

## ***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.

from the uppermost of levels to the nethermost [for just as He, blessed be He, is found in the upper worlds, so He is in precisely that measure in the nether worlds, nor in terms of temporal changes [for just as He was alone, one and unique, before the six days of creation, so He is now after the creation]. This is so because everything is absolutely as nothing and naught in relation to His being and essence...

Why then does our empirically observable reality not conform to this truth? Why do we see a physical world bereft of God? Simply because through the process of *tzimtzum*, God created an illusion by hiding the Divine Light (*Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 21):

...there is thus no manner of change in His blessed Self, but only for the created beings which receive their life-force from His blessed “word,” as it were, in its revealed state at the creation of the worlds, in which it is clothed, giving them life through a process of gradual descent from cause to effect and a downward gradation, by means of numerous and various contractions, until the created beings can receive their life and existence from it, without losing their entity.

These “contractions” are all in the nature of “veiling of the Countenance,” to obscure and conceal the light and life-force that are derived from His blessed “word,” so that it shall not reveal itself in a greater radiance than the lower worlds are capable of receiving... Yet, in regard to the Holy One, blessed be He, no concealment or delitescency hides or obscures anything from Him, to Whom darkness is like light, as is written, “Yea, the darkness obscureth not from Thee...”

In this passage, R. Shneur Zalman is referencing the Arizal’s mystical cosmology of *tzimtzum*. While some kabbalists understood this doctrine literally and argued that through these contractions God created an “empty space” bereft of Himself that allowed for the creation of the world,<sup>5</sup> R. Shneur Zalman vociferously championed a non-literal interpretation

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<sup>5</sup> For a summary of this longstanding kabbalistic debate, see Moshe Halamish, *Mavo le-Kabbalah* (Sifriyat Eliner, 1991), 160–162 and R. Eli Rubin, “Immanent Transcendence: Chassidim, mitnagdim and the debate about tzimtzum,” available at [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/2306809/jewish/Immanent-Transcendence.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2306809/jewish/Immanent-Transcendence.htm) (accessed 1/18/2016).

of *tzimtzum*. From God’s “true” perspective, all of reality is entirely comprised of God. The Arizal’s *tzimtzum* is a means of explaining our perception of reality, not reality itself.<sup>6</sup>

For our discussion of Rav Kook and the Rebbe, it is important to emphasize several points regarding R. Shneur Zalman’s system.

(1) This paradoxical understanding of the relationship between God and the world is by no means merely a theoretical and speculative issue. Rather, it is a key element in determining Habad orientation and practice. As articulated by Rachel Elijor,<sup>7</sup> the God-world system of Habad has two opposite ramifications on the relationship to our illusory world.

(A) On the one hand, the system creates a tremendous potential of divine immanence within the confines of our physical world. This is in two ways. First, even if our illusory world does not present itself to us as being connected with God, there is still an aspect of divinity that underlies it.<sup>8</sup> In addition, through our fulfillment of *mitsvot* we have the ability to draw even higher levels of divinity into this world.<sup>9</sup> This entire aspect of service assumes the existence of this world and has a positive attitude towards it. A proper understanding of the divinity within the confines of this world is known as *Yihuda Tata’ab* (The Lower Unification).<sup>10</sup>

(B) However, as was noted, from God’s inner perspective our world does not truly exist. If we are to aspire to see reality from God’s perspective and truly understand the unity of God then our perspective should be one of *bittul*—of nullification. The “light that surrounds the world” leaves no room for existence (*Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, ch. 46).

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<sup>6</sup> R. Shneur Zalman’s arguments for a non-literal understanding of *tzimtzum* are delineated in *Tanya, Sha’ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah* chapter 7. For more sources and elaboration see Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jefferey Green (SUNY Press, 1992), 82–87.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent*, 131–138.

<sup>8</sup> This aspect of divinity is referred to as *memalei kol almin, Shekhina* and *Elokim* (*Tanya, Likutei Amarim* chapters 41, 52). One is supposed to focus on the fact that God “fills the worlds” when reciting *Barukh Shem Kevod Malkhuto le-Olam Va’ed* (*Tanya, Sha’ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah* chapter 7). For a clear explanation of the matter see R. Nissan Mindel, *Rabbi Schneur Zalman Volume 2: The Philosophy of Chabad* (Kehot, 1974), 124–125.

<sup>9</sup> *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 36–37; *Likutei Torah, Drushim le-Rosh ha-Shanah*, 61a. For more sources and an analysis see Dov Schwartz, *Maḥshevet Habad* (University of Bar Ilan Press, 2010), 118–119.

<sup>10</sup> *Tanya, Sha’ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah* chapter 7.

