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THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEO-HASIDISM: ECHOES AND  
REPERCUSSIONS  
PART IV: ARTHUR GREEN AND CONCLUSION

ARIEL EVAN MAYSE

*Editor's note: This article, presented in four parts, is a revised version of a paper presented at the Orthodox Forum convened March 15-16, 2015. It will appear in the forthcoming volume, Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut, ed. Shlomo Zuckier (Urim, 2019), as part of the Orthodox Forum series. It is intended to spark a conversation about the origins of neo-Hasidism and to consider its contemporary relevance. After some preliminary notes, the first three installments are devoted to exploring in brief the works of foundational neo-Hasidic writers, thinkers and leaders. This intellectual genealogy paves the way for the fourth part of the series, considering the impact of neo-Hasidism, and particularly its liberal forms, upon Orthodox Jewish life and examines how such liberal neo-Hasidism may continue to influence Orthodox religious thought.*

**Rabbi Arthur Green**

Rabbi Arthur Green (b. 1941) is a liberal theologian, professor of Jewish mysticism, and the teacher of two generations of American rabbis and scholars.<sup>1</sup> He was born and raised in a staunchly atheist family, though his mother, from a traditional family, felt obligated to give her son something of a Jewish education. Green was deeply drawn to Judaism already in childhood, and has charted his own course as a spiritual seeker and devoted much of his career over five decades to the study of Hasidism and its contemporary relevance. He has been deeply influenced by the writings of Buber and Zeitlin, having read their works in his youth.<sup>2</sup> But Green was more directly a disciple of Heschel, with whom he studied closely at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He also learned a great deal from his mentor and fellow-traveler Reb Zalman. He and his wife were part of a small cadre of young people with whom Zalman had hoped to establish the community described in “Toward an Order of B’nai Or,” noted in [the previous installment of this series](#). Instead of following this imagined model of a Jewish monastic order, Green became the principal founder of [Havurat Shalom](#), an intentional Jewish community established in Somerville, Massachusetts and over the years has been identified more with the movement that grew forth from this community than with Zalman’s Jewish Renewal. Green has sought to carry forward the legacy of these “founders” of Neo-Hasidism. He has devoted himself to reshaping the experience and content of Jewish learning for contemporary Jews, always seeking to allow the tradition’s authentic voice to both challenge and inspire us. Ever attracted to the great power of Hasidic teachings, he believes they must be reinterpreted and reframed in our day if they are to remain a compelling voice for new generations.

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<sup>1</sup> For an appreciation of Green’s many contributions to the fields of contemporary theology and academic scholarship, see Ariel Evan Mayse, “Arthur Green: An Intellectual Portrait,” in [Arthur Green: Hasidism for Tomorrow](#), ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 1-52. The following remarks are based on my work there.

<sup>2</sup> On his search for an intellectual lineage, see Arthur Green, “Three Warsaw Mystics,” in *Kolot Rabbim: Essays in Memory of Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer*, ed. Rachel Elior (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 1-58; idem, “What is Jewish Theology?” in *Torah and Revelation*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 1-11.

Green draws particular inspiration from the textual sources of early Hasidism, but feels free to engage with those teachings somewhat selectively. He values the teachings of Kabbalah and Hasidism as holding deep insights into the human psyche and spiritual life, rather than as bearers of metaphysical or cosmological truth. He rejects elements of the mystical tradition, such as the degradation of non-Jews or the disenfranchisement of women, which he feels conflict with fundamental Jewish morality. Green understands these aspects of Jewish mysticism as reflecting the historical contexts in which these texts were written, and insists that the modern seeker need not accept them whole cloth. This selective reading allows for the possibility of rediscovering the beauty and potential contemporary relevance of the sources. The teachings of Jewish mysticism, argues Green, give us access to some of the deepest wellsprings of human creativity and spirituality, pointing toward a mysterious, elusive reality within them that we humans call by the name Y-H-W-H, or “God.”

The earliest stirrings of Green’s neo-Hasidic project are found in a pair of short, provocative essays written in 1968 and 1971.<sup>3</sup> These are clearly influenced by the ethos of the 1960s youth culture, but they already contain many of the core themes of his theological project. He draws upon the language and theology of Jewish mysticism, combining it with the empowerment and freedom of modern writers like Nietzsche and Kazantzakis. Calling for a non-dualistic Judaism that embraces both spirit and body, he argues that while some Jewish rituals may indeed still be meaningful, a vibrant Jewish life will depend on a radical and bold reimagining of both Jewish theology and praxis.

These short articles represent Green’s thought as it had crystallized during his time at Havurat Shalom, which he founded with his wife Kathy and with the help of their friend Reb Zalman. But his theology continued to mature and deepen during his graduate work in Jewish mysticism at Brandeis, as it did throughout his early career as a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania and then the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.<sup>4</sup> Green had never seen himself as a Reconstructionist (nor did he consider himself one after joining the faculty of RRC), although his theology shares a number of important ideas in common the thought of founder Mordecai M. Kaplan. These include his understanding of Judaism as a full civilization, the embrace of religious humanism, commitment to renewal, a theology that moved beyond a personal God, and a deep respect for tradition without feeling bound to it.

