidachow (d. 1831),[7] overtly discussed themes from the kabbalah, the direction taken by the great Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk (d. 1859) was to ridicule such study. There is a story that a Habad hasid came to Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk, who asked him what *kavanah* (kabbalistic 'intention') he employed while reciting the Shema and Amidah prayers. The hasid told him. The anecdote does not recount exactly what he said—but presumably it was not a *kavanah* in the Lurianic sense,[8] but rather a Habad teaching about the flow of spiritual life-force from the Ein Sof (Infinite), giving existence to all the worlds, and the way all is 'really' subsumed in the Oneness of the Ein Sof, as described in Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady's *Likutei amarim—Tanya* (1797) in connection with recitation of the Shema,[9] or some similar Habad teaching. Hearing this, the Kotsker cried out with a loud voice 'Un vi iz der pipik?'—and what about the *pipik* (lit., stomach), the guts, the coarse and genuine reality of man?[10]

Thus Rabbi Isaac Meir avoided overt esotericism, and his collected writings, called *Ḥidushei harim*,[11] are devoted to talmudic and halakhic analysis. It seems that his grandson and successor,[12] Rabbi Judah Leib, felt that in addition to Talmud and

[7] See Zevi Hirsch Eichenstein, *Turn Aside from Evil and Do Good: An Introduction and a Way to the Tree of Life*, trans. and ed. Louis Jacobs (London, 1995).

[8] R. Isaac Luria's prescriptions for the conceptualization of specific kabbalistic themes (*kavanot*) while reciting the various sections of the daily prayers were presented in works such as R. Shabbatai of Rashkov's Lurianic prayer-book, *Kavanat halimud* (Korets, 1794/5). Although this edition of this work was published by the hasidim, there was a trend to abandon the specific Lurianic *kavanot* in favour of hasidic interpretations and approaches to prayer. See Joseph G. Weiss, 'The Kavanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism' in id., *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed. D. Goldstein (Oxford, 1985), 95–125, and Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (London, 1972).

[9] *Tanya*, pt. 2, *Sha'ar hayiḥud veha'emunah*. See ch. 1.

[10] Yisrael Ya'akov Artan, *Emet ve'emunah* (Jerusalem, 1940), p. 14, §91. The editor adds the following: 'As a hasid of Kotsk said to a hasid of another *rebbe*, "your *rebbe* speaks unto Heaven and our *rebbe* says Torah which goes into the *pipik*."'

[11] The first publication of the several volumes of this work were in Józefów 1867, Warsaw 1870–80.

[12] When R. Isaac Meir died in 1866, Judah Leib was only 18 years old, and he refused to accept the position of *rebbe*. R. Hanokh Heynekh Hakohen Levin of Aleksandrow became *rebbe* instead. When

halakhah there must be some further level of communication by a *rebbe* to his hasidim. His use of Midrash in the *Sefat emet* and, indeed, the entire project of this work express his goal of revealing an inner, spiritual dimension of the Torah. His writings show that he was conversant with Habad teachings,[13] and he sometimes cites the Zohar as well. However, far more frequently and consistently, it is the Midrash that provides him with the means to develop his spiritual themes.

HASIDIC TEACHINGS *AS* MIDRASH

I turn now to a further aspect of the relationship between hasidic *derush* and Midrash. Not only does the hasidic teaching *use* Midrash but, in some cases, *in itself* it can be seen as a form of latter-day Midrash. Indeed, it is a revival of the midrashic mode, in which a text acts as the germinator of an inspired outpouring of visionary narrative, perceptions, and ideas. This characterization applies to the teachings in the *Sefat emet*, with the rider that the 'text' is often a phrase of Midrash or a comment by Rashi, rather than simply a verse from Scripture (as will be discussed below). Another important earlier example of this kind is evident in the teachings of the great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (d. 1810). He was a prominent figure in the third generation of hasidism, whose influence extends strongly to the present day. Shaul Magid, in the context of discussing the teachings of Rabbi Nahman collected in his *Likutei moharan* (Ostraha, 1808) in relation to the Midrash mode, suggests various ways of extending the boundaries of the definition of Midrash in order to include Rabbi Nahman's fascinating *torot* (teachings).

Are Rabbi Nahman's teachings to be considered 'associative' or even 'poetic Midrash'?[14] Magid tries to draw a distinction between what he sees as the exegeti-

the latter passed away in 1870, R. Judah Leib accepted the position of leader of the Gerer dynasty. At the same time he was, like his grandfather R. Isaac Meir, the rabbi and *av beit din* of Gora Kalwaria.

[13] See Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth*, introd., p. xxxvii.

[14] See Shaul Magid 'Associative Midrash: Reflections on a Hermeneutical Theory in *Likutei MoHaRan*', in id. (ed.), *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism* (New York, 2002), 15–66. As presented by Magid, citing Daniel Boyarin's *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), classical 'Midrash' expounds the scriptural text often by means of an intertextual process, i.e. citing a passage from elsewhere in the biblical corpus in order to illuminate the text it is expounding. For Boyarin, the passage cited by the Midrash is not a proof-text (i.e. a passage presented in order to support previously determined conclusions) but rather is '*the generating force*' behind the midrashic exposition (*Intertextuality*, 22; italics in the original). By contrast, states Magid, 'associative Midrash' refers to R. Nahman's broadening of this process through his use of the term *beḥinah*, which enables him to establish associative relationships between concepts, one being a *beḥinah* ('aspect') of the other. The term 'poetic Midrash' expresses a further claim, that R. Nahman is writing in his 'own' voice, not that of the text he is expounding, and his teachings in *Likutei moharan* can therefore be considered poetry, unlike midrashic exegesis, which remains bound to the scriptural text it is expounding. However, says Magid, R. Nahman's poetry is 'couched in a proemic (i.e. midrashic) form' ('Associative Midrash', 21), and in that sense is 'poetic Midrash'.

cal goal of Midrash and the personal spiritual praxis of Rabbi Nahman's hasidic texts. Whereas classical Midrash draws on a 'far verse' (i.e. distant in Scripture from the verse being expounded) in order to generate an exegetical discourse that will lead back to a novel explication of the initial verse, Rabbi Nahman typically moves from his opening text to some 'transtextual' hasidic praxis, perspective, or ideal.[15] In addition to this feature, his use of the term *beḥinah* (aspect) to create intertextual links (A is the *beḥinah* of B; i.e. A = B) vastly broadens his ability[16] to weave a tapestry that extends far beyond the more controlled links between texts delineated in classical Midrash—links effected by such technical artifices as *al tikra* ('do not read [the text as written, but rather in a modified form]'), *kiveyakhol* ('so to speak') or even *ke'ilu* ('as if').[17] As described by Magid, these differences notwithstanding, the midrashic form is essentially preserved in Rabbi Nahman's teachings. Moreover, one could argue that even the apparent differences do not carry us very far from the classical midrashic approach, since it too seeks to convey ideals and achieve emotional–spiritual edification through various forms of creative association and identification. And further: just as the classical Midrash believes that its theological exegesis is a genuine reading of the inner depth of the text, at the level of *derush*, the hasidic teachers correspondingly believe that their theosophy is genuinely embodied in the 'text', whether on the level of *derush*, *remez* (hint), or *sod* (the esoteric level).[18]

MIDRASH AND THE ESOTERIC TRADITION

Our discussion raises the more general question of the relationship of Midrash to the esoteric or kabbalistic tradition of Jewish thought. In an interesting passage in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem discusses the difference in attitude expressed by Jewish philosophers and kabbalists to both halakhah and Midrash/aggadah. He regards the philosophers as seemingly uncomfortable with both, in contrast with the kabbalists, who turn to these subjects more enthusiastically.[19] In his view, their great attraction to the aggadah is because 'the whole of the Aggada can in a way be regarded as a popular mythology of the Jewish universe'.[20] He adds that the kabbalists broaden the scope of that 'mythology' so as to include the cosmic dimension. Scholem goes on to state that what is missing from the old aggadah is man's direct effect on the divine. Michael Fishbane critically discusses

[15] Magid, 'Associative Midrash', 28–31, 38–40.

[16] Ibid. 20, 43–9.

[17] See Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), 22–32, and more extensively in id., *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford, 2003), appendix 1.

[18] The traditional four levels of interpretation (*pardes*) are *peshat* (the literal), *remez* ('hints' to further teachings), *derush* (deeper exposition), and *sod* (the esoteric level). See the recent discussion of ways of interpreting these four levels in Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago, 2008), 64–107. See also R. Menachem M. Schneerson, *On the Essence of Chassidus*, trans. Susan Handelman (and Y. Greenberg) (Brooklyn, NY, 1998).

[19] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, paperback edn., 1961), 29.