R. Shneur Zalman enjoined his students to spend time each day meditating on the fact that nothing exists other than God (*Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 33):

Let him then concentrate his mind and envisage in his intelligence and understanding the subject of His blessed true Unity: how He permeates all worlds, both upper and lower, and even the fullness of this earth is His blessed glory; and how everything is of no reality whatever in His presence; and He is one Alone in the upper and lower realms, as He was One Alone before the six days of Creation; and also in the space wherein this world was created, the heavens and earth, and all their host—He alone filled this space; and now also this is so, being One Alone without any change whatever. For all things created are nullified beside Him in their very existence, as are nullified the letters of speech and thought within their source and root .... Exactly so, figuratively speaking, is the world and all that fills it dissolved out of existence in relation to its source, which is the light of the blessed En Sof.<sup>11</sup>

This perspective is referred to in *Tanya* as *Yibuda Ila'ab* (The Higher Unification).<sup>12</sup>

(2) An important element of R. Shneur Zalman's paradoxical approach to reality is his further paradoxical descriptions of the eschatological era. While one might have thought that the ultimate eschaton will entail a complete erasure of reality—the realization of *Yibuda Ila'ab*—this is surprisingly not the case. Both in *Tanya* and elsewhere, R. Shneur Zalman describes the messianic era as one in which the presence of “*Or Ein Sof*”<sup>13</sup> does not eradicate our world, but is entirely expressed through it (*Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 36):

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<sup>11</sup> *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 33.

<sup>12</sup> *Tanya, Sha'ar ha-Yibud ve-ha-Emunah* chapter 7.

<sup>13</sup> R. Shneur Zalman dedicated an entire discourse to the definition of this term, “*Or Ein Sof*” (*Mama'rei Admor ha-Zaken* 5667, s.v. “*Le-Havin Inyan Or Ein Sof*,” 22–32. In this discourse he differentiates between “*Atzmut*” and “*Or Ein Sof*.” The former has no definition. *Or Ein Sof* refers to the “light” of this *Atzmut* which “shone” from the *Atzmut* and filled the “empty space” prior to the *tzimtzum*. The reason that “light” is used to describe the “*Or Ein Sof*” is that it connotes a life-giving force. Elsewhere (*Tanya, Sha'ar ha-Yibud ve-ha-Emunah*, chapter 3) R. Shneur Zalman explains that light is the proper metaphor for “*Or Ein Sof*” because even though the effect of light can be felt at a distance, when one traces the light back to its source, the sun, it is completely nullified and unified within it. To an even greater degree is the “*Or Ein Sof*” connected with its source. For more sources and a longer explanation see Moshe Halamish,

Clearly, the purpose of the Hishtalshelut of the worlds and their descent, degree by degree, is not for the sake of the higher worlds, because for them this is a descent from the light of His blessed Countenance. But the ultimate purpose [of creation] is this lowest world, for such was His blessed will that He shall have satisfaction when the sitra achra is subdued and the darkness is turned to light, so that the Divine light of the blessed En Sof shall shine forth in the place of the darkness and sitra achra throughout this world, all the more strongly and intensely, with the excellence of light emerging from darkness, than its effulgence in the higher worlds, where it shines through “garments” and in concealment of the Countenance, which screen and conceal the light of the blessed En Sof, in order that they should not dissolve out of existence.<sup>14</sup>

How is it possible for the “*Or Ein Sof*” to shine in this world without causing it to “dissolve out of existence?” R. Shneur Zalman explained:

For this purpose, the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Israel the Torah which is called “might” and “strength,” as the Rabbis, of blessed memory, have said, that the Almighty puts strength into the righteous in order that they may receive their reward in the hereafter, without being nullified in their very existence, in the Divine light that will be revealed to them in the hereafter without any cloak, as is written, “No longer shall thy Teacher hide Himself (literally: He will not conceal Himself from thee with robe and garment) ... but thine eyes shall see thy Teacher.” It is also written, “For they shall see eye to eye,...” and, “The sun shall be no more thy light by day ..., but the Lord shall be thine everlasting light...”

It is well known that the Messianic Era, and especially the time of the Resurrection of the Dead, is the fulfillment and culmination of the creation of the world, for which purpose it was originally created.

It is the learning of Torah and the performance of *mitzvoth* that will purify our world such that our physical world can be unified with the highest levels of divinity.

Elsewhere (*Torah Or*, Vol. 1, 22b), R. Shneur Zalman admits that the regular system of reality that he generally describes makes this unification

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*Mishnato ba-Iyunit shel R. Shneur Zalman mi-Liadi* (dissertation presented to Senate of the Hebrew University, 1976), 35–41. This distinction between “*Or Ein Sof*” and *Atzmut* will become important in understanding the innovative nature of the Rebbe’s philosophy.

<sup>14</sup> For more sources and parallel passages, see Dov Schwartz, *Maḥshevet Habad*, 277–280.

an impossibility. Before the full purification of our world, God negates the existence of our world and hence the aforementioned process of *bittul*. But once the physical world reaches a purified state, a higher level of divinity that even “*Yihuda Ila’ab*” will be revealed. The “*Or Ein Sof* itself that is higher and higher than occultation,” meaning the Divine Light that is prior to *tzimtzum*, will not negate the physical reality but will be fully manifest in it.<sup>15</sup>

However, as mentioned above, despite these descriptions of the Messianic era, R. Shneur Zalman placed a heavy emphasis on the notion of nullifying the physicality of this world.<sup>16</sup>

### **The God-World Relationship in the Thought of Rav Kook**

It is quite clear that Rav Kook’s conception of the God-world relationship was heavily influenced by Ḥabad.<sup>17</sup> In one piece, he even contrasts “traditional monotheistic notion” with the “monotheistic outlook that leans

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<sup>15</sup> The fact that this unification will take place through the revelation of an aspect of divinity that is “above the *hishtalshelut*” will become important for the Rebbe’s theology.