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<sup>3</sup> These essays were republished in *The New Jews*, ed. James Sleeper and Alan Mintz (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 176-192, and 193-203. The first of these, which explores the ways in which psychedelic drugs can offer the religious person a different perspective on the world, was first published under the pseudonym Itzik Lodzer. The great-grandfather for whom Green was named was called Avraham-Itzik and he lived for some years in Lodz.

<sup>4</sup> At RRC he met with some opposition from staunch Reconstructionists who opposed his mystical leanings. See, for example, the remarks of Sidney Schwarz, “Reconstructionism and Neo-Hasidism: The Limits of Cooperation,” *Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA), Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC)* (1984): 25: “Many who feel that the two tendencies are compatible and mutually enriching are quick to point out how many of the same goals we share... Yet at the core of neo-Hasidism is the search for the encounter with a personal God... Both will find natural constituencies, people previously turned off to the more conventional Jewish movements. But the universe of discourse of the two approaches is so different that I don’t see the benefit of lumping the two together.”

In 1984, while serving as the dean of RRC, he published a short but important article on the nature of neo-Hasidism and its place in the contemporary Jewish world.<sup>5</sup> He argues that neither obeisance to tradition nor a fleet-footed run toward all aspects of the modern will work for the contemporary Jewish seeker. This careful balance of criticism and commitment, suggests Green, reflects the struggle of the Hasidic masters in their own day: true religious renewal emerges from “a sense of reverence for the past, combined with openness to growth toward a potentially very different future.”<sup>6</sup>

In this piece Green also offers some reflections regarding why he turned to the symbolic language of Jewish mysticism, and to the teachings of Hasidism in particular, in his quest to articulate a contemporary Jewish theology. The language of Hasidic panentheism, he writes, enables modern seekers:

To view religious awareness as an added or deepened perception of the world, one that complements rather than contradicts our ordinary and “profane” perception. It seems to be nurtured by an openness to a more profound rung of human consciousness rather than needing the “leap of faith” requisite for theism. The theology that would emerge from such a re-appropriated Hasidism could be characterized as belonging to religious “naturalism”, in that it entails no literal belief in a deity that is willful or active in human affairs. On the other hand, it is a naturalism deeply tempered by a sense of the transcendent, an openness to the profundities of inner experience, and a humility about the limits of human knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Green is ultimately a “monist,” interpreting the Jewish faith in one God as pointing beyond itself toward the ultimate oneness of all being. This understanding of the infinite and expansive God, grounded in the theology of Hasidism, offers an alternative to classical notions of a theistic Deity. Yet rather than restricting us to descriptive silence, Green argues that we are called upon to describe the infinite Divine through a variety of forms and metaphors. These are drawn, as water from two wells, from the springs of ancient symbolism and personal religious experience. Each enriches and lends meaning to the other, without which it could not be sustained or would be of little value. We are the ones who give the faceless One expression as “God” (a view with which Maimonides and some kabbalists might agree) through our theological and religious language; the infinite number of “faces,” or names of the Divine, are those given by us. Of course, these conceptual structures are a type of projection, but this is something Green celebrates. The act of projection, in which we attempt to describe the mysterious and infinite Divine through structures and words, and then reflect upon it, is called theology.

Green’s greatest contribution to contemporary Jewish thought is his three-part theological series, written over the course of several decades. Throughout these works we find Green struggling with issues of intellectual honesty, wrestling with his identity as a post-modern

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<sup>5</sup> See Arthur Green, “Neo-Hasidism and Our Theological Struggles,” *Ra’ayonot* 4:3 (1984): 11-17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

thinker and as a monistic Jewish theologian. The first of these books is [\*Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology\*](#) (1992).<sup>8</sup> This work is poetically written and especially personal, welcoming the reader into the depths of his heart and personal religious life in an evocative, almost experiential way. Beginning with a description of his understanding of projection theology, Green then moves on to a discussion of Creation. Building on the Jewish mystical mythology, he writes that God withdrew some measure of the infinite divine light so that the world might have a place. In this moment the nameless One both gave birth to and was born into the diversity of the physical world. Here he is adapting the notion of *tzimtzum* as it was understood in Hasidism; the infinite divine consciousness is also making room for the human other, though this process may be viewed from either direction. This transition from the infinite (but inexpressible) divine unity into dynamic multiplicity<sup>9</sup> is mirrored by the process of Revelation. Torah, the ever-flowing font of divine wisdom, was first expressed in language—which by its very nature both limits and reveals—on Mt. Sinai (understood metaphorically, as we shall see). But the capstone in this unfolding sacred drama, the ultimate goal toward which both Creation and Revelation are important steps, is the movement toward Redemption.

[\*Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow\*](#) (2003) is the second entry in the series.<sup>10</sup> In its tone and content, *Ehyeh* is offered as an answer to the need of Jewish seekers attracted to Eastern religion in its various manifestations. In a very different way, this book is also a reply to certain contemporary groups that claim the mantle of the kabbalistic tradition but totally remove its wisdom from the Jewish historical and devotional context. Green sees great opportunity in the revival of interest in Jewish mysticism in the past several decades. The question, he insists, is *how* that revival should take place. What elements of the kabbalistic heritage are useful to the contemporary seeker, and how might they be re-read in a contemporary context? What elements of that tradition, he also dares to ask, might best be left behind? *Ehyeh* touches on many of the themes in *Seek My Face*, but specifically addresses the mystical tradition. Green spends more time showing how mystical themes and theological ideas are tied to the life of concrete Jewish praxis. It even offers a small number of devotional practices and specific exercises, something quite rare in Green's writings. Both as teacher and theologian, Green generally demurs from prescribing how others should act in the realm of religious practice.