[20] Ibid. 31.

this idea and successfully demonstrates that there are some midrashic passages where a direct human effect on the divine is depicted in a manner very similar to that described by the kabbalists, for whom the theurgical aspect of both halakhah and *kavanah* (the 'intention' behind the performance of halakhah or of prayer) is central.[21] Fishbane shows how the *Pesikta derav kahana* moves in its interpretation of the phrase 'But the righteous one holds fast to his way, and the pure of hands will increase strength' (Job 17: 9), from first depicting God's effect upon the righteous ('"the pure of hands" refers to the Holy One . . . [who] "will increase strength"—give power to the righteous to fulfil His Will'), to expressing the effect of the righteous upon the divine: 'Whenever the righteous do the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, they increase strength in the *dynamis*' (*mosifin ko'aḥ bagevurah*).[22] Fishbane gives further attention to this theme in his *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, where he explores midrashic depictions of the divine's dependence on human repentance, the effect of Jewish obedience to the Law on the erotic coupling of the cherubs in the Holy of Holies in the Temple, and examples of human action that arouse divine mercy and power.[23]

In general, as David Flusser puts it, one could say that both rabbinic mysticism and aggadah are the product of the same *Weltanschauung*, although he also sounds a note of caution regarding such an approach, stating that in order to understand their reciprocal relationship more serious research is needed into the field of aggadah.[24] Fishbane draws attention to Flusser's comment and, it could be said, in part sets himself the task of revealing that dimension of thought in which mysticism and Midrash, kabbalistic theosophy, and aggadic images and narrative can be found together.[25] This paper attempts in a very limited way to follow his example, focusing on the Habad hasidic school, providing just a glimpse of a very broad and varied topic.

[21] Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 24.

[22] Ibid. See *Pesikta derav kahana*, *According to an Oxford Manuscript, with Variants from All Known Manuscripts and Genizoth Fragments and Parallel Passages*, ed. Dov (Bernard) Mandelbaum, 2 vols. (New York, 1962), ii. 379–81 (*piska* 25); *Pesikta vehi agadat erets yisra'el meyuḥeset lerav kahana*, ed. S. Buber (Lyck, 1868, repr. New York, 1949), 166*a–b* (*piska* 26). See by contrast Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 173–81, exploring the difference between midrashic and kabbalistic explanations of Ps. 121: 5, in which the divine is described as 'a shadow' of man.

[23] Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, 172–82.

[24] David Flusser, 'Scholem's Recent Book on Merkabah Literature', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 11 (1960), 68, reviewing Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and the Talmudic Tradition: Based on the Israel Goldstein Lectures, delivered at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York* (New York, 1960).

[25] See Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 197 n. 1. A differing view on the relationship between aggadic Midrash and mysticism is expressed by Joseph Dan and Shaul Magid. See Joseph Dan, 'Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity: An Introduction', in id., *Jewish Mysticism: Late Antiquity* (Northvale, NJ, 1998), p. xxii, and Shaul Magid, 'Associative Midrash', 17 and 50 n. 12, quoting Joseph Dan's depiction of the writing of the Heikhalot mystics as 'a negation of Midrash' because it transcends textual exegesis.

THE CHAIN OF TEXTUAL SANCTITY

In order to engage with this material, we have to cross a certain barrier—for our general understanding is that Midrash is an interpretation of the biblical text. As Moshe Idel puts it: 'There are two main components in the interpretative experience: the text and the interpreter. The text is the canonized Hebrew Bible whose precise borders are delineated and whose sacrosanct status is sealed.'[26] However, as Joseph Dan has pointed out, 'to the Jew of the Middle Ages, all of Talmudic–midrashic literature, as well as the Bible, was considered holy' and could therefore function as the starting point of a sermon or *derash* (a homiletic insight) whose goal was to reveal some further dimension of the text with which it began.[27] This is apparent in the writings of the Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Judah Loew, *c.*1520–1609), and can be seen most clearly in the *Eight Gates* (*Shemoneh she'arim*) of his contemporary Rabbi Hayim Vital (1543–1620), who transmitted the teachings of his master Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–72). One of the 'Gates' is called *sha'ar hapesukim*, 'the Gate of [Scriptural] Verses', and expounds the kabbalistic meanings of passages in Scripture; another is called *sha'ar ma'amarei rashbi*, '[the] Gate of the Teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai', and expounds the Zohar. And a third is called *sha'ar ma'amarei ḥazal* '[the] Gate of the Teachings of our Sages, of Blessed Memory', and expounds passages from the Talmud, the Midrash, and Mishnah *Pirkei avot*.[28] Throughout, the mode of 'exposition' is quite other than a scholarly elucidation or exegesis. Rather, successive levels of textual meaning are disclosed to reveal a broad spiritual landscape. This overall concern was central to the work of the kabbalists. The text at hand, sometimes especially processed by such complex methods as *gematriyah* (calculating the numerical values of words), became a window through which the student could perceive intimations of the divine.

In this way Scripture, the Written Torah, becomes the head of a chain of sacred texts extending through the generations. In the hasidic *derush* literature, the 'sacred text' being exposited might even be from the very recent past, as we will see.

VARIETIES OF 'TEXT' IN HASIDISM

As is the case for the Maharal or Rabbi Hayim Vital, so too for the hasidim the sacred phrase that triggers hasidic interpretative responses may be from Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, Rashi's commentary on the Torah, or from a passage in the daily prayers.[29] There are even instances where the phrasing of Rabbi Joseph

[26] Moshe Idel, 'Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah', in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (eds.), *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1986), 141.

[27] See Joseph Dan, 'Homiletic Literature', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), viii, col. 948.

[28] It is intriguing that *sha'ar hapesukim*—focusing on the verses of Scripture—is the fourth gate, *after* those of *ma'amrei rashbi* and *ḥazal*, which are second and third respectively.

[29] This is true also of some of the *derush* literature which preceded hasidism proper. Mendel Piekarz discusses this in his *The Beginning of Hasidism: Ideological Trends in Derush and Musar Literature* [Bimei tsemiḥat haḥasidut: megamot ra'ayoniyot besifrei derush umusar] (Jerusalem, 1978) 35–95.

Karo's code of law, the *Shulḥan arukh*, is used as the target 'text'. And not only this, but, in some cases, one master's hasidic teaching may also become the 'text' that a later master expounds.

Let us return to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav's *Likutei moharan*, which, as will be recalled, expounds new teachings on the basis of a biblical verse, an aggadah from the Talmud, or a quotation from the Zohar. In the next generation, Rabbi Nahman's disciple, Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz (1780–1845), in his *Likutei halakhot* (Zolkiev, 1847–8), juxtaposes his master's teaching from *Likutei moharan* and a halakhic statement from the *Shulḥan arukh*. The statement of the halakhah, sometimes only a brief phrase, becomes the 'text' for exposition, and Rabbi Nathan's own interpretation, based on a specific teaching of Rabbi Nahman, opens it up as a spiritual pathway—providing the illumination of Bratslav thought. Similar processes are seen in the *derush* literature of other hasidic groups, including Rabbi Judah Leib Alter's *Sefat emet*, discussed above, where a line from the Midrash, *Pirkei avot*, or even Rashi's commentary on the Torah becomes the 'text' which is expounded in terms of the transtextual themes of Gerer hasidism—including, in particular, teachings in the name of Rabbi Judah Leib's grandfather, Rabbi Isaac Meir, founder of this school.

MIDRASH IN HABAD

These preliminary remarks set the stage for us to consider the role of Midrash in the Habad–Lubavitch school. Here we find that Midrash becomes an important medium in its goal of transmitting to the widest reaches of its hasidic following the ideals of inwardness and of a spiritualized conception of life. The quest to communicate spirituality using esoteric teachings distinguished Habad from earlier hasidic paths.[30] Midrash *per se*, and the creation of a literary genre which can be seen as a latter-day form of spiritual Midrash, are important tools in this task.

A letter by Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880–1950), written in 1921 in the early years of his leadership as the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, ascribes an exalted spiritual power to intimate and personalized study of the *Midrash Rabbah*, which, he claims, may sometimes even achieve that which hasidic teachings alone might fail to accomplish. He writes:

> *Avodah* [service] is demanded from us, literally, a term relating to the curing of skins [*orot me'ubadim*],[31] that one takes a thick hide and puts it in a special vessel, and by means of a number of additives the hide becomes soft and fit for its intended purpose: so too is *avodah*. In our case, we have everything in plenty. The hide is thick, and we are put in the vessel, in the saucepan, and we also have the right ingredients, they are the waters of revealed Torah and hasidic teachings. Nonetheless, the hide does not get soft. So we have to ask many questions: whose fault is it? Is it on account of the hide or because of the

[30] See Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: the Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago, 1990).

[31] The Hebrew word for 'curing' (of leather) has the same root as that for 'service'.

broth? It is anyway clear that there is a problem, and we have to root out and eradicate that problem. Sometimes good counsel is to have a session studying *Midrash Rabbah*, with understanding, applying it to oneself, so that it arouses the heart, as my sacred great-grandfather [Rabbi Menahem Mendel] the Tsemah Tsedek [1789–1866], said: 'Zohar exalts the soul, the Midrash arouses the heart, and Tehilim [Psalms] with tears wash out the vessel.' Thus I heard from Rabbi Hanokh Hendel of blessed memory, who was told this in *yeḥidut* [private audience, with Rabbi Menahem Mendel]. Ultimately, one has to make the effort, and plead with the Divine that He help us and shine His countenance upon us with kindness and mercy.[32]

Here study of a traditional midrashic collection such as *Midrash Rabbah* is presented as helping a person attain a state of inner purity and wholesomeness which, claims Rabbi Joseph Isaac, is an important adjunct to study of the Habad hasidic teachings. In Habad thought, as we might expect, the Habad teachings are generally seen as paramount in their power to open spiritual doors. But in this context we note a most unusual and even surprising affirmation of the importance and power of studying Midrash in its classical collections. In addition, Habad teachings often employed midrashic passages and themes in order to create their own genre of spiritual communication, *ḥasidut* (hasidic teachings), also called *dakh*, an acronym of the liturgical phrase *divrei elokim ḥayim* 'words of the living God'.[33]

To begin our exploration of this process, let us turn back to the beginning of Habad at the end of the eighteenth century and, in particular, the tract *Likutei amarim—Tanya* by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745–1812). This work is a manual on spiritual service of the divine, creating a structured system which, the author felt, imparted the path of his teachers in the hasidic movement.