<sup>16</sup> See, Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent*, 143–178. The fact that *bittul* was considered an ideal for R. Shneur Zalman is concretized by Ḥabad lore regarding the final moments of his life. Here is the rendition of a website dedicated to the discourses of R. Shneur Zalman: <http://www.likkuteitorah.com/Tzav-for%20interim%20web%20posting.htm>:

...there is a well-known story relating that, on his deathbed, the Alter Rebbe gestured toward the ceiling and asked his grandson and eventual successor, the Tzemach Tzedek, what he saw there. “I see wooden beams,” replied the Tzemach Tzedek. “I see only G-dliness,” his grandfather said. The point is not that the Alter Rebbe realized that even the ceiling beams were essentially a form of G-dly manifestation; certainly the Tzemach Tzedek, too, knew that. The point of the story is that, on the very threshold of the next world, the Alter Rebbe was so spiritually refined, so pure, that he actually saw the beams for what they really were—G-dliness

In other words, at the end of his life, R. Shneur Zalman was able to look at the wood without seeing the physical wood—only the divinity that underlies it.

<sup>17</sup> Tamar Ross, “*Musag ha-Eloket shel ha-Rav Kook*,” *Da’at* 8 (Bar Ilan University Press), 115-116. For a list of articles regarding the connection between Rav Kook and Ḥabad see Dov Schwartz, *Maḥshevet Ḥabad*, 357 note 5. Analyzing the similarities and differences between Rav Kook and Ḥabad stems back to Rav Kook himself. R. Dovid Cohen, a close student and editor of *Orot ha-Kodesh*, noted the similarities between Rav Kook and Ḥabad and asked him about them. Rav Kook’s response was “Ḥasidism builds the individual. I am building the

towards a Spinozan explanation when it is purified from its dregs, that many aspects of it are emphasized in the new Hassidism—that there is nothing other than God.”<sup>18</sup> However, it is striking that Rav Kook does not advocate for the approach of *bittul*.<sup>19</sup>

Let us begin our analysis with the first essay of the pamphlet “*Zei-ronim*” that Rav Kook himself published (*Orot*, 119-120).<sup>20</sup> He begins by asserting that a person can find complete peace and serenity only when connected to God. This, however, poses a problem for the God-searcher:

The place where we may find peace is only in God. God, however, transcends the existing world, making it impossible for us to grasp any aspect of Him in feeling or thought. This makes Him, as far as we are concerned, nonexistent, and the spirit cannot find contentment in what does not exist. It is for this reason that wise men who devote themselves to the quest for God are, for the most part, spiritually weary.

The quest to find God is bound to fail. This inexorable failure to attain peace through connecting to God generates a “trivialization” of the world and all within it. To navigate this tension, Rav Kook asserts the following:

It is necessary to show how one may enter the palace: by the way of the gate. The gate is the divine dimension disclosed in the world, in all its phenomena of beauty and grandeur, as manifested in every

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nation.” See R. Dovid Cohen, “*Mavo le-Orot ha-Kodesh*,” *Sinai* 12 (1943), 289 where he refers to the difference between R. Kook and “*ba-Hasidut ha-Ḥadashah*.” However, see R. Shlomo Aviner, “*Bein Maran ha-Rav Kook le-Rav Ginsberg*” (available at <http://www.kimizion.org/maamar/rvkuk7.html>) where he tells the story specifically about Ḥabad.

<sup>18</sup> Tamar Ross, “*Musag ha-Eloket shel ha-Rav Kook*,” 115; R. Yeshaya Hadari, “*Sbir shel Yom be-Torat Reb Tzadok ha-Kohen*,” *Sinai* 53 (Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 80 note 4.

<sup>19</sup> Tamar Ross, “*Musag ha-Eloket shel ha-Rav Kook*,” 116–126 and specifically, 121; Tamar Ross, “*Musag ha-Eloket shel ha-Rav Kook: Hemsbekeh*” *Da’at* 9 (Bar Ilan University Press), 54; R. Yosef Avivi, “*Mekor ha-Orot*” *Zohar* 1 (2000), 17–19 (available at [http://yosefavivi.blogspot.com/p/blog-page\\_3252.html](http://yosefavivi.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_3252.html)); Smadar Cherlow, *Tzadik Yesod Olam*, 245-246. In particular, see *Shemonah Kevatzim* 2:319: “Through the spiritual service of the Tzadikim, the ones who have elevated thoughts of God, the light of the divine *Ayin* (nothingness) is constantly glittering and is revealed as reality (*yesh*), and the entire world is sweetened through him. As Smadar Cherlow notes, this is in direct contrast to the Ḥabad notion that the service is supposed to transform *yesh* into *ayin*.”