The third part in the series, [\*Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition\*](#) (2010), is in many ways Green's most mature theological work.<sup>11</sup> Though the picture he draws is largely consistent with his earlier writings, *Radical Judaism* has a different tone than either of Green's previous books. It was written in a more sophisticated style, though still very much from a personal perspective. He explains that he feels compelled to outline a Jewish theology that is still viable after the two great intellectual defeats of traditional religion in the twentieth

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<sup>8</sup> Revised and republished as [\*Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology\*](#) (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> *Ein Sof* to *sefirot*, which exist only from the perspective of humans. Here we see the influence of Hasidic thought, particularly that of R. Aaron of Starroselye.

<sup>10</sup> [\*Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow\*](#) (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> [\*Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition\*](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

century: the triumph of evolutionary biology (and with it a host of other sciences, including astrophysics and geology, in describing the origin of our planet and the emergence of life upon it) over traditional views of Creation, and the wide acceptance of biblical criticism, with its challenges to the divine and mosaic authorship of the Torah.

This mystical trilogy is supplemented by an array of articles published over the past thirty years in *Tikkun*, *The Reconstructionist*, and elsewhere; many of the same themes are echoed and intensified over the course of these shorter pieces. An important element of Green's heterodox, seeker-friendly Judaism is his rejection of the very idea of dogmatic theology. As he has sometimes remarked, Green "does not believe in believing." He writes from the heart of his own religious experience, using the storehouse of traditional teachings and rubrics to give it theological language and then sharing it with others. This is particularly visible in his current project of a devotional commentary on the liturgy. Green has also invested himself in training rabbis and graduate students, and many of his disciples are now working as neo-Hasidic teachers in varied ways and settings. These include Elliot Ginsburg, Ebn Leader, Eitan Fishbane, Miles Krassen, Or N. Rose, and the present writer.

In a recent essay entitled "A Neo-Hasidic Life: Credo and Reflections," with which I will draw this survey to a close, Green has offered a deeply personal reflection on the central tenets of his neo-Hasidic theology. The text of this short treatise and accompanying commentary (also by Green) recasts the theology of Hasidism for the contemporary world, informed by the author's teachers but in a striking language all Green's own:

1. There is only One. All exists within what we humans call the mind of God, where Being is a simple, undifferentiated whole. Because God is beyond time, that reality has never changed. Our evolving, ever-changing cosmos and the absolute stasis of Being are two faces of the same One. Our seeming existence as individuals, like all of physical reality, is the result of *tsimtsum*, a contraction or de-intensification of divine presence so that our minds can encounter it and yet continue to see ourselves as separate beings, in order to fulfill our worldly task. Daily life requires us to live as separate individuals and to recognize both the boundaries between self and other and the great opportunity for communion with other souls. In ultimate reality, however, that separate existence is mostly illusion. "God is one" means that we are all one.

... 5. The essence of our religious life lies in the deep inward glance, a commitment to a vision of spiritual intensity and attachment to the One. Outer deeds are important; ritual commandments are there to be fulfilled. They are the tools our tradition gives us to achieve and maintain awareness. Each such *mitsvah* is to be seen as a great gift, an opportunity to stand in the divine presence in a unique way. But the *mitsvot* are to be seen as means rather than as ends, as vessels to contain the divine light that floods the soul or as concrete embodiments of the heart's inward quest.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur Green, "A Neo-Hasidic Life: Credo and Reflections," in [\*Personal Theology: Essays in Honor of Neil Gillman\*](#), ed. William Plevan (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 67-69.

Divine unity refers not only to the conception of one God, but rather to the affirmation that all existence is One. All apparently multifarious reality is a *levush* (“garment”), a term used by Green (as by the Hasidic sources he reads) with great frequency. The infinite One dwells within the human heart and within all existence as well. Every extant form one of the endless “faces” of this Divine, a God that is the totality of being and yet infinitely more as well. The Divine infuses the world and is expressed through the cosmos, but nothing—not even the name Y-H-V-H—can adequately convey the infinity of the One.

Our response to this awareness is embodied in deed and ritual, for the ongoing self-manifestation process of the One requires human action. Green’s teacher Heschel saw his campaigns for social justice as a direct outgrowth of this theology: in fighting for a more just and compassionate world, we fulfill one of God’s greatest needs and desires. These deeds open us up and attune us to the presence of the One. While the specific rituals are of human origin, a part of the history of religion, they serve to frame our moments of illumination and insight, becoming vessels that connect those moments of awareness with the physical world around us. Doing them thus reinforces the memory of such moments, even when we cannot attain those same heights. Created by the Jewish people as its way of responding to the universal sacred call of “Know Me!” and “Be aware!”<sup>13</sup> their very antiquity and the devotion placed in them over the ages give them a resonance capable of evoking profound religious feeling.