The author set as his task the intensive communication of spiritual teachings, which he saw as a necessary task both for the wellbeing of the Jewish people and for the eventual coming of the messiah. In this he was responding to a theme in a letter by the Ba'al Shem Tov, which reports that he was told by the messiah in a mystical 'ascent of the soul' that the redemption would come 'when your teachings burst outward'.[34] This idea itself is consistent with the teaching of the kabbalist Rabbi Hayim Vital, who similarly stated in the introduction to his *Ets ḥayim* ('Tree of Life') that study of the kabbalah would both preserve the Jewish people and bring the messiah.[35]

[32] R. Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, *Igerot kodesh admor yosef yitsḥak*, vol. xiv (Brooklyn, NY, 1998), 30–1; see also vol. x (Brooklyn, NY, 1984), 390. The phrase concerning the Zohar, Midrash, and Psalms is quoted in R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson's anthology of hasidic sayings arranged as a diary, *Hayom yom* (Brooklyn, NY, 1943 and frequently reprinted); see the entry for 16 Tevet.

[33] The talmudic use of this phrase is to suggest the spiritual transcendence of opposites: although two sages may maintain opposing views, on a higher level both opinions are true (cf. BT *Eruv.* 13*b*, *Git.* 6*b*), and this is an apt way of defining the process of hasidic discourse. See R. Shneur Zalman's *Likutei torah* (Brooklyn, NY, 1999), 'Aḥarei', 27*b*.

[34] Prov. 5: 16. See Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, Mass., 2005), 79–87.

[35] See R. Hayim Vital, *Tree of Life* [Sefer ets ḥayim], 2 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1960), i. 5–21. Cf. Rachel Elior's

The opening up of the corpus of sacred wisdom to wider circles than before brought criticism of Rabbi Shneur Zalman both from kabbalists who were opposed to hasidism, such as Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720–97), and from some other hasidic leaders, colleagues of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, who were against too much revelation of spiritual or mystical thought. As Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk (1741–1810) put it: 'Too much oil can extinguish the lamp.'[36] Nonetheless, Rabbi Shneur Zalman made communication of spirituality his central endeavour, and created a form of Midrash that presents esoteric, cosmic perceptions in the apparently exoteric, accessible medium of the Habad hasidic discourse.

TANYA: FINDING ONE'S PLACE IN THE TORAH

A theoretical underpinning of this process is seen in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya*. In his introduction to this work, the author discusses different forms of spiritual guidance.[37] Direct face-to-face communication is paramount; then follow different kinds of written text. Of these, the most important are those based on the midrashic expositions of the sages, 'in whom the spirit of God spoke and His word was on their tongue'.[38]

Rabbi Shneur Zalman goes on to say that all the myriads of the Jewish people cleave to the Torah, and the Torah connects them to God. On the one hand, this expresses the mystic power of the Torah, 'as is known from the sacred Zohar'. This might refer to the idea that 'there are three levels [*dargin*] which are interconnected: the Holy One, the Torah, and [the people] Israel'.[39] All this pertains to the Jewish people as a whole. However, asks Rabbi Shneur Zalman, what about the individual? He answers that each person is individually bonded to the Torah and thus to God because *of the possibility of the multiple interpretation of the Torah*:

> because the Torah is given to be interpreted [both] in general and in particular, even down to the most minute detail, to [apply to] each and every individual soul of Israel, which is rooted in it.[40]

The interpretation of the Torah, the *derash*, provides the link between the individual and the Torah. However, states Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the problem is that 'Not every person is able to recognize his own individual place in the Torah.' That

discussion of this introduction, which stands as an independent essay by R. Hayim Vital, in her 'Messianic Expectations and Spiritualization of Religious Life in the Sixteenth Century', *Revue des études juives*, 145 (1986), 35–49; repr. in David B. Ruderman (ed.), *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York, 1992), 283–98.

[36] See R. Abraham's letter expressing his disapproval of R. Shneur Zalman's imparting of mystical teachings, in Jacob Barnai, *Hasidic Letters from Erets Yisra'el* [Igerot ḥasidim me'erets yisra'el] (Jerusalem, 1980), 240.

[37] R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Likutei amarim—Tanya* (Slavuta, 1796; Vilna, 1900; bilingual edn, trans. N. Mindel et al., London, 1973), introd., fo. 3*b*.

[38] Cf. 2 Sam. 23: 2.

[39] Zohar iii. 73*a*.

[40] *Tanya*, introd., 3*b*.

is, many individuals cannot find their personal interpretative route to their particular place in the Torah, bonding them as an individual to God. Rabbi Shneur Zalman explains that there are many different pathways, as for example the different routes of Hillel and Shammai. He then announces that he has written this tract for his followers, with whom he feels a close bond. The unspoken implication is that he claims to have found a way, through his book, to help them find their individual place in the Torah—their own path of *derash* which leads to their bond with the Torah and with God. Viewed in this way, he conceived his book, which he saw as based on the teachings of his forebears, the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid,[41] as helping forge a personal route in *derash*, one which leads to the divine.

EXPOUNDING AN AGGADAH

The *Tanya* starts with a quotation of an aggadah from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Nidah*, concerning the way the soul is made to take an oath before it comes into the world. According to this, the soul is adjured: 'Be a *tsadik* [righteous person], and not a *rasha* [evildoer], and even if the whole world considers you a *tsadik*, consider yourself as a *rasha*.'[42]

For the first fourteen chapters Rabbi Shneur Zalman's tract expounds the meaning of that aggadah in terms of what it means spiritually to be a *tsadik* or a *rasha*, drawing on kabbalistic teachings of the Zohar, Rabbi Hayim Vital, and other sources. Subsequent chapters, and subsequent sections of the work, either introduce a new 'text'—often a scriptural verse, or a quotation from Talmud or Zohar—or simply continue to explain the author's system of inner spiritual psychology as it relates to contemplation, inspiration, repentance, and action.

The *Tanya* can thus be seen as a work which initially expounds a specific aggadah from the Talmud. This exposition, together with the opening of other 'texts', is the vehicle which, in the view of the author, will help readers find their individual 'path' in the Torah.

THE RIVER OF TORAH

It is interesting that near the beginning of *Tanya* we find an image depicting the chain of sacred texts that includes Midrash and aggadah as part of the flow of divine revelation, authentically expressing the divine essence of the scriptural text, seemingly on a par with the halakhic dimension of Torah teaching.

> Although God is termed Ein Sof [Infinite] . . . 'and thought does not grasp Him at all'[43] . . . [nonetheless] 'in the place where you find the greatness of the Holy One, there you find His humility',[44] and He contracted His will and wisdom in the 613 commandments

[41] R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch.

[42] BT *Nid.* 30*b*. In fact in this place in the Talmud this passage starts *darash r. simlai*, although in BT *Yev.* 71*b* it is referred to by the word *vehatanya*.

[43] *Tikunei zohar* (Jerusalem, 1965), beginning of 2nd introd., fo. 30*a*.

[44] BT *Meg.* 31*a*.

of the Torah, and their *halakhot*, and in the combinations of letters of the Bible, and their explanations which are in the aggadot and *midrashim* of our Sages—so that every soul . . . in a human body will be able to grasp them in his mind and uphold them as much as possible in action, speech, and thought. Hence the Torah is compared to water [in a talmudic aggadah[45]], because just as water flows from a high place to a low place, so the Torah descends from the place of its glory, the divine will and wisdom, [where] Torah and the Holy One are one, and thought cannot grasp Him at all—and from there it descended . . . level after level in the down-chaining of the worlds, until it was garbed in physical things and worldly matters.[46]

Thus not only the verse of Scripture, but the halakhah, and indeed the Midrash or aggadah, are all sacred. The descending movement starts with the Written Torah, the biblical verse, or rather the supernal form of that sacred text, beyond thought. Then comes the text itself and all further levels of explanation, each of which may itself be explained further, bringing the flow of the water of Torah closer to the individual person; with the flow of Torah also comes the sense of contact with the divine. For Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the lower 'exoteric' reaches of the river are joined with and even carry something of the very mystical origins of Torah, the point where Torah and the Holy One are joined, beyond thought and beyond the many levels of our world.

RABBI SHNEUR ZALMAN'S DISCOURSES

Apart from his written tract *Tanya*, Rabbi Shneur Zalman also taught oral discourses that were transcribed after the sabbath by his closest disciples and have been published in about two dozen volumes.[47] These contain *derushim*, most of which start by expounding a verse of Scripture, generally from the Pentateuch, sometimes from the *haftarah*, and quite frequently on verses from Song of Songs. However there is also a volume collecting a substantial number of *derushim* that begin by expounding passages from Talmud, Zohar, and the text of the prayers.[48] The teachings in another volume take as their 'text' a theme in the kabbalah or an idea from hasidic teaching.[49] The typical form of these discourses starts with the 'text', then launches into a topic of hasidic 'philosophy', based on ideas about the soul, Godliness, the spiritual nature of existence, one's relationship with the divine through Torah study, prayer, and performance of the commandments—and then returns to the original 'text'.

As suggested above, when discussing Shaul Magid's treatment of Bratslav teachings, the foregoing techniques could be seen to parallel the way in which a *midrash* like *Leviticus Rabbah* uses the initial text from the Pentateuch to open up a theolog-

[45] BT *Ta'an.* 7*a*.