<sup>20</sup> Translation is from R. Ben Tzion Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook* (Paulist Press, 1978), 250–252.



living thing, in every insect, in every blooming plant and flower, in every nation and state, in the sea with its turbulent waves, in the panorama of the skies, in the talents of all creatures, in the thoughts of writers, the imagination of poets and the ideas of thinkers, in the feelings of every sensitive spirit and in the heroic deeds of every person of valor... is revealed the great truth, that all the worlds with all that is in them only appear to us as particular effulgence but they in truth are manifestations of the higher light, and, seen in their essence, they make up one whole, a unitary manifestation in which is included all beauty, all light, all truth, and all good. These manifestations continually emerge and develop, they show themselves increasingly as in truth individual expressions of the All-Good... The narrow boundaries of all these no longer oppress the soul, which at once realizes that all these tiny sparks continually ascend and become integrated into the comprehensive unity of all life.

R. Shneur Zalman would have us look at a tree and see only the fiery Hebrew letters that comprise its spiritual essence. Through the *bittul* of the physical tree one can perceive the divinity that is truly present. Rav Kook, however, would have us look at a tree and see the trunk, bark and leaves. Even without stripping the tree of its physicality, one should be able to perceive the physical reality itself as a manifestation of divinity.

This idea is a leitmotif in Rav Kook's thought<sup>21</sup> and serves as the basis for many of his more radical teachings. For the sake of illustration, I will cite one passage that articulates Rav Kook's general orientation towards the physical reality and one that describes the particular significance that he attributed to the natural world.

One oft-quoted passage from Rav Kook reads as follows (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:181):<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See *Shemonah Kevatzim* 2:178 where Rav Kook writes: "We think that it is exaggerated if we say that the unity of existence interests us more than anything else... but this is a terrible mistake in our value. There is nothing comparable to this unity." R. Dovid Cohen (*ha-Rav ha-Nazir*, the editor of *Orot ha-Kodesh*), "Mavo le-Orot ha-Kodesh," *Sinai* 11 (1943), 288 identified the notion of "all-inclusive unity" as foundational to Rav Kook's metaphysics. For Rav Kook, as for R. Shneur Zalman, the unity of God means that nothing exists other than God. For more references to Rav Kook's writings regarding this idea, see Tzvi Yaron, *Mishnato Shel ha-Rav Kook* (Jerusalem, Jewish Agency Torah Department, 1974), 85–94; Lawrence Fine, "Rav Abraham Isaac Kook and the Jewish Mystical Tradition" in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan, David Shatz (NYU Press, 1995), 30–34.

<sup>22</sup> Translation from R. Ben Tzion Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook*, 207.

If you will it, man, observe the light of the divine presence that pervades every aspect of life, the spiritual and material, which are before your eyes of flesh and your eyes of the spirit.

Contemplate the wonders of creation, the divine dimension of their being, not as a dim configuration that is presented to you from the distance but as the reality in which you live.

Know yourself, and your world; know the meditations of your heart and of every thinker; find the source of your own life, and of the life beyond you, around you, the glorious splendor of the life in which you have your being.

Instead of divinity obliterating life, we should focus on “the divine dimension [of creation’s] being.” This notion is responsible for Rav Kook’s mystical appreciation for the natural world. One piece in particular, connects the supernal stature of Adam ha-Rishon with his direct connection to nature (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 3:66):

The highest service of Hashem is the one that is directly connected to nature. This high holiness was made profane through the pollution of man who destroyed the service of nature by making it into an idolatrous monster instead of it being a strong basis for the highest ideals. The “supernal shining”<sup>23</sup> of Adam ha-Rishon includes this high characteristic that rises higher than the “clear lens” of the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu. “To work it and guard it” in Gan Eden, this is the brightness of the supernal life, to eat from the Tree of Life, and not to know at all of bad because it is impossible that there will be any bad in the physical or spiritual world that is so perfect, the handiwork of the Creator of all, rather everything in its proper time is good, “and Hashem made humans straight.” The involvement in *Perek Shirah* is the basis of return/repentance to nature. This is the teshuva that is low but is high, that rises above all jealousy of nations, just elevates all of them as an exalted brotherhood, all brothers the creations of God that know their creator and derive pleasure from the splendor of his work. All rises to the heights of holiness.

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<sup>23</sup> In this passage Rav Kook uses the term “*zihara ila’ah*.” In *Shemonah Kevatzim* 8:170 Rav Kook defines “*ziharah ila’ah*” as a perspective where all physicality is elevated and seen as divine. This was the level of *Adam ha-Rishon* before he sinned, and is a higher level than “the clear vision” of Moshe Rabbeinu, who needed to separate from the physical aspects of marital life. See also, *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:416 for a similar description of the “*Zohar ehyon*” of Adam which will return in the times of Mashiah.

In the ideal reality, man serves God while being connected to the divinity that exists within the natural world.

What caused Rav Kook to use R. Shneur Zalman's conception of the God-world relationship but erase the doctrine of *bittul*?<sup>24</sup> There are two elements to the answer. First, despite their similarity, Rav Kook's view of the relationship between God and the world is not identical to that of R. Shneur Zalman.<sup>25</sup> I will discuss this point in the section of the essay relating to the differences between Rav Kook and the Rebbe.