### Neo-Hasidism: **Impact and Influence**

Now that we have, over the course of this series, examined the genealogy of neo-Hasidism, we can evaluate its impact and repercussions. The impact of neo-Hasidism has been most profound in *liberal* Jewish communities. The reasons for this are not difficult to identify. Although theology and issues of the spirit feature prominently in the writings of some twentieth-century American Orthodox leaders, such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, for the most part these thinkers eschewed Hasidic or mystical sources.<sup>14</sup> But many Orthodox intellectuals in America, like their colleagues in Reform and Conservative communities, have not been particularly interested in theology *per se*; many have had serious misgivings about the very existence of Jewish spirituality. And some Orthodox figures were—and are—suspicious of elements of neo-Hasidism that they saw as foreign to Judaism, including the emphasis on the private devotional world of the individual versus the communal standards of obligation, the perceived subjectivity of Hasidic teachings, and the primacy of the inward realm of the spirit over and above the performance of outer ritual.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Green, *Radical Judaism*, 97, 113.

<sup>14</sup> See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Eternal Duration and Temporal Compresence: The Influence of Habad on Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” [\*The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience; Festschrift for Steven T. Katz on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday\*](#), ed. Michael Zank and Ingrid Anderson (Leiden and Boston, 2015), 195-238.

<sup>15</sup> This debate represents a modern echo of the controversy between the Hasidim and the *mitnaggedim*. See also, Shaul Magid, [\*American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society\*](#) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 111-132.

Neo-Hasidism found little traction in Orthodox circles where *halakhah* is the defining feature of Jewish life and its practice is considered the *summum bonum* of religious experience. To some degree these feelings were mutual. Each of the neo-Hasidic figures detailed in the present study struggled to present a form of Jewish spiritual and religious life that is focused upon God and divine service rather than *halakhah* as such.<sup>16</sup> For some, like Zelda, Heschel, and Reb Shlomo the issue was a matter of emphasis rather than essence. Their spiritual projects looked beyond the confines of Jewish practices and law into a deeper realm of spiritual discourse and experience. Buber, Reb Zalman, and Green, however, proudly embraced heterodox forms of Jewish practice that are at odds with the Orthodox understanding of obligation. The turn toward theology and spirituality at the expense of engagement with (and practice of) *halakhah* in some neo-Hasidic circles has surely pushed members of the Orthodox community—including those who follow Isaiah Leibowitz and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik—to become more deeply entrenched in their single-minded focus on the study and practice of Jewish law.

Yet despite this overlay of general antipathy, liberal neo-Hasidism has influenced the contemporary Orthodox world. The impact of a significant number of spiritually and intellectually talented youth who, inspired by neo-Hasidism, have abandoned the trajectory of assimilation and joined more traditional communities has provided a large morale boost for the Orthodox world. It affirmed the validity of Jewish Orthodoxy, but, more importantly, these “returnees” to the fold of Orthodox Judaism demonstrated that what traditional religion could offer was creative and vital enough to attract these people.<sup>17</sup> The neo-Hasidim who did join the Orthodox community brought with them new styles of dress (including colorful and intercultural garments), approaches to food (vegetarian, sustainable), ritual objects, music, and, most importantly for our purposes, an embrace of mysticism and a non-rational spirituality. Many of these elements originated in the youth counterculture and were fused with the ideas of neo-Hasidism.

The goal of the 2015 Orthodox Forum was to detail and explore recent attempts to foster a spiritual revival in Orthodox circles based in Hasidic sources. This renewal, in its infancy in America, is readily visible in Israel, where *yeshivot* of all kinds have now incorporated the study of Hasidic texts into their curricula.<sup>18</sup> Some of these schools have even embraced aspects of Hasidism—and indeed, a particularly nationalistic form of neo-Hasidism—as a core part of their spiritual identity and ethos. The climate for spiritual renewal in Israeli culture was set by mystically-inclined writers like Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, as do the writings, teachers and teachings of Chabad and Breslov,<sup>19</sup> but neo-Hasidic writers and teachers such as Rav Shagar have also played an important role.

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<sup>16</sup> In addition to the sources above, see Heschel’s penetrating criticism in [Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays](#), ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 155.

<sup>17</sup> Yaakov Ariel, “Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius: The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 1967-1977,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13:2 (2003), 157.

<sup>18</sup> See Tomer Persico, “Neo-Hasidism and Neo-Kabbalah in Israeli Contemporary Spirituality: The Rise of the Utilitarian Self,” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5:1 (2014), 31-54.

<sup>19</sup> Rav Shagar, [Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age](#) (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017).



Carlebach's significant impact in Israel is due to his consistent presence over the years, as well as the emigration of many of his American disciples. Heschel's writings have been recently rediscovered by a younger community and are being translated into Hebrew. These works speak to the sense of crisis that grips some young Israeli intellectuals, and, for the more devotionally-minded, Heschel's writings present a refreshing religious alternative to state-run forms of Orthodoxy, the nationalist interpretations of Rav Kook, and Eastern Religion.