[46] *Tanya*, pt. 1, ch. 4, fo. 8*b*.

[47] The first publications, edited by R. Menahem Mendel (the Tsemah Tsedek), third leader of Habad–Lubavitch, were *Torah or* (Kopyst, 1837) and *Likutei torah* (Zhitomir, 1848). In the second half of the 20th cent. the Kehot Publication Society published over twenty volumes of R. Shneur Zalman's teachings from manuscript transcriptions with the generic title *Maamorei admur hazoken.*

[48] *Maamorei admur hazoken al maamorei razal (shas, zohar, usefiloh)* (Brooklyn, NY, 1984).

[49] *Maamorei admur hazoken al inyonim* (Brooklyn, NY, 1983).

ical discourse through associated texts drawn from such 'wisdom' sources as the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Looking at the work of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, we therefore see the creation of a large literature in which a form of kabbalistic midrashic exegesis became the vehicle to convey to his followers hasidic mystical ideas about *bitul*, hasidic selflessness, love of the divine, the significance of the commandments, and inspired perceptions of the nature of existence. Many of these ideas were also taught by his colleagues in the leadership of the hasidic movement at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, together with the midrashic element in his exposition of these concepts there was also a 'philosophical' dimension, which provides a sense of a rational, discursive development of a theme.[50] These elements together created the distinctively cerebral 'Habad' genre of hasidic teachings,[51] which was continued by Rabbi Shneur Zalman's successors in the leadership of that school.

STUDY OF THE AGGADAH

Rabbi Shneur Zalman was a noted halakhist who compiled a new edition of the *Shulḥan arukh*.[52] It is interesting that in his halakhic writings he strongly encouraged the study of the aggadah. His first published work, a halakhic tract on the laws of Torah study, in a passage giving advice to the seasoned scholar who has thorough knowledge of the entire Written and Oral Torah recommends regular study of the aggadah, quoting *Sifrei Deuteronomy*: 'If you want to know He who spoke and the world came into being—learn the words of aggadah, for through them you will know the Holy One, blessed be He, and will cleave to His ways.'[53] He also declares that 'most secrets of the Torah, the wisdom of the kabbalah, and knowledge of the divine are concealed in the aggadah', an idea based on the Lurianic writings.[54] This idea is also cited in a letter by Rabbi Shneur Zalman to the communities of his followers, instituting daily study of the *Ein ya'akov* anthology of talmudic aggadah compiled by Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib (1460–1526) in the synagogue 'between the afternoon and the evening prayer', adding that according to the Lurianic writings

[50] See Naftali Loewenthal, '"Reason" and "Beyond Reason" in Habad Hasidism', in Moshe Hallamish (ed.), *Alei shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr Alexandre Safran* (Ramat Gan, 1990), 109–26.

[51] Note that the word Habad is an acronym of Hokhmah, Binah, and Da'at—wisdom, understanding, and knowledge—the 'cerebral' *sefirot*, contrasting with Hesed (kindness), Gevurah (severity), and so on, the *sefirot* depicting 'emotion'.

[52] For a full bibliographical account of R. Shneur Zalman's halakhic writings, see Y. Mondshine, *The Halakhic Works of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi* [Sifrei hahalakhah shel admor hazaken (ba'al hatanya vehashulḥan arukh): bibliografiyah] (Kfar Chabad, 1984).

[53] R. Shneur Zalman, *Hilkhot talmud torah* (first published anonymously Shklov, 1794; Brooklyn, NY, 1968), 2: 2, fo. 13*a*, citing *Sifrei Deuteronomy* on 'Ekev', end of §13 (on Deut. 11: 22). See also ibid. 2: 9, fo. 15*b*.

[54] Ibid. 2: 2, fo. 13*a*; cf. the Lurianic prayer book, *Kavanat halimud*, ed. R. Shabbatai of Rashkov (Korets, 1794/5; modern repr. Israel, no place, no date), fo. 130*a*.

study of the aggadah achieves atonement for the individual.[55] He saw this study as approximating to the study of overtly mystical teachings, and perhaps even more important.

Hence we see Rabbi Shneur Zalman at the turn of the nineteenth century as a figure who encouraged the study of aggadah in the hasidic community, and who, like his contemporaries Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, and later figures like Rabbi Judah Leib Alter, created in his own teachings a midrashic literature for his own time—namely, a hasidic *derush* literature, which became the substance of the communication of hasidic spirituality among his followers.

We will now consider some aspects of this focus on Midrash and midrashic modes of exposition in Habad during the subsequent two centuries.

MIDRASH AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY HABAD

In subsequent generations, each Habad leader—sometimes there was more than one at the same time—would produce teachings broadly of the style of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's oral discourses and often modelled on his original themes. These are published in many Hebrew volumes—about a score by Rabbi Shneur Zalman's son and successor Rabbi Dov Ber (1773–1827), and more than twice as many by his successor Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Tsemah Tsedek (d. 1866).

Fluency of knowledge of Midrash as well as of other aspects of Torah was an important element in the repertoire of these hasidic leaders. It is said that the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dovber (d. 1920) would study the whole *Midrash Rabbah* every year, week by week—'"borrowing in the long *sidrot*"[56] and "paying back" in the shorter ones'.[57] He would also study the Torah, Prophets, and Writings daily, learning chapters by heart, as well as studying the Mishnah, the two Talmuds, and halakhic writings.[58] These ingredients helped him weave his fascinating lengthy tracts of kabbalistic–hasidic philosophy, which he would teach week by week, each one interleaved with a comment on the weekly Torah portion.[59] It is noteworthy that *Midrash Rabbah* is included in this list of 'revealed Torah' that he would study

[55] See *Tanya*, pt. 4, ch. 23, fo. 137*a*, and the passage in the Lurianic prayer-book about the study of aggadah cited in the previous note.

[56] *Seder*, *sedra*, *sidra*, and *parashah* are terms for one of the fifty-three portions into which the Pentateuch is divided for communal recitation in the synagogue each week. *Midrash Rabbah* and several other midrashic collections are divided in the same way, except that some portions are much longer than others. The passage quoted suggests R. Shalom Dovber would study *Midrash Rabbah* week by week approximately following the current Torah portion, balancing the longer portions in the Midrash against those which are shorter.

[57] See R. Menachem Schneerson, *Hayom yom*, entry for 3 Nisan. [58] Ibid.

[59] For a brief discussion of the hasidic discourses of R. Shalom Dovber, see Naftali Loewenthal, 'Joining Worlds: The Revealed and Hidden Torah, Study and Action—The Yeshivah of the Last Rebbe of Lubavitch' (Heb.), in Immanuel Etkes (ed.), *Yeshivot and Batei Midrash* [Yeshivot uvatei midrash] (Jerusalem, 2006), 385–6.

regularly, apart from kabbalistic and hasidic works, which provided the main themes for his published writings.[60]

One can suggest that in the traditional community in eastern Europe, *Midrash Rabbah* was seen as a central canon of basic Midrash. Indeed, the complete 'set' of *Midrash Rabbah*, on the Pentateuch and the Five Megillot, had been printed as a unit as early as 1545 in Venice, by Bomberg, in 'square letters', thus enhancing its status as a sacred text.[61] This sense of 'canonization' of course did not exclude from study the other important collections of *midrashim*, such as *Tanḥuma*, but it did mean that complete editions of *Midrash Rabbah* were frequently published, including the splendid 1878 Vilna edition 'with fifteen commentaries' (the 1887 edition added even more). The composition of these commentaries, such as the *Matanot kehunah* by R. Issachar Ber Katz in the sixteenth century (first printed in Kraków, in 1597), and their inclusion on the printed pages of such grand editions added to the general sense of significance of *Midrash Rabbah*.

There is no evidence at all that the students of the Lubavitch yeshiva founded in 1897 spent much time specifically studying passages from the Midrash. However, they did assiduously study the Habad hasidic teachings that incorporate them. In the case of the sixth *rebbe*, Rabbi Joseph Isaac, during the 1930s when his main yeshiva was in Otwock, near Warsaw, some yeshiva students were privileged to hear his discourses directly. On Friday evening, when he would recite the discourse in public, a group of just ten yeshiva students was permitted to join the senior hasidic followers who were present. After this one hearing they would be expected to know it by heart, and during the sabbath they would each repeat it so that other members of the yeshiva and the community could hear it. A student who could not memorize the entire discourse in one hearing would not be permitted to be a member of the chosen ten the next time.[62] After being rescued from the Warsaw ghetto, and

[60] The story is related that R. Shalom Dovber asked his prominent follower, R. Asher of Nikolayev (editor of the 1900 Vilna edn. of *Tanya*)—'Do you have a *Midrash Rabbah* at home?' R. Asher replied in the negative. The Rebbe continued: 'If you have Rabbenu Tam tefillin, you also have to have a *Midrash Rabbah*' (heard from Yisroel Kozminsky, July 2009). The association of *Midrash Rabbah* with the second pair of tefillin worn by hasidim, which have an exalted spiritual status, is striking. Regarding Rabbenu Tam tefillin in Habad, see N. Loewenthal, '"From the Source of *Rahamim*": Graveside Prayer of Habad Hasidism', in Robert H. Hayward and Brad Embry (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Prayer* (Oxford, 2005), 207–23, esp. 211–12.