The second element is Rav Kook's firm belief in the onset of the messianic process.<sup>26</sup> As noted above, R. Shneur Zalman spoke of the messianic era as one in which there is no contradiction between "*Or Ein Sof*" and our physical world. Rav Kook had a keen sense of history and historical processes,<sup>27</sup> and identified his own time period as part of the messianic process. Once this was the case, Rav Kook felt that the time had come to shift our perception regarding the physical world. No longer could we view physicality as a challenging negative or as non-existent. Rather, in order to accelerate the process of redemption he felt that people needed to begin seeing the world in the colors of R. Shneur Zalman's messianic vision.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Body and Its Actions According to Rav Kook**

The connection between the advancement of the world towards redemption and perceiving the physical and secular world as being permeated with divinity is explicit in many passages. As examples, I will cite passages

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<sup>24</sup> It is apparent from Rav Kook's diaries that part of him was attracted to not focusing on this world. See *Hadarav*, edited by Ron Sarid (*Dabri Shir*, 2008), 166 where Rav Kook admits that he is lacking "love for this world" and that causes him "a great lacking in his spirituality." He concludes the paragraph with a prayer that Hashem guide him along the proper paths of this world.

<sup>25</sup> These differences are outlined at length by Tamar Ross in her two-part article on Rav Kook's conception of God in relation to that of R. Hayyim of Volozhin and R. Shneur Zalman.

<sup>26</sup> See Smadar Cherlow, *Tzadik Yesod Olam: ha-Sheliḥut ha-Sodit ve-ha-havayah ha-Mistit shel ha-Rav Kook* (Bar Ilan Press, 2014), 184, n. 100.

<sup>27</sup> This sensitivity to history is apparent in the historical essays translated by Bezalel Naor, *When God Becomes History, Historical Essays of Rabbi Avraham Isaac Hakohen Kook* (Spring Valley, NY: Orot, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Rav Kook was very aware that he was not yet living in the messianic era and saw this shift as occurring slowly and gradually. See, for example, *Orot ha-Teshuva* 6:7 where he writes that the "secular" means will become only as holy as the "spiritual" goals in the time of Mashiah.

that relate to the relationship between body and soul, and to the value of physical actions.

Here is a passage regarding the relationship between body and soul (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:626):

We can only fix spirituality in our generation with the filling out of physicality. The physical forces of Torah Scholars in whom the holy light is caught well in their heart, must be strengthened. It is impossible for the physical forces to be strengthened and for the spiritual and moral value to not diminish except when the light of thought will be great, deep and wide. This is only possible when the involvement in the secrets of the Torah will be great and bright. And the material forces, thoughts and emotions will be strengthened through their preparations they will become a basis for the holy...<sup>29</sup>

This interconnection between the physical body and spiritual forces exists only in “our generation” as opposed to previous generations. This shift in perception is also connected with a key element of the messianic process—the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel (*Orot Yisrael* 9:8):

In the Land of Israel it is possible to understand how the flesh of Jewish body is just as sanctified as the sanctity of the soul. And there is not such a great need to aggravate the body from its natural serenity, but rather to elevate it and to provide for it the true taste of a holy life that flows from the sanctity of the Land, and that is suffused with the enlightening air of the Land of Israel.

Rav Kook writes of a similar shift regarding how we are to view the relationship between actions and theoretical study. This issue is already debated in the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 40b)<sup>30</sup> which seems to conclude that study is more significant. Rav Kook, however, teaches that in redemptive process we must have a newfound appreciation for the realm of physical actions (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 3:92):

Eliyahu, because he includes the sanctity of the world of action, he absorbs with his spirit all of the orientations that are necessary for the advancement of this world until the point of its being readied for complete harmony with the worlds above. Just as before his sweetening he recognized more than anyone else the depth of the ugliness and pollution that this lowly world is sunken within, and because of

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<sup>29</sup> For more passages regarding the elevation of the body in the thought of Rav Kook see R. Elhanan Nir, “*Hitkasbrut ba-Nefesh im ba-Guf*,” *Or Hadash* 11, available at <http://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/14337#7b>.

<sup>30</sup> See Rashi, *Bava Kamma* 17a s.v. “*meivi lidei ma’aseh*” and Tosefot in both places.

that he was zealous as a burning fire to destroy the spirit of impurity and those that hold onto it, so too after his “sweetening” he will recognize every holy spark of this world, to elevate it with a spirit of peace, and he will return the hearts of the fathers to their sons and the hearts of the sons to their fathers.

At the end of history, Eliyahu includes within himself the “sanctity of the world of action.”<sup>31</sup> This positive outlook towards this world at the end of history stands in direct contrast with the earlier, zealous characteristics of Pinḥas and Eliyahu.