There is a significant gap between Carlebach's influence on Israeli neo-Hasidism and that of the other thinkers in this series. But many Israeli seekers have found interest in the writings of Reb Zalman and Arthur Green, some of which are now available in Hebrew.<sup>20</sup> Martin Buber's stories and his philosophical works on Hasidism were avidly read in some circles, though largely outside the Orthodox community.<sup>21</sup> But in Hebrew there are a host of other "lovers of Hasidism" who write—and wrote—prose and poetry, some living on the edges of the Hasidic community itself, and others more a part of the National Religious movement. These have included [Yehudah Steinberg](#), [Yitzhak Alfasi](#), [Pinchas Sadeh](#), and many more. [Zeitlin's works](#) were preserved by some of his disciples who had come to Israel and were reprinted and published by Mossad Harav Kook. Many seekers have been brought back to an authentic Jewish spiritual world through encountering his writings.

The move to bring the theology and spiritual ethos of Hasidic—and neo-Hasidic—teachings into the Orthodox mainstream has been slower in America. Carlebach's tunes, however, are by now ubiquitous, as are his stories and some of his key ideas; his emphasis on serious devotional prayer is also being adopted by an increasing number of Orthodox communities as well. A more positive attitude toward Hasidic texts and spirituality more broadly has recently emerged in traditional Orthodox circles. The appointment of [Rabbi Moshe Weinberger](#) as a spiritual director and guide (*mashpi'a*) at Yeshiva University revealed a change in Orthodox attitudes. Rabbi Weinberger is well known as a teacher of Hasidic texts, and his model of leadership at his Woodmere synagogue is loosely patterned after that of a traditional Hasidic master. Rabbi Weinberger is both traditional and in some ways creatively neo-Hasidic in his approach to Jewish spirituality: like the others in this series, he does not consider himself a disciple of one particular Hasidic path, nor does he demand or advocate adopting a host of Hasidic strictures of his students or followers.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Avraham Yitshak (Art) Green, *Yahadut Radikalit: Petihat Sha'ar le-Mevakshei Derekh*, trans. Igal Harmelin Moria (Rishon le-Zion: Yedioth Ahronoth Books, 2016); and Zalman Schachter Shalomi and Ruth Gan Kagan, *Kirvat Elohim: Al Tikkun Olam ve-al Tikkun ha-Lev* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> In a recent lecture, the Israeli scholar Ran Hacoen pointed out the extent to which Orthodox, and even Hasidic, works have drawn from Buber's compendia of Hasidic tales, despite the steadfast taboo against his writings; see Ran Hacoen, "Buber's Covert Orthodox Reception," delivered at *Multiple Dialogues—Martin Buber in Palestine and Israel*, Jerusalem (May, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> See the 2014 interview located at ([https://www.ou.org/jewish\\_action/12/2014/embracing-chassidus-q-rabbi-moshe-weinberger/](https://www.ou.org/jewish_action/12/2014/embracing-chassidus-q-rabbi-moshe-weinberger/), retrieved January 14, 2016) and Moshe Weinberger, "[Chassidus for non-Chassidim: A Modern Experiment in Chassidus](#)," *Jewish Action*, no. 1 (Fall, 1999).

It is, however, impossible to imagine the contemporary interest in Hasidic thought in American Orthodox communities without the writings of liberal Jewish scholars. These developments outside and at the limits of the Orthodox world have left a powerful—and very positive—mark upon current intellectual trends in Orthodox society. When students in Orthodox institutions (I speak here of *yeshivot* and schools in Israel as well as in North America) wish to read compelling, nuanced theological works that speak to modern issues of the inner spirit, they often turn to the works of thinkers like Heschel, Buber, and, to a lesser degree, Schachter-Shalomi and Green. The translations and explanations of Hasidic sources produced by liberal neo-Hasidic thinkers, most prominently Arthur Green, are widely used in English-speaking communities across denominational lines. This includes Orthodox communities of many different kinds.<sup>23</sup> Martin Buber's works, and particularly his collection of Hasidic tales, continue to be widely read. The theological writings of liberal neo-Hasidic writers have been met with opposition from some Orthodox figures; but, though perhaps unacknowledged, the influence of neo-Hasidic writers has indeed extended to the Orthodox community and rabbinate in ways both subtle and direct.

### Future Directions

Thus far my efforts to trace a genealogy of neo-Hasidism have been largely descriptive. After describing these historical developments, I would like to suggest a few ways in which the contemporary Orthodox world may continue to learn from developments outside its own borders. These thoughts, of course, reflect my own interests and beliefs (spiritual and in some cases political). They are personal remarks that flow forth from my own religious journey, which has included learning from a wide variety of academic and spiritual teachers in addition to my years of training as an Orthodox rabbi. This spiritual quest in the white spaces between different communities has attuned me to the importance of listening to the words of the other as a source of wisdom and challenge, one that leads not to compromise but to mutual enrichment. I trust that this will be the result of the dialogue between Orthodoxy and liberal neo-Hasidism; both communities have much to share, and much yet to gain.

Thus this conversation with liberal Jewish movements must begin with humility in both directions. The default stance of many Orthodox thinkers, in line with the position staked out by Rabbi Soloveitchik, has been disengagement. But we have moved beyond the historical moment in which an embattled American Orthodoxy must prove its *raison d'être* through constantly asserting its distinctiveness from other more liberal communities.<sup>24</sup> The need for creative inter-denominational discourse has become increasingly clear. To borrow a concept from Buber, the dialogical moment—the respectful “I-Thou” engagement—with other Jewish communities will enrich Orthodox Judaism, and it will allow the latter to contribute more broadly to the Jewish future.