[61] When Hebrew printing began, 'square' or 'block' Hebrew letters, that is, a simplified form of the script employed in Torah scrolls or in formal documents, were used for printing biblical texts, and also for Mishnah and Talmud. Commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and other works of lesser sanctity, were printed in a form of cursive script. This became known as 'Rashi' lettering since it was used for Rashi's commentaries on the Bible and Talmud. Printing *Midrash Rabbah* in square letters rather than 'Rashi' lettering helped to emphasize its significance as a major Jewish text. It is interesting that the first edition of *Tanya* (as well as all subsequent editions) was also printed in 'square letters', distinguishing it from many rabbinic works of the period which were printed in 'Rashi' typeface.

[62] Oral communication in 2003 from the late R. Zev Greenglass (d. 2011), for many years *rosh yeshivah* of the Lubavitch yeshiva in Montreal, who had been a student in Otwock.

reaching the United States in 1940,[63] Rabbi Joseph Isaac founded the Lubavitch yeshiva at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, where he also resided. The rules for hearing the discourses were relaxed,[64] and he would also write them down. Later his successor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902–94), would deliver discourses at large hasidic gatherings. A special melody would precede the discourse and everyone would stand while it was delivered. A group of *ḥozerim*, 'repeaters', led by Rabbi Yoel Kahn, would memorize the discourse during that one hearing and later transcribe it. As in the previous generation, the yeshiva students were expected to be able to repeat by heart the various discourses they had studied.[65]

I thus see the twentieth-century discourses of Habad as combining an intense, esoteric quality, exemplified by the restricted permission to hear them and the special melody, with the quest to communicate. This duality is also expressed in their content, combining esoteric kabbalistic terminology and ideas, blended with exoteric midrashic themes. (And to a varying extent, as mentioned above, these elements have an overlay of a philosophical, discursive style.)

Apart from the more formal, and more mystical, discourses, both the sixth and seventh Lubavitch leaders would give *siḥot* (talks). The edited *siḥot* of the seventh *rebbe* fill over forty volumes and are wide-ranging discussions of the Torah readings and the festivals, in which there is constant quotation and interpretation of midrashic and aggadic material. This became a vehicle for presentation of the seventh *rebbe*'s ideas and world-view. Illustrative is a teaching on the concept of Midrash itself, which presents the idea that Midrash and other 'oral' aspects of Torah are the result of a mass repentance on the part of the Jewish people. This act spiritually empowered them to the extent that they could *add* to the Torah.

THE SECOND TABLETS OF THE LAW

According to *Exodus Rabbah*, Moses was very upset about the breaking of the first Tablets of the Law. However,

> God said to him: Do not be upset about the First Tablets, which only contained the Ten Commandments. For on the Second Tablets I am giving you there will be *halakhot*, Midrash, and aggadot, as it says 'He shall tell you the secrets of wisdom, for there is double [what you imagine] in [divine] knowledge.' [Job 11: 6][66]

[63] See Bryan Mark Rigg, *Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler's Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (New Haven, Conn., 2004).

[64] Due to accelerating multiple sclerosis his speech was slurred and it was hard to understand what he was saying.

[65] This demand is initiated at bar mitzvah, when the 13-year-old boy is expected to recite by heart a discourse on the meaning of tefillin.

[66] *Exod. Rabbah* 46: 1. In the scriptural verse, Zophar the Naamathite is rebuking Job, expressing the wish that God would reveal more of his wisdom to him, so that he would realize he had been dealt with leniently. See also BT *Ned.* 22*b*.

Rabbi Menachem Schneerson discussed this idea in a number of talks. At the time of the original giving of the Torah, the Israelites should have been *tsadikim* (righteous). But in fact they were not: they served the Golden Calf—hence the Tablets of the Law were broken. Had the people been righteous, they would have received only the Law in the brief form of the Decalogue. Why? Because the chief characteristic of a *tsadik* is that he keeps the Law, following its instructions fully and without deviation. He is wholly guided by it; that is, he 'receives from' and wholeheartedly accepts the Torah (*mekabel fun torah*) as God's direct word of instruction. But this, in fact, limits him.

By contrast, when the Israelites received the Second Tablets they were not on the level of the righteous, but rather of the *ba'al teshuvah*, or penitent—for they had sinned with the Golden Calf, and had subsequently repented. Now the power of repentance is such that 'it arouses and reveals the source of the soul . . . which is higher than the Torah'. And since those who received the Second Tablets had repented, they reached a spiritual level higher than that they had attained at the original revelation. Instead of merely *receiving* instruction from the Torah (being *mekabel fun torah*), like *tsadikim*, the righteous, these ancestors of the Jews were actually empowered to *add* something to the Torah—*zeynen yidden mashpia in torah*.

As a result the Second Tablets are not just a series of brief divine statements of the Law but now somehow incorporate all future human discussions of *halakhot*, Midrash, and aggadot. The spiritual power of repentance thus remarkably enabled them *leḥadesh*, to extrapolate new Torah teachings themselves.[67] This statement was made notwithstanding another favourite theme for Rabbi Schneerson, which stressed that all future Torah teachings were communicated to Moses himself at Sinai.[68]

Another, complementary explanation by Rabbi Menachem Schneerson is that through the process of the breaking of the First Tablets and the recognition of sin, the Jewish people achieved the quality of *shiflut*, humility. This enabled them to open their hearts to the infinity of Torah as expressed in the breadth of '*halakhot*, Midrash, and aggadot'—in contrast to the specific and defined text of Scripture. This is indicated in the liturgical phrase (found in the private meditation at the conclusion of the Amidah): 'Let my soul be as dust to everything; open my heart to Your Torah.'[69] That is, if one is as humble as the dust, the breadth of Torah is accessible to the heart. For Rabbi Schneerson, this bounty of Midrash includes the mystical dimensions of Torah and hasidic teaching, which he regarded as included in the 'secrets of wisdom' mentioned in the above-quoted passage from *Exodus Rabbah*.[70] What is of special significance is that this perspective also views Midrash and mysticism as on a theological and exegetical continuum. If there is a difference, this

[67] R. Menachem Schneerson, *Likutei siḥot*, vol. ix (Brooklyn, NY, 1978), 242.

[68] See JT *Pe'ah* 2: 4; *Tanḥuma* (Buber), 'Ki tisa' 17.

[69] *Likutei siḥot*, vol. xxvi (Brooklyn, NY, 1988), 249–52.

[70] See *Likutei siḥot*, vol. xxix (Brooklyn, NY, 1991), 258.

might be due to the fact that within the normative cultural milieu, Midrash *can* be openly expressed, whereas mysticism needs to be concealed. However, when the borders between the exoteric and esoteric are to some extent dissolved, and mysticism is more openly revealed—as in Habad hasidism—then *all* Torah teachings take on a mystical hue. For the devotee of esoteric mysticism, of course, this has, in fact, always been the case.

It is interesting to compare these interpretations by Rabbi Menachem Schneerson on the difference between the First and Second Tablets with that of Rabbi Judah Leib Alter. The late twentieth-century Habad explanation just noted sees the addition of '*halakhot*, Midrash, and aggadot' to the original statements of the Ten Commandments as something positive. In contrast Rabbi Judah Leib Alter, in his *Sefat emet*, depicts this change as the very opposite—namely, as an expression of the concealment of the divine. In his view, before the sin of the Golden Calf Godliness was revealed to an extraordinary degree. Citing the famous *midrash*: '"Engraved on the Tablets" [Exod. 32: 16]—Do not read *ḥarut* "engraved", but [rather] *ḥerut* "freedom"',[71] he taught that at Sinai the Jewish people were spiritually 'free' to ascend to higher worlds and descend to this material world without hindrance, like Adam before he sinned, or like Elijah. Correspondingly, the Torah was similarly 'free', and the ultimate revelation of the divine could be expressed in the Ten Commandments heard at Sinai. The transgression of the Golden Calf changed all this fundamentally: the sacred letters of the Ten Commandments could no longer dwell freely in this world on the physical tablets and 'flew away'.[72] From that time on Torah was not free—and even after the repentance of Israel and the giving of the Second Tablets, the Torah had to be concealed, even 'imprisoned', in the vessels of halakhah, Midrash, and aggadah. Only in this form could it enter our physical world. But despite this situation, on the sacred sabbath some aspect of the prior freedom returns and the Torah text again reveals the divine. It is for this reason that there is a public reading of the Torah on the sabbath.[73]

For the *Sefat emet* the Midrash and halakhah thus conceal (even 'imprison') the divine, yet this teaching also emphasizes the sense of contact with divine holiness through the chanting of the Torah on the sabbath. By contrast, the Lubavitcher Rebbe's interpretation depicts the halakhah, Midrash, and aggadah as expressing the infinite boundlessness of the Torah, for the effect of repentance empowered the people of Israel to add this dimension and to receive it within their hearts. The differences in interpretation can be understood as relating to the Habad emphasis on the great spiritual power of mystical texts, as against their dismissal in Kotsk–Ger, as noted earlier. For the author of the *Sefat emet*, the goal is not to authenticate the chain of Oral Torah texts but to heighten one's experience of the pure Written Torah on the sabbath.[74] Another point for consideration in evaluating the two contrasting

[71] Mishnah *Avot* 6: 2.

[72] See *Pesikta zutarta* (also known as *Midrash lekaḥ tov*), 'Ekev'.

[73] *Sefat emet* (Piotrkov, 1905), *Exodus*, 'Ki tisa' 5756 [1896], fo. 106*a*, p. 211.

[74] See Yoram Jacobson's article on the theme of the sabbath in Ger hasidism: 'The Sanctification of

interpretations of this *midrash* is the virtual apotheosis of the power of repentance in contemporary Lubavitch thought, which leads to its particular form of religious activism. As seen, the foregoing interpretation of *Exodus Rabbah* given by Rabbi Menachem Schneerson presents the idea that repentance fuels the highest attainments—including the ability to add to the Torah.