These modifications regarding the view of the human body and the realm of action are but two examples of a general shift that Rav Kook was advocating. He has similar passages regarding all other natural and secular items, ideas and people.<sup>32</sup>

### **Spreading the Secrets according to Rav Kook**

In order for these shifts in perception to occur on a mass scale, Rav Kook felt that it was crucial to popularize the secrets of kabbalah.<sup>33</sup> The masses would need to understand the true relationship between God and the

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<sup>31</sup> See also *Shemonah Kevatzim* 6:291 where Rav Kook connects the fact that Eliyahu appears at a *Berit Milah* to the fact that Eliyahu’s job is to elevate the lowest realm of action. This elevation of the lowest realms is “a true messianic characteristic, and through this all of the worlds are united.” In a related piece (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 3:223) Rav Kook connects Eliyahu with the “sanctity within nature.”

<sup>32</sup> For example, Rav Kook’s tolerance to people and ideas that were foreign to traditional Judaism was based on an application of this principle to the world of ideas. See Binyamin Ish-Shalom, “Tolerance and its Theoretical Basis,” in *Rabbi Abraham Issac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. by Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York University Press, 1995), 178–204.

<sup>33</sup> By his own admission, one of Rav Kook’s goals in writing was: “to illuminate the world, to fashion a literature filled with the light of the secrets of Torah, popular and accessible to all, filled with poetry and might, supplied with proper logic and loyal criticism, to raise the horn of the nation of God and for the sake of the redemption of the world that has begun to shine in the land of Israel.” (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 3:259, translation from <http://www.ravkook.net/to-know-each-of-your-secrets.html>). Regarding Rav Kook’s general desire to spread kabbalah see his essay “*Ha-Zarah le-Limud Penimiyut ha-Toral*” printed in R. Moshe Tzuriel, “*Ozrot ha-Raiyah*” Volume 2 (Yeshivat Hesder, Rishon le-Zion, 2002), 303–315.

world in order to properly inculcate the new messianic perspective.<sup>34</sup> As Rav Kook writes (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:597):

The Divine Truths that were always the stronghold of the true wise men of the world, which are the light of Israel in general, as they desire the ultimate and absolute truth will conquer the world, are also becoming more fitting for the masses... the opening of the gates of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, which is the supernal flowing that shapes the senses and desires, knowledge and emotions to grab hold to the depths of the strong ideas, the source of perfect and eternal life, until life continues with courage to conquer death and the good will completely sweetens the evil.<sup>35</sup>

In order for this shift in perception to happen and for the “good to completely sweeten the evil,” the gates of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* need to be opened for the masses.

### **The God-World Relationship in the Thought of the Rebbe**

The thought of the Rebbe contains striking parallels to that of Rav Kook, together with some fundamental differences. I will first outline the parallels, deliberately leaving out the elements that differentiate them, which will be dealt with afterwards.

The Rebbe felt that he was living in the last generation before *Ma-shiah*<sup>36</sup> which necessitated a shift in our perception of the physical world.

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<sup>34</sup> There are many passages from Rav Kook that connect kabbalah with seeing the entire world in its proper, unified, and divine state. For example, see *Shemonah Kevatzim* 2:187 “The Wisdom of Truth teaches us about the cosmic unity”; *Shemonah Kevatzim* 7:6 “The secrets teach us that you are in a world that is full of light and life. Know the great entity, the richness of reality that you constantly encounter.” For more sources and elaboration regarding the connection between the messianic process, the need for a new perspective and spreading kabbalah in the thought of Rav Kook, see Binyamin Ish-Shalom, *Rav Abraham Itzhak Hacohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (SUNY Press, 1993), 197-198.

<sup>35</sup> Rav Kook also pointed to other factors that necessitated the popularization of kabbalah such as the increased knowledge of science.

<sup>36</sup> As will be illustrated shortly, the Rebbe was certain that he was living in the “last generation of exile and the first generation of redemption.” However, it is important to note that his Messianism was not connected with Zionism or the political entity of the State of Israel in the least. See *Iggerot Kodesh* Volume 26, letter 9,613 where in a letter addressed to R. Shlom Yosef Zevin the Rebbe vociferously argued against the concept of the State of Israel as “the beginning of the redemption.”

This fundamental premise was the main topic of the Rebbe's first Hasidic discourse (*ma'amar*) as Rebbe (*Ma'amarim Melukatim* Vol. 2, 263–271).<sup>37</sup> The *ma'amar* focused on a midrashic passage (*Midrash Rabbah, Shir ha-Shirim*, 5:5) that describes the “*Ikar Shekhinah*” as originally occupying “this lowly world.” When Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge the *Shekhina* ascended to the first heaven, and with the next six major human sins the *Shekhina* continuously ascended until it reached the seventh and highest heaven. Then, seven righteous people merited to lower the *Shekhinah*, level after level, until Moses, the seventh righteous man, merited to bring the *Shekhina* back to “this lowly world.”

After a brief analysis of the term “*Ikar Shekhina*,” the Rebbe concluded that it referred to the “beginning of the revelation of the “*Or Ein Sof*” which existed prior to *tzimtzum*. He then made the striking assertion that would define Habad under his tenure:

This, then, is why the seventh is so cherished: it is he who draws down the Shekhinah, in fact—the essence of the Shekhinah; moreover, he draws it down into this lowly world.