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Green, [\*Your Word Is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer\*](#), co-ed. Barry W. Holtz (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993); [\*The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger\*](#), trans. Arthur Green, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2012); Arthur Green, [\*Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid's Table\*](#), with Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse, and Or N. Rose (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> [\*The Relationship of Orthodox Jews with Jews of Other Religious Ideologies and Non-Believing Jews\*](#), ed. Adam Mintz (New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 2010).

Neo-Hasidism has much to share regarding spiritual sensitivity and the notion of a life in which God is at the very center. Theological debates in the Orthodox world now tend to drift into either dogmatic or creedal theology (hidden behind the nebulous term *hashkafah*), in which doctrinal statements define the fold of acceptable beliefs. But in many cases Orthodox Jews avoid the issue of theology by taking refuge in legal obligations. Inner spiritual experiences, and all the more so thinking and talking about God, are overtaken by the focus on how to perform rituals and studying the intricacies of divine law. I believe that neo-Hasidism, on the other hand, bespeaks a kind of new God-centered faith that can tolerate the complexities of the modern world, including the necessary conversation with doubt and uncertainty. This openness does not, however, undermine commitment. God's existence may not be *proven* in the modern world, but mankind can experience the divine Presence and bear witness to this proximity of God.

Neo-Hasidism has much to teach the Orthodox world in regard to an impassioned and exciting practice of prayer. Contemporary Orthodox circles see the life of prayer as a matter of attendance, not spiritual uplift. It is easier to concentrate on filling seats than on filling souls. Movement in this Carlebach-influenced direction in recent years has affected a resurrection of prayer in some Orthodox synagogues. But continuing to incorporate specific neo-Hasidic practices, from intense contemplative prayer to song and dance, will be of continued significance.

But neo-Hasidism also offers a very different approach to education, with implications from primary schools to rabbinical seminaries. Orthodox schools do a good job preparing students for college at prestigious universities, but relatively few offer their students intensive spiritual guidance with sensitive mentors. Modern rabbis, even Orthodox ones, are called upon to serve their congregants and students as listeners, pastoral guides, and spiritual leaders. These are not skills fostered by exclusive training in law and Talmud. Our generation needs *rebbe*s, not just rabbis. Models for this type of religious leadership may be found in the rich works of neo-Hasidism in addition to the traditional Hasidic texts from which they sprang. Seminaries should put a greater emphasis on the interior spiritual quest of the rabbi and in teaching pastoral skills. This may entail changing elements of rabbinic curricula to emphasize the importance of *aggadah* and cultivating a personal theology, as well as the study of Hasidic sources. These sources should be approached in the same rigorous and intensive manner used in the realm of *halakhah*. Yet more fundamentally the wisdom of neo-Hasidism reminds us to approach the quest of training rabbis as a holistic educational enterprise, one in which we cultivate the spiritual hearts of our future rabbis in addition to strengthening their minds through penetrating talmudic scholarship.

Orthodox Judaism prides itself on engendering a dedication to *halakhah* in the modern world. This commitment to rituals, ceremonies, restrictions, and obligations is truly one of the great successes of Orthodoxy. But it is no secret that the Orthodox approach to *halakhah* has also led to an exclusively practice-oriented definition of religiosity, in which performance itself is the height of spiritual experience. Many Orthodox legal thinkers (though by no means all) portray *halakhah* as if it were a self-justifying system with an internal, coherent logic and a

matrix of values that exist untouchably beyond time and space.<sup>25</sup> Neo-Hasidism embraces the centrality of ritual and *halakhah*, but brings values such as personal experience and cultural transformations into consideration when formulating a legal decision.<sup>26</sup> Most importantly, however, neo-Hasidism reminds us that Jewish practice and observance, the duties outlined by the *halakhah*, should be understood as leading the worshiper to God. *Halakhah* is thus best understood not as law *per se*, but as *halikhah*—a sacred path of obligation that brings us into the presence of the Divine. Hasidic and neo-Hasidic approaches to *halakhah* are grounded in the ideals of spiritual creativity, compassion, and personal integrity, values that deepen rather than undermine commitment. But this ethos is not simply a theoretical paradigm, and I suggest that in certain cases it must inform the way that we decide the *halakhah* in the contemporary world.

These are matters that Orthodox figures influenced by Hasidism and neo-Hasidism have worked toward, and the discourse in centrist and left-leaning Orthodox communities has already begun to shift. There is, however, more work to be done. The lessons of neo-Hasidism may also help to redress the indifference of Orthodox communities toward environmental problems and climate change. Recent non-Orthodox neo-Hasidic thinkers have been among the Jewish champions of this cause. This fact is no mere coincidence, for commitment to sustainability and environmental concern is a direct outgrowth in their belief that God *needs* our help to repair and heal the world. Furthermore, because the Divine is manifest precisely through the physical world, the notions of raising the sparks and revealing God's presence mandate that we take up our duty to preserve the physical world as a habitable place for higher life. This understanding should be seen as a fundament of our covenantal relationship with God. It is a universal extension of our heartfelt commitment to serving the Divine, and the highest call to duty of the present moment.