BATI LEGANI: A *MIDRASH* AS THE BASIS OF A WORLD-VIEW

I shall now investigate how specific midrashic texts were used to generate certain varieties of spiritual consciousness. In doing so, I go back in time to the sixth *rebbe*, Rabbi Joseph Isaac, who became a hasidic leader after the death of his father in 1920. At that time the centre of 'Lubavitch' hasidism had moved to Rostov-Don, in southern Russia, and the religious life of the Jewish community throughout the USSR was severely curtailed by the Bolsheviks and, more particularly, by the Yevsektzia, the Jewish arm of the Communist party. David Fishman has described this period of struggle, in which Rabbi Joseph Isaac fought to maintain traditional Jewish practice, including running secret *ḥadarim* where children were taught about Judaism.[75] He sent his leading followers to the various regions of the USSR in order to strengthen Jewish life. Some of these were arrested, and a number were tortured and killed.

In January 1923 Rabbi Joseph Isaac gave two lengthy discourses on two successive sabbaths (of the portions 'Bo' and 'Beshalaḥ', Exod. chs. 10–17). These discourses developed a unified theme, although the second had opening and concluding sections linked to the Torah reading for the second sabbath. In the opening paragraph, the first discourse quotes from the Song of Songs: 'You that dwell in the gardens, the companions hearken for your voice, let me hear it,'[76] and gives Rashi's commentary, which is loosely related to a passage in *Midrash Rabbah*, which Rabbi Joseph Isaac also cites:

> Rashi says 'You who sit in the gardens'—[meaning] God says to the Jewish people, 'You who are scattered in exile, grazing in the gardens of other people, dwelling in synagogues and study houses, the *ḥaverim* are listening—the ministering angels who are your friends . . . come to hear your voice in the synagogues'; and this is from *Midrash Rabbah*[77] [which states] that 'When [the people of] Israel sits in the synagogues and study houses and says

the Profane in Gur Hasidism: Reflections on the Concept of the Sabbath in the Teachings of the "Sefat Emet"' (Heb.), in Rachel Elior et al. (eds.), *Hasidism in Poland* [Ḥasidim ve'anshei ma'aseh: meḥkarim beḥasidut polin] (Jerusalem, 1994), 241–77, and Michael Fishbane, 'Transcendental Consciousness and Stillness in the Mystical Theology of R. Yehudah Arieh Leib of Gur', in Gerald J. Blidstein (ed.), *Sabbath: Idea, History, Reality* (Be'er Sheva, 2004), 119–29.

[75] See David E. Fishman, 'Preserving Tradition in the Land of Revolution: The Religious Leadership of Soviet Jewry, 1917–1930', in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (New York, 1992), 85–118.

[76] S. of S. 8: 13.

[77] See *S. of S. Rabbah* 8: 15.

the Shema and studies Torah, the *ḥaverim* listen, I [God] and My *pamaliyah* [group of ministering angels] come to hear your voice.'[78]

The goal of this discourse, of course, is to encourage the beleaguered traditional Jews of the USSR, especially his own hasidic followers, to continue to pray, attend the synagogue, and to study Torah, despite the risks involved. The midrashic depiction of the angels is used to promote normative Jewish practice in a time of struggle—an interpretation quite close to the original intent of the midrashic text. But although this passage is a recurrent theme of the discourse, Rabbi Joseph Isaac then turns to another topic, which would eventually captivate the imagination of the Habad movement for half a century.

'To explain this matter', says Rabbi Joseph Isaac, 'note that it is written "I have come into My garden [*bati legani*], My sister, [My] bride" [S. of S. 5: 1].' He then quotes *Midrash Rabbah* (that is, *S. of S. Rabbah*) on that verse:

> It does not say to [a or the] garden but *gani*, meaning *liginuni*, to My bridal chamber, to the place of My root [or 'essence', *ikari*] at the beginning. For the essence of the Shekhinah was in the lower world [*bataḥtonim*], but because of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge the Shekhinah departed from the earth to the [lowest heavenly] firmament; and because of the sin[s] of Cain and Enosh the Shekhinah departed from the first firmament to the second and the third; and after that, in the generation of the Flood, it departed from the third firmament to the fourth.[79]

This description of the original presence of the Shekhinah in the world, in the Garden of Eden, and its subsequent departure to ever more distant firmaments because of human sin is found in several midrashic sources: in *Song of Songs Rabbah* (5: 1), cited by Rabbi Joseph Isaac, and also in *Genesis Rabbah* (19: 13), *Pesikta rabati* (5: 7), *Tanḥuma* ('Pekudei', 6; 'Naso' 16); *Tanḥuma* (Buber) ('Naso' 24); and *Numbers Rabbah* ('Naso' 13: 4). It also appears in the first section of the fascinating *Pesikta derav kahana*, a *midrash* known to Rashi, then lost, but rediscovered in the early nineteenth century.[80]

[78] R. Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, *Sefer hama'amarim 5682–5683* [1921–3] (Brooklyn, NY, 1986), 168.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Leopold Zunz suggested the existence of the *Pesikta derav kahana* in his *Die gottesdienstlichen Vortraege der Juden historisch entwickelt* (1832). Over the next decades several manuscripts came to light. In 1868 Solomon Buber published it for the first time, and in 1962 a new critical edition edited by Dov (Bernard) Mandelbaum appeared (see above, n. 22). Both in the Buber edition and in that of Mandelbaum, the explanation of Song 5: 1 is the first *piska* in the collection. Solomon Buber based his edition, and the order of the sections, on a manuscript from Safed, copied in Egypt in 1565 (now in the Alliance Française library in Paris), comparing it with three other manuscripts. One of the latter was a manuscript in the Bodleian Library (MS Marshall Or. 24), dating from 1291. Mandelbaum based his edition of the text on this Oxford manuscript of the *Pesikta derav kahana*. Leopold Zunz intuited the existence of *Pesikta derav kahana* on the evidence of references to it by medieval scholars. According to his listing, the *midrash* began with the *piska* for Rosh Hashanah. This suggested order is seen in another Oxford manuscript (Opp. Add. 4to, 128; Neubauer no. 2339/11), which was only relatively recently discovered to be a text of *Pesikta derav kahana*. In this text the first *piska* is for Rosh Hashanah (*baḥodesh hashevi'i*) and the collection continues in

As we might expect, the precise wording of this account of the departure of the Shekhinah differs from one version to another. It is interesting that Rabbi Joseph Isaac's phrasing, which states that the Shekhinah ascended 'from the third firmament to the fourth' (that is, mentioning both the lower firmament that is abandoned and then the one above it), is not the one found in the *Song of Songs Rabbah* version that he cites, but rather occurs in *Tanḥuma* (Buber) and *Pesikta derav kahana* versions.[81]

Pesikta derav kahana was first published by Solomon Buber (Lyck, 1868) who also published his edition of the *Tanḥuma* (Vilna, 1885). Rabbi Joseph Isaac possessed an extensive library, now housed at the Lubavitch headquarters in Brooklyn. The catalogue of this collection is available and shows that the library contains Buber's editions of *Pesikta derav kahana* and of *Tanḥuma*.[82] I have not, however, been able to ascertain whether these had been acquired by 1923, when these discourses were composed. Later, after Rabbi Joseph Isaac's death in 1950, the Lubavitch Library, under the leadership of his successor Rabbi Menachem Mendel, also obtained Bernard Mandelbaum's edition of *Pesikta derav kahana*.[83]

Although he might be partly quoting one or other of these texts, Rabbi Joseph Isaac does not mention either *Pesikta derav kahana* or *Tanḥuma*, but only the *Midrash Rabbah*. This is due to the above-mentioned 'canonization' of the *Midrash Rabbah* among eastern European Jewry—as mentioned above, partly as a result of printers' promotion of the work and also of the fact that significant commentaries on it had been written.[84] Since Buber's editions of *Pesikta derav kahana* and *Tanḥuma* were probably rare volumes in Rostov, it was natural for Rabbi Joseph Isaac to cite the popular and accessible *Song of Songs Rabbah*. (Notably, the catalogue of his library lists 179 entries for *Midrash Rabbah*—from the earliest printings until those of the twentieth century.)

In the next part of his discourse, where the Shekhinah is far away from the world, the different midrashic versions present slightly varying accounts of its

the order of the Jewish calendar. Evidence in favour of this order comes from Nathan ben Yehiel of Rome's *Arukh* (entries for מסקיד, מסאסא) which mentions the Rosh Hashanah *piska* as *rosh piskaot*, i.e. 'the beginning of the *piskaot*', a term understood to be a reference to *Pesikta derav kahana*. (On this see Mandelbaum's introduction to his edition of *Pesikta derav kahana*, i. 7–9, 12–13).

[81] See Buber edn., 1*b*; Mandelbaum edn., vol. i, p. 2. See also Buber's edition of *Midrash Tanḥuma* (Vilna, 1885), ii, 'Naso', §24, fos. 19*a–b*.

[82] The catalogue is available on the 'Chabad Library CD-ROM' and also online at <www.chabadlibrary.org>.