It is this that is demanded of each and every one of us of the seventh generation—and “all those that are seventh are cherished”:

Although the fact that we are in the seventh generation is not the result of our own choosing and our own service, and indeed in certain ways perhaps contrary to our will, nevertheless “all those who are seventh are cherished.”

We are now very near the approaching footsteps of Mashiah, indeed, we are at the conclusion of this period, and our spiritual task is to complete the process of drawing down the Shekhinah—moreover, the essence of the Shekhinah—within specifically our lowly world.

The seventh generation (R. Schneerson was the seventh Rebbe), as the last generation before Mashiah, had the responsibility to unite “*Ikar Shekhinah*” with our lowly physical world. To clarify this radical assertion, the Rebbe referenced the above-cited passage from *Tanya* in which R. Shneur Zalman describes the purpose of creation being the ultimate revelation of the highest level of divinity in the lowest world. In other words, in order for the redemption to be initiated, it was necessary for people to begin to see the world according to the Messianic vision of R. Shneur

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<sup>37</sup> The *ma'amar* is known as “*Bati le-Gani* 5711.” Translation is from [http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article\\_cdo/aid/115093/jewish/Basi-LGani.htm](http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/115093/jewish/Basi-LGani.htm).

Zalman—in which all of physicality was a *dirah be-tahtonim* for the very essence of divinity.<sup>38</sup>

This mission of creating a *dirah be-tahtonim* for the essence of the *Shekhinah* engendered a conscious revolution in many poles of religious thought and practice.<sup>39</sup> The need to focus on the “*tahtonim*” created an inverse hierarchy in which items and activities were previously considered more overtly “spiritual” became secondary to the more physical. These revolutionary ideas fueled the multitude of Habad’s varied activities under R. Scheerson’s leadership.<sup>40</sup>

### The Body and Its Actions According to the Rebbe

As parallel to the above passages from Rav Kook, I will illustrate this shift in perception with examples of the Rebbe’s treatment of the physical body<sup>41</sup> and physical actions.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For a clear presentation from the Rebbe regarding the future abolition of the *tzimtzum* and paradoxical illusion that *tzimtzum* creates, see *Torat Menahem Sefer ha-Ma’amarim Melukatim*, Volume 1, 237–238.

<sup>39</sup> See Levin, “Heaven on Earth,” 6–27; Alon Dahan, “Go’el Aharon: Mishnato ha-Meshiḥit shel R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson” (Contento de Semrik, 2004), 38–62 for a summary. Dahan’s book is based on his dissertation, *Dirah be-Tahtonim: Mishnato ha-Meshiḥit shel R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (submitted as a doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University Press, 2006). The fact that these concepts created a positive attitude towards this world is apparent in the Rebbe’s emphatic address from January 26 (10<sup>th</sup> of Shevat) 1972, available at [http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player\\_cdo/aid/253998/jewish/Its-a-Beautiful-World.htm](http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player_cdo/aid/253998/jewish/Its-a-Beautiful-World.htm).

<sup>40</sup> For a summary, see Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 138–144.

<sup>41</sup> For a longer discussion, see Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 104–114; Dahan, *Go’el Aharon*, 420–425; Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret – Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 131–160.

<sup>42</sup> For a longer discussion of this topic see Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 114–122; R. Yizhak Krauss, *ha-Shevi’i—Mesbi’ḥiyut be-Dor ha-Shevi’i shel Habad* (Yediot Ahronot Books, 2007), 137–143.

There are several other areas where the Rebbe inverted the previous hierarchy of “spiritual” significance. One interesting example is the relative importance of men and women. In this regard, see Eldad Weill, “*Tehilatah shel Tekufat ha-Nashim – Nashim ve-Nashiyut be-Mishnato shel ha-Rebbi mi-Lubavitch*,” *Akdamot* 22 (2009), 61–85 (available at <http://www.bmj.org.il/userfiles/akdamot/22/Veil.pdf>); R. Chaim Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward: A Biography of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Kol Menachem, 2014), 485, note 181 and the sources cited within; Susan Handelman, “Putting Women in the Picture – The Rebbe’s views on



In a talk delivered on the eve of Rosh Hodesh Adar 1987 (*Torat Menahem* 5747, 476–482), the Rebbe discussed the nature of Purim. He noted three themes that coexist in the holiday: (1) The fact that there was a physical threat and therefore we celebrate through a physical meal, (2) It is a day of Jewish acceptance of the Torah, (3) It is a day on which the unity of the Jewish people is expressed. The Rebbe analyzed the interconnectedness between these three themes.

He began with his often-repeated assertion<sup>43</sup> that through the giving of the Torah, God began to break down the barriers that existed between the highest levels of divinity and our lowly world. Therefore, the Torah relates to the physical world and gives us physical commandments that are a way of slowly bringing *Atzmut Elokit* into this world and thereby helping create the messianic reality.

This essential aspect of Sinaitic experience is underscored by R. Shneur Zalman's explanation of the phrase from our liturgy—"And You chose us from all peoples and tongues."<sup>44</sup> While one might have thought that God chose the Jewish people due to the unique nature of their souls, R. Shneur Zalman explains that it refers to "the physical body that appears in its materiality similar to the bodies of non-Jews" (*Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 49). It is the physical body of a Jew that is connected with the *Atzmut Elokit* and therefore the fulfillment of *mitzvot* through physical actions of the body is what can break down the barrier between *Atzmut* and the physical world. It is for this reason that Purim, a holiday celebrating the Torah, also celebrates the true nature of the body.