This question of environmental ethics and responsibility leads me to my final point: Neo-Hasidism has sought, from the beginning, to universalize the teachings of Hasidism as a spiritual message with something to say about enduring human issues that reach beyond the Jewish community. Yet with few exceptions, Orthodoxy has remained largely parochial.<sup>27</sup> Orthodox thinkers have sought to demonstrate the relevance of the humanities for scholars of Jewish thought and practice, but less energy has been devoted to exploring the ways in

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, this conception of *halakhah* is most visible in Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), the ethos of which has had tremendous impact on contemporary Jewish thought. Yet a very different picture of *halakhah* emerges from works such as, inter alia, Eliezer Berkovits, *Essential Essays on Judaism*, ed. David Hazony (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2002), 1-88; Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Human and Social Factor in *Halakhah*," *Tradition* 36.1 (2002): 89-114; Daniel Sperber, "'Friendly' *Halakhah* and the 'Friendly' *Poseq*," *Edah* 5.2 (2006): 36;; idem, "On How to Lean Towards Leniency: Halakhic Methodology for the *Poseq*," *Conversations* 23 (2015): 1-28.

<sup>26</sup> See Ariel Evan Mayse, "The Ever-Changing Path: Visions of Legal Diversity in Hasidic Literature." *Conversations: The Journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals* 23 (2015): 84-115; and idem, "Neo-Hasidism and *Halakhah*: The Duties of Intimacy and the Law of the Heart," *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> The many insightful works of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks are a crucial exception to this rule; see the presentation and evaluation of his message in *Jonathan Sacks: Universalizing Particularity*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Boston: Brill, 2013). See also the strikingly broad vision of the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Chabad that emerges from Chaim Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward: A Biography of the Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Kol Menachem, 2014).

which Jewish theology can inform and elevate contemporary debates over religious ethics, spiritual leadership, the relationship between religion and science, perceptions of the other, notions of sacred and secular in the modern world, the place of the humanities (and human dignity) in the digital age, and so forth. Recent efforts in this direction have focused primarily on the political uses of Jewish tradition, with little thought given to the possible centrality of Jewish spirituality as a deep reservoir for human inspiration and flourishing. Furthermore, the great global crises of our age, from impending environmental disaster to rampant economic disparity and the shocking violation of human rights across the world, will not be solved by any single religious group working in a vacuum. When interpreted in light of neo-Hasidic values, the moral conscience and spiritual message of Hasidism has much wisdom to share on these and other weighty problems. This two-fold commitment to the specific power of Jewish mysticism to shape and sustain the universal life of the spirit, as well as that of the particular Jewish community, is one of the richest and most relevant legacies of the neo-Hasidic tradition.

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# THE TALMUD'S ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR, AND THE STUDY OF BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS

SHLOMO ZUCKIER

## INTRODUCTION

A close analysis of Talmudic and Halakhic literature dealing with economic issues can often yield insight into Talmudic theories of economics, a fascinating if underexplored field. Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine was a [trailblazer](#) in this realm, and scholars such as [Yisrael Aumann](#), [Guido Calabresi](#), Yuval Sinai, and Benjamin Shmueli have contributed as well.

The juxtaposition of Talmud and economics provides opportunities for each field to learn from and build upon the other in a variety of ways. *Bava Kamma*, dealing as it does with torts, may be the tractate most associated with economics in the Babylonian Talmud. This essay will examine two issues appearing in *Bava Kamma* that seem to pose a problem from the standpoint of economics and will draw upon developments in recent decades in the field of economics that may assist in solving these questions.

### CASE 1: *Zuzei Hu De-Ansuha*

The Talmud has a principle that people do not generally wish to part with their land or possessions, and only do so upon some degree of financial coercion. The Gemara in [Bava Kamma 89b](#) and elsewhere ([Ketubot 53a](#), [A.Z. 72a](#)) describes the concept of *zuzei hu de-ansuha*, that a person who sells their land presumably does so only due to “the coercion of money,” i.e. a particular need for cash. (This principle has ramifications in certain cases, including backtracking on a commitment to sell to one person and then selling to someone else for a higher price.) Absent this financial pressure, there would be no reason to sell one’s land, even if offered full price for it, as land is worth more than its cash value. This concept seems to imply that land or possessions are actually worth more than their face value; in other words, all possessions are underpriced.

But this principle seems to contradict the widely accepted economic principle of the efficiency of markets. In general, the presumption is that a price in a free market represents the true value of an item. If the item were worth more than its price, people would be willing to pay more for it, and if its owners were reasonable, they would only be willing to sell it for a higher price, so the price would rise to reach the item’s value; if the item were worth less than its price, reasonable people would not be willing to pay the stated price and the price would thus decrease. If so, how can the Talmud have this concept of *zuzei hu de-ansuha* without running afoul of a basic and demonstrated economic principle?

### CASE 2: *Meitav*

[Exodus 22:4](#) rules that one who damages their fellow’s field must repay from the “choicest (*meitav*) of his field and vineyard.” The Talmud in [Bava Kamma 6b-8b](#) analyzes this verse, considering what precisely *meitav*, also known as *iddit*, may mean. It raises the possibility that if one damages a field of a certain size, one must pay the value as if that field were of the highest quality. Thus, if one damages an acre of a field of low quality, one would need to pay not the cost of a low-quality field (for argument’s sake, \$100 per acre) but the cost of a choice field (let’s say, \$200 per acre). But the Gemara rejects this option: *akhal kehushah meshallem*

*shemenah?* – how could it be that one does \$100 of damage but repays \$200? Rather, the Gemara (6b) rules, the one who did the damage must pay an amount of money equivalent to the damage, but he must pay from high quality land (whether this quality is determined based on the tortfeasor or the victim is disputed by Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva). In other words, if he damaged a low-quality, acre-sized field (\$100), he now pays back that damage with a half-acre of higher quality field (with a value equaling half of \$200, or \$100).

