

## ***Pre-Messianic Modifications in the Thought of Rav Kook and the Lubavitcher Rebbe***

**By: YOSEF BRONSTEIN**

*Great and exalted is the study of Habad philosophy, the discipline that most enlightens the Torah of the holy of Israel, the Bal Shem Tov, which was certainly prepared for the redemption...*<sup>1</sup>

-Rav Kook

Two of the most influential rabbis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were Rabbi Avraham Kook and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (henceforth, the Rebbe). While they were active decades and thousands of miles apart, they share the distinction of becoming the ideological leaders of strongly committed communities on new shores: Rav Kook in Israel and the Rebbe in Crown Heights. Though on the surface there is little in common between the Religious-Zionist community of Israel and the Habad community of Crown Heights, in this essay I will outline one underlying fundamental element of their philosophies that is strikingly common to both. Rav Kook and the Rebbe were both students of the Habad tradition<sup>2</sup> and were innovative<sup>3</sup> within it in an almost identical fashion. After analyzing the

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<sup>1</sup> *Iggerot ha-Raiyah* Volume 4, letter 1,444. The continuation of the quote appears at the end of the essay.

<sup>2</sup> It is clear that Rav Kook was influenced by Habad, particularly regarding the topic of this essay. See note 17. However, it is also important to emphasize that Rav Kook prided himself on being eclectic. See the citation from his letters at the conclusion of this essay and Lawrence Fine, "Rav Abraham Isaac Kook and the Jewish Mystical Tradition," *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan, David Shatz (NYU Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>3</sup> This adjective accurately describes the thought of both Rav Kook and the Rebbe. While Rav Kook asserted that "the foundation of [my ideas] is ancient and emerges from the source of holiness" (*Iggerot ha-Raiyah*, Volume 4, letter

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similarity between the basic innovative premises of Rav Kook and the Rebbe, I will note one significant way in which they diverged.

### **The God-World Relationship in the Thought of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi**

In order to understand the innovativeness of Rav Kook and the Rebbe, a basic summary of a central aspect of early Ḥabad philosophy is in order. A central topic in Ḥasidism as a whole and of Ḥabad in particular, is the relationship between God and the world. While earlier Jewish philosophy perceived God and the world as two distinct entities, Ḥabad claimed that this distinction was an illusion. In the words of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe of Ḥabad (*Tanya, Iggerot ha-Kodesh*, letter 6):<sup>4</sup>

But as for His blessed Being and Essence, it is written: “I, the Lord, I have not changed”; neither in terms of changes of the development

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49a), he was certainly self-aware of the innovativeness of some of his passages. For examples, see *Shemonah Kevatzim* 3:208, 4:17 and the introduction to *Midbar Shur* where he justifies his publishing philosophy before halakha by admitting that he is more innovative in the former. See also, Neryah Gutel, *Hadashim Gam Yesbanim be-Netivei Mishnato ha-Hilkhatit-Hagutit shel ha-Rav Kook* (Magnes Press, 2009), 6. The Rebbe never openly acknowledged that he was being innovative within the Ḥabad tradition but it was patently apparent to his students. For example, R. Feital Levin, one of the select group charged with transcribing the Rebbe’s oral discourses, summarized the Rebbe’s “comprehensive and consistent theological system” in his book *Heaven on Earth: Reflections on the Theology of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menahem M. Schneerson* (Kehot, 2002). R. Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, X, notes that despite the Rebbe’s faithfulness to earlier Ḥabad thought:

... it appears justified to maintain, as this book does, that the general thrust of the Rebbe’s theology, whilst firmly rooted in classic Chasidic teachings, is strikingly innovative. Indeed, even those relevant perceptions that were expressed previously are no longer isolated thoughts, but are now incorporated into a total system. Where he is not the creator of the building blocks, the Rebbe is the master architect who incorporates these blocks into an impressively innovative edifice, in which, in turn, each brick assumes new meaning... The Rebbe has furthered many Chasidic teachings to their logical conclusion, thereby continuing the tradition of the great Chasidic leaders to progressively reveal the hidden mystical dimension of Judaism. And it is these teachings that this book attempts to paraphrase.

<sup>4</sup> Translation from [http://www.chabad.org/library/tanya/tanya\\_cdo/aid/1028862/jewish/Tanya.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/tanya/tanya_cdo/aid/1028862/jewish/Tanya.htm). For a clear summary of the shift from earlier Jewish philosophy and kabbalah to the approach of Ḥabad, see R. Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (JPS, 1998), 47–51; R. Feital Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 43–49.