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women today" (available at [http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article\\_cdo/aid/161694/jewish/Putting-Women-in-the-Picture.htm](http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/161694/jewish/Putting-Women-in-the-Picture.htm)), and especially note 5. Also see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 200–223 for the theoretical background of this shift of R. Schneerson regarding the nature of the *sefirah* of *malkhut* in relation to the other *sefirot*.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, *Torat Menahem* 5717 volume 3, 16–21. For further elaboration and more references see Dahan, *Go'el Abaron*, 154–159; R. Yoel Kahn, "*ba-Hidush ha-Mahapkehani she-Nit'holel be-Matan Torat*" (available at <http://www.toratchabad.com/contents.asp?aid=40031>). <http://chabad.org/mug/mug2/hasidut-umoshiah-hainu-hach/>). R. Kahn served as the lead transcriber of the Rebbe's talks for decades and is considered the greatest living authority on the Rebbe's thought and Habad Hasidism in general (see [http://chabadpedia.co.il/index.php?title=%D7%99%D7%95%D7%90%D7%9C\\_%D7%9B%D7%94%D7%9F](http://chabadpedia.co.il/index.php?title=%D7%99%D7%95%D7%90%D7%9C_%D7%9B%D7%94%D7%9F)).

<sup>44</sup> Translation from *The Koren Mesorat ha-Rav Siddur*, translation by R. Jonathan Sacks (OU Press, Koren Publishers, 2011), 108.

The Rebbe continued that it is for this reason Purim has an emphasis on Jewish unity. When we look at people and think of the amount that their divine soul is manifest in their lives, we are forced to make degradation. There are people who learn more Torah and do more mitzvot and therefore their divine soul is revealed to a higher degree. But on the deeper level of connection to *Atzmut*, which is paradoxically connected with the physical body, all are equal.<sup>45</sup> Hence the three themes of Purim all express related ideas. This emphasis on the body both in terms of its abilities (breaking the barrier between this world and *Atzmut*) and in terms of being the center of God's choice is clearly a shift from earlier Jewish thought.

A second example of these shifts in emphasis in the Rebbe's thought is the unique importance of physical actions. His mantra "*ba-Ma'aseh Hu ha-Ikar*" was not just a rallying cry to galvanize his followers but reflected a shift that was taking place as the world readied for redemption. In a fundraising letter, R. Shneur Zalman wrote that in the times of the Tannaim and Amoraim, Torah study was the main method of serving Hashem. However, that changes as we approach the coming of Mashiah (*Tanya, Iggerot ha-Kodesh*, letter 9):

Our sages, of blessed memory, did not say that the study of Torah is equivalent to the performance of loving-kindness except in their own days. For with them the principal service was the study of Torah and, therefore, there were great scholars: Tannaim and Amoraim. However, with the advent of the Messiah, as "the Hut of David has fallen" to a level of "feet" and "heels"—which is the level of "Action"—there is no way of truly cleaving unto it and to convert the darkness into its light, except through a corresponding category of action, namely the act of charity.

The Rebbe took this idea, expanded it and applied it. First, he asserted that even though the Talmud seems to conclude that Torah study is more important than the fulfillment of actional *mitzvot*, this is true only before the coming of Mashiah. However, in the messianic age the ruling will be

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<sup>45</sup> The Rebbe also often quoted the statement from earlier Habad literature that in the time to come the soul will be nourished from the body. See, for example, *Sefer ha-Ma'amarim* 5659, 99 that the Rebbe Rashab (fifth Rebbe of Habad) associates the physical body with the *sefirah* of *malkhut*, the lowest of the *sefirot*. In the end of days this *sefirah* will rise and transform from a *mekabel* to a *mashpi'a*. For a reference to this idea in the speeches of the Rebbe, see *Torat Menahem* 5714 vol. 1, 195.

switched to “*ma’aseh gadol*.”<sup>46</sup> The Rebbe argued that as we approach the Messianic era a “spark” of this idea comes into existence and requires us to partially embrace the newly revealed importance of actions.<sup>47</sup>

The reason for this shift towards physical actions is they, as opposed to Torah study, involve movement of our physical bodies. Our intuition might tell us that the movement of our bodies is the least spiritual enterprise in which we can engage, especially when compared to our cognitive or emotional capabilities. However, specifically because actions seem to be the lowest level of human enterprises, it is necessary for the last generation to focus on bringing divinity to them as well, as a preparation for the coming of Mashiah.<sup>48</sup>

### **Spreading the Secrets According the Rebbe**

Similar to Rav Kook, the Rebbe felt it was crucial to spread the inner secrets of Torah in order to accelerate these changes in perception. The Rebbe<sup>49</sup> was fond of quoting the tradition that the Bal Shem Tov met Mashiah and asked him, “when is the master coming?” Mashiah’s response was “when your wellsprings