The obvious question emerges: since both fields are worth the same amount of money, what is the special preference for having him pay with the smaller, higher quality field rather than the larger, lower quality field? The standard answer given for this question is based on Rashi ([Gittin 48b](#) and elsewhere):

[One pays] the higher quality land (*iddit*) among the properties of the tortfeasor, because it is preferable for a person to collect a smaller amount of high quality land (*iddit*) rather than a larger amount of low quality land (*zibborit*).

In other words, a smaller, high quality field costing \$100 is more valuable than a larger, lower quality field of the same cost. Thus, one would rather have a smaller *iddit* field worth \$100 than a larger *zibborit* field at the same cost, and so the Torah penalizes the tortfeasor by making him pay from an *iddit* field.

A basic problem is posed to this approach from the perspective of economics, again building on the concept of efficient markets. If a \$100 *iddit* field is worth more than a \$100 *zibborit* field, why do they remain at the same price? Shouldn't the *iddit* field's greater value be reflected by a correction in the markets such that it is now worth more than \$100? Shouldn't the concept of market efficiency dictate that (at equilibrium) two fields costing \$100 are equivalent to one other? If some \$100 fields are worth more than others, why wouldn't enterprising businessmen buy up all the *iddit* \$100 fields and sell them for \$105!?

## **BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS**

It may be possible to resolve both of these problems on the basis of a revolution in the study of economics that took place over the past half-century. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, two Israeli psychologists and scions of rabbinic dynasties, earned the Nobel prize in Economics in 2002 (received by Kahneman; Tversky was deceased by that point) on the basis of their research in the 1970s on behavioral economics. Prior to their research, it was generally assumed that people always acted rationally; if something could be shown to prescriptively be the logical way to earn the most money, economics textbooks would present it descriptively as the way that people would function. Kahneman and Tversky, approaching the field of economics from their backgrounds in psychology, took a new perspective on these issues. They pointed to all sorts of irrationalities that are built in to the human psyche and raised the question of their significance for economics. For example, people are loss averse, which means that a person values not losing \$5 more than they value earning \$5, despite the fact that from an economic perspective these things are equivalent. Kahneman and Tversky suggested that economists should study closely all of the irrationalities of human behavior and incorporate them into economic models. If one is attempting to understand the real world, the models should be based not on fully rational actors but on human actors, with their peculiar mix of rationality and irrationality.

## APPLICATION TO THE TALMUD

Against this backdrop, it might be possible to explain the problems posed by economics to the Talmudic passages noted above. Classical economics assumes an equivalence between the objective value of a field and the amount of money at which they will subjectively value it; a person should value a \$50 field as much as they value \$50 in cash and it should thus be a fair deal to sell one's field. However, on a *psychological* level, on the plane of behavioral economics, there is a discrepancy between these scenarios. Given the psychological principle of loss aversion, people prefer not to give up their field or their object, even if they receive money that is fully equivalent. This is spelled out in the psychological literature as the [endowment effect](#), which dictates that people place a higher value on a good they own than one they do not own.

A similar resolution can be offered to the problem that on an objective plane a field that is *iddit* is no more valuable than one that is *zibborit* at the same price. While this is true from the perspective of classical economics, one might argue that, behaviorally, people would generally prefer to have the higher quality item over a similarly priced item of lower quality. This is for the simple reason that people enjoy having something of higher quality, even if its objective value is equivalent. As some scholars [put it](#), "the consumer's sense of gain or loss is directly related to the usefulness of the goods in question"; it can thus be argued that the item that is subjectively valued at a higher level will generate the greatest loss aversion, regardless of its objective value. Based on this, when people give up land in payment, the loss aversion is much stronger regarding their higher quality assets than it is regarding their lower quality assets. Therefore, although giving up one's *iddit* field or one's *zibborit* field is an equal cost to the damager's wallet, the cost to their psyche will be greater in the first case.

On this basis, it is possible to explain these Talmudic principles of *zuzei hu de-ansuha* and the preference for *iddit* over *zibborit* on the basis of behavioral economics. These preferences, though irrational, are very much at work in the real world, and the Torah takes into account lived reality for these purposes rather than theoretical value alone. Thus, when assessing why someone sold their field, it is likely due to duress rather than a view of the equivalence between cash and land. And in assessing what would be a more severe punishment for the tortfeasor, imposing the penalty that damager pay from *iddit* is indeed more powerful, but on a *psychological* basis rather than an objective financial one.

This case study has revealed that, by using the approach of behavioral economics, and appealing not to objective but to subjective value, it is possible to resolve both the question of *zuzei hu de-ansuha* and of *meitav*. There may be additional economic conundrums that can be resolved as well using similar methods, as the data of the economic behavior noted in the Talmud and the ever-developing field of economics continue to mutually inform one another.

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