[83] The interest in midrashic texts among the Habad–Lubavitch leadership is indicated by the following anecdote. At the time when Bernard Mandelbaum began working on his edition of *Pesikta derav kahana* he went to visit R. Menachem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe asked him which manuscripts he was using, and he gave the information. The Rebbe then said 'But there are two more manuscripts!', of which Mandelbaum was ignorant. (This was related by Mandelbaum's father-in-law, Murray Werber, to Professor Arnold Enker, who related it to me in July 2004.)

[84] See above, and Zeev Gries, 'The Book as a Cultural Agent from the Beginning of Printing to the Modern Period' (Heb.), in Howard Kreisel, *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought* [Limud veda'at bemaḥshavah yehudit], vol. ii (Be'er Sheva, 2004), 237–58.

retreat, and Rabbi Joseph Isaac provides only a general outline. Thereupon, he depicts the return of the Shekhinah to the world:

> And after that there arose seven *tsadikim* who brought the Shekhinah below. Abraham had the merit to draw it from the seventh firmament to the sixth, Isaac from the sixth to the fifth, until Moses who is the seventh (and all sevenths are precious) brought it down to the world.[85]

Song of Songs Rabbah, *Pesikta derav kahana*, and *Tanḥuma* (Buber) all provide a full list of the seven *tsadikim*, unlike Rabbi Joseph Isaac. However, none of them mention that 'all sevenths are precious'. But a fully developed exposition of this idea does occur elsewhere (in *Pesikta derav kahana* and *Lev. Rabbah*)—namely, that all sevenths are precious, whether in terms of firmaments, lands, generations, leader-figures, or kings, and so on.[86] We shall return to this theme.

After having described the fact that Moses brought the divine presence back into the world, Rabbi Joseph Isaac's discourse continues: 'And the main revelation of Godliness was in the Temple, as it says "And they should make for Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell in them" [Exod. 25: 8].' There follows a striking idea, based on the writings of several sixteenth-century kabbalists: 'Scripture does not say "in it", that the Divine Presence will dwell "in it", in the Sanctuary, but "in them"—in each individual.'[87]

This interpretation expresses the idea that the Sanctuary is a personal in-dwelling of the divine. By contrast, the midrashic sources on which this discourse is based speak of the dwelling of the divine itself in the Sanctuary. In *Pesikta derav kahana*, especially, the whole *pesikta* becomes a hymn to the greatness of the Sanctuary, portrayed through a variety of images. Among these are: the (secluded) Tent of Meeting, where the king and his nubile daughter (Israel) can meet;[88] a place filled with divine radiance, much as a cave by the sea is filled with water;[89] and a structure made of red, green, black, and white fire— the Lower Sanctuary reflecting the Upper.[90]

Rabbi Joseph Isaac's discourse does not contain any of this imagery. However, in its first half (recited on the first sabbath) it presents a variety of ways in which to understand the task of the individual Jew who is carrying out the service in the inner Sanctuary. Thus, the animal offerings brought to the flames of the altar in the Sanctuary express the attempt to infuse one's animal soul with divine fire, and

[85] *Sefer hama'amarim 5682–5683*, 168.

[86] *Pesikta derav kahana*, *piska* for Rosh Hashanah (Mandelbaum edn., vol. ii, pp. 343–4; Buber edn., 154*b* (para. 75)). See also *Lev. Rabbah* 29: 11.

[87] Moses Alsheikh, *Torat mosheh*, on the verse; Elijah b. Moses Vidas, *Reshit ḥokhmah*, vol. i (Jerusalem, 1984), 'Gate of Love', ch. 6, #19, 463; R. Isaiah Halevi Horowitz, *Shenei luḥot haberit*, vol. ii (New York, 1960), *Masekhet ta'anit*: *derush lehesped mitat hatsadikim uleḥurban*, 134*b*.

[88] *Pesikta derav kahana*, Buber edn., 2*a*; Mandelbaum edn., vol. i, §3, pp. 3–4.

[89] *Pesikta derav kahana*, Buber edn., 2*b*; Mandelbaum edn., vol. i, §2, p. 4.

[90] *Pesikta derav kahana*, Buber edn., 4*b*–5*a*; Mandelbaum edn., vol. i, §3, pp. 7–8.

thereby transform it. The planks of the Sanctuary, on the other hand, are made of *atsei shitim* (variously translated as cedar or acacia wood), and these are explained as hinting at the word *shetut* (folly)—an exegetical link already found in the Talmud and *Tanḥuma* (with reference to Num. 25: 1).[91] Rabbi Joseph Isaac goes on to describe two kinds of 'folly'—a negative folly, descending below the level of reason, which leads to sin, and a 'sacred folly', which expresses a relationship with the divine and transcends reason. As an example of the latter, Rabbi Joseph Isaac then quotes an aggadah from the Talmud (*Ket.* 17*a*) describing the wild dancing of Rabbi Samuel bar Rabbi Isaac on the occasion of a wedding. It is reported that he would juggle with three sticks of myrtle, to the scorn of the other sages, such as Rabbi Zeira. However, when he died a pillar of light revealed his greatness. Rabbi Joseph Isaac links this with the famous teaching of Rabbi Akiva (BT *Sot.* 17*a*), which points out one of the divine names (Y-H) shares letters found in the words *ish* (*alef-yod-shin*, man) and *ishah* (*alef-shin-heh*, woman); that is, if a man and woman join together in loving matrimony their relationship connotes the very presence of the Shekhinah. According to Rabbi Joseph Isaac, Rabbi Samuel was most sensitive to the revelation of the Shekhinah at a wedding and therefore danced in a manner beyond reason, with a 'sacred folly'.[92]

After this, the discourse goes on to speak of the great value of spiritual dedication, or *mesirat nefesh* (self-surrender), for the divine, as well as the power to transform the negative into positive. This point is also made with respect to the Sanctuary. Thus Exodus 26: 15 speaks of using planks for building the Sanctuary. Since a plank is called *keresh*, and this can be understood (midrashically) as an anagram of the word *sheker*, or falsehood, one may find here a hint of the spiritual goal of transforming the falsehood of the negative form of folly into the positive holiness of being like a plank that comprises the holy Sanctuary.[93] The discourse concludes by reverting to a discussion of the Jews in their synagogues and study houses, being overheard by the admiring *ḥaverim*, or angels (see the previous discussion).

The second discourse,[94] delivered a week later, focuses on the divine quality of *netsaḥ* (literally, 'eternity', but the Hebrew root also means 'victory'), which represents both the divine *sefirah* of that name and a specific quality in a person (the will to victory). The high goal of a spiritually developed person is to develop this quality, this will to victory, so that it may reach to the most exalted levels of Ein Sof (the Infinite) and draw down heavenly qualities into this world below. In this manner, the divine may be revealed in the inner sanctuary of the individual. The thrust of this teaching can also be understood in the context of Rabbi Joseph Isaac's defiant stance in the USSR in 1923, as an exhortation to a total dedication to Judaism at all costs.

[91] *Sefer hama'amarim 5682–5683*, 172; see BT *San.* 106*a*, *Tanḥuma*, 'Balak' 16.

[92] *Sefer hama'amarim 5682–5683*, 175. R. Joseph Isaac does not cite the negative possibility in R. Akiva's *derush*, that if their marriage is not successful (morally or spiritually) then they would be destroyed by the *esh* ('fire') which is present in both the words *ish* and *ishah*.

[93] Ibid. 182.

[94] Ibid. 183–96.

In 1927 Rabbi Joseph Isaac was arrested for his work in strengthening Judaism, and it seems that only international protest saved him from the death sentence. Instead, he was expelled from the USSR and eventually took up residence in Otwock, Poland, where he had established a Lubavitch yeshiva. In the spring of 1939, perhaps with a sense of impending doom, he wrote a précis of the first half of the discourse described above and gave it to his followers to study.[95] In it, the order at the beginning has been changed. It starts with 'I have come into my garden' (S. of S. 5: 1) and therefore begins with a history of Creation, defining the divine goal as the wish for a dwelling of holiness in this world, which is achieved in the inner sanctuary. The next time we encounter this discourse is in Brooklyn in 1950, when a transcript of the full 1923 version[96] was prepared for printing, subdivided into twenty chapters.[97] Rabbi Joseph Isaac's son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, who was responsible for the Lubavitch publications, added (as he often did) some source references as footnotes to the work. The discourse was printed in order to be studied on 10 Shevat, the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Joseph Isaac's grandmother Rivkah (1833–1914), wife of the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Samuel Schneersohn (1834–82). However, on this day Rabbi Joseph Isaac himself passed away, and thus this discourse, with its comprehensive view of the purpose of Creation, was regarded as his last will and testament. Whereas in its original setting, in 1923, it could be seen as expressing a stance against Communist oppression, in 1950 it expressed a different challenge: the materialism and comfort of American life. The idea of the synagogue and the Torah study circle as the place where the angels, the *ḥaverim*, listen to the voices of the Jewish people (now a passage introducing the sixth chapter of the discourse) had new significance in a very different context.

Before we approach this new topic, let us review what has been discussed so far. Beginning with Rabbi Shneur Zalman, and extending into the twentieth century, Midrash served, both in its own right and as a generator of new forms, as a medium which could translate intense and recondite spiritual perspectives into more broadly accessible, relatively 'exoteric' modes. One effect of this was the evolution of an unusual, even unique, contemporary expression of eschatological processes.

ESCHATOLOGY AND MIDRASH

On 10 Shevat 1951 Rabbi Menachem Mendel formally accepted the role of *rebbe*, thus becoming the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. He gave a discourse of his own, based on the last discourse of his father-in-law and beginning with the same *midrash* on the phrase *bati legani* (S. of S. 5: 1, see above). In the course of his lengthy dis-

[95] R. Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, *Sefer hama'amarim: kuntresim*, vol. ii (Brooklyn, NY, 1986), 828–34.

[96] The transcript was written by R. Elijah Nahum Skolier. See *Yemei bereshit: yoman mitekufat 'kabalat hanesiut'* (Brooklyn, NY, 1993), 98.

[97] Brief summaries were appended to each chapter, as in the case of other discourses by R. Joseph Isaac.

course, he focused on the phrase interpolated by Rabbi Joseph Isaac: 'all sevenths are precious', which in its context explained why Moses, the seventh *tsadik*, was able to draw the Shekhinah back to the world. This theme of the power of the 'seventh' was used to highlight what one might regard as an incidental feature of the Habad–Lubavitch movement: namely, that Rabbi Menachem Mendel represented the seventh generation of Habad–Lubavitch leadership.[98] But now, in his first discourse as *rebbe*, he emphasized the theme of the special empowerment and responsibility of the seventh generation to bring the divine presence into the world.[99] The theme of the 'seventh' fuelled his outreach work and sense of the implicit holiness of *this* world: the Shekhinah can indeed be revealed here on earth, for, despite all appearances to the contrary, the world is a 'garden'. Each year on 10 Shevat he would deliver another discourse, always based on the original *midrash* on the phrase *bati legani*, and expound the original discourse chapter by chapter, year by year. Thus in 1951 the focus was on the first chapter, in 1952 on the second, and so on.

These discourses, collected in two volumes, represent a further stage of the ongoing interpretative process. They expound not only the scriptural verse and the midrashic text, but Rabbi Joseph Isaac's exposition and elaboration of the *midrash* as well. Their theme is set by the midrashic approach to the text 'I have come into my garden' as meaning that the goal of Creation is that the divine presence should have a dwelling-place in our physical world, in the Temple itself, and in the temple in the heart of each individual.

To take just one example, we saw above the logical progression from the verse 'I have come into my garden' to the symbolism of the Sanctuary, its walls made of acacia wood, representing folly, and ultimately sacred folly, as illustrated by the description of Rabbi Samuel dancing wildly at a wedding (because of the revelation of the Shekhinah expressed in the union of bride and groom). In his discourse of 10 Shevat, 1955, Rabbi Menachem Mendel elaborates on the theme of bride and groom, and expounds on the liturgical text of the wedding blessings. Citing an earlier discourse of Rabbi Dov Ber, the second Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Rebbe remarked:

> [on the] fact that one says in the wedding blessings, 'Make the beloved companions rejoice, as You made Your creation rejoice in Gan Eden long ago [*mikedem*]'. [Rabbi Dov Ber] explains that *mikedem* means before the down-chaining of the worlds. For in the realm of the down-chaining of the worlds, the male is above and the female below . . . but [originally, and ultimately] not only are they equal, but . . . the bride is above the groom and he receives from her . . . [Moreover], at the conclusion of the wedding blessings one says

[98] Beginning with R. Shneur Zalman, the list comprises his son R. Dov Ber, his son-in-law (a grandson of R. Shneur Zalman), R. Menahem Mendel (the Tsemah Tsedek), his son R. Samuel, his son R. Shalom Dov Ber, and finally his son, R. Joseph Isaac. This list traces a line through the generations, ignoring various rivals in each generation from the second onwards who were 'Habad' but not 'Lubavitch'. R. Menachem Mendel, the seventh leader, was a descendant of the Tsemah Tsedek and son-in-law of his predecessor R. Joseph Isaac.

[99] See R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Bati legani*, vol. i (Brooklyn, NY, 1977), 31.

'Make the groom rejoice with the bride,' so that the groom may rejoice with that which is higher than him . . . This explains the connection of dancing to a wedding. For in order to draw down an aspect that is higher than the down-chaining of the worlds, there must be a worship that transcends reason—and that is why [the sages] would dance.[100]

If we follow the logic of this discourse, the theme of the indwelling of the divine in this world is linked to an emphasis on the spiritual power of the feminine. It is admitted that this is not the current mode in the 'down-chaining of worlds', which here means not only the realm of the *sefirot* but also, more generally, the pre-messianic world order, yet it is the ultimate mode to which one should aspire. For in the time of the messiah, the Essence of the Divine, beyond the 'down-chaining' of the *sefirot*, will be revealed. In social-historical terms this theoretical passage joins to a process that slowly unfolded during Rabbi Menachem Mendel's leadership, unusually empowering women in the context of strictly Orthodox (*ḥaredi*) society.[101]

A more general feature of the *Bati legani* discourses relates to the messianic thrust in Habad. The war years of the 1940s had been a period of intense messianism for the small Lubavitch circle around Rabbi Joseph Isaac. His slogan had been *le'alter liteshuvah*, *le'alter lige'ulah*: 'immediate repentance, immediate redemption'. Whereas this was muted in the late 1940s after the end of the war, it came to the fore once again as the annual cycle of commentary on the twenty chapters of *Bati legani* drew towards completion in 1970. In his discourse of 10 Shevat that year Rabbi Menachem Mendel linked the outreach work of Habad with the theme of the 'bursting [spreading] outward of the wellsprings', which, as expressed in the letter of the Ba'al Shem Tov cited earlier, would lead to the advent of the messiah.[102] In 1970 the messianic fervour was still contained within the Lubavitch movement, in contrast to the much more intense and overt messianic tension that emerged at the close of the second cycle of discourses in 1990. At the source of both phenomena, however, was the interpretation of the Midrash which declared that the 'seventh' has the power to draw the Shekhinah back down into the world.[103]

[100] Schneerson, *Bati legani*, i. 65. See R. Dov Ber, *Seder tefilot mikol hashanah* (Brooklyn, NY, 1971), 'Derushim laḥatunah', 134*a*, 136*b*.

[101] See Bonnie J. Morris, *Lubavitcher Women in America: the Post War Era* (Albany, NY, 1998); N. Loewenthal, 'Women and the Dialectic of Spirituality in Hasidism', in I. Etkes et al. (eds.), *Within Hasidic Circles: Studies in Hasidism in Memory of Mordecai Wilensky* (Jerusalem, 1999), *7–*65; and concerning an earlier period, Ada Rapoport-Albert, 'The Emergence of a Female Constituency in Twentieth Century Habad Hasidism', in David Assaf and Ada Rapoport-Albert (eds.), *Let the Old Make Way for the New: Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Eastern European Jewry Presented to Immanuel Etkes* [Yashan mipenei ḥadash: meḥkarim betoledot yehudei mizraḥ eiropah uvetarbutam. Shai le'imanu'el etkes], 2 vols. (Jerusalem 2009), i: *Hasidism and the Musar Movement* [Ḥasidim uva'alei musar], English section, 7*–68*.

[102] *Bati legani*, i. 232.

[103] See Yitzchak Kraus, *The Seventh: Messianism in the Last Generation of Habad* [Hashevi'i: meshiḥiyut bador hashevi'i shel ḥabad] (Tel Aviv, 2007).

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO THE PEOPLE

My delineation of Habad's use of a specific *midrash* in different situations over the past ninety years underlines the ability of latter-day hasidic masters to expound a chain of texts, from Scripture to Midrash, and from Midrash to a hasidic text, which then itself becomes the 'text' for further exposition—all with the belief that the sanctity of the divine continues to be transmitted through every link of the chain of transmission. For the Habad movement, this process became a central feature of the endeavour to communicate spirituality to ever wider circles of society.

It is interesting to note the relationship of the *Bati legani* chain of discourses we have discussed to its main midrashic sources in the exposition found in *Pesikta derav kahana*.[104] In this first *piska* in the Buber and Mandelbaum editions,[105] compiled for Hanukah, there is a strong restorative and redemptive theme. The *Pesikta* begins with the classic formulation in rabbinic texts of the state of exile and redemption. After quoting Numbers 7: 1 ('And it was on the day that Moses completed the erection of the Sanctuary', which according to the post-talmudic tractate *Soferim*[106] begins the Torah reading for Hanukah) and Song of Songs 5: 1 ('I have come into My garden'), 'Rabbi Azaria said in the name of Rabbi Simon: [This can be compared] to a king who became angry with the queen and drove her away, sending her out of his palace. After a time, he wished to bring her back.' This forceful metaphor of exile and redemption is transformed into a depiction of the redemptive state as the very goal of Creation, described in the account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, outlined above.

Both for the fifth-century *Pesikta* and for twentieth-century Habad, the idea of the future restoration of the Temple was prominent. This continuity of theme is striking. Despite the passage of time, and the very different social and historical contexts of the early Midrash and later hasidic discourses, both concern divine immanence, expressed through the erection of the Sanctuary (whether in physical or inner psychological and spiritual terms) and redemption. Indeed, both communicate an inspiring perspective on existence of epic proportions. Thus classical Midrash and latter-day hasidic discourses, based on this *midrash* but also becoming a form of Midrash in themselves, continue to transmit the river of Torah from the esoteric heights of the mountain to the human realities of the everyday world.

[104] I am grateful to Michael Fishbane for drawing this to my attention.

[105] The Oxford manuscript which is the basis of the Mandelbaum edition is the earliest known (1291). However, see n. 80 above.

[106] *Soferim* 20: 10. In many communities today this passage is recited only on the first day of Hanukah; on Shabat Hanukah, the passage from Numbers 7 for the corresponding day of Hanukah (beginning Num. 7: 18 'On the second day', Num. 7: 24 'On the third day', and so on) is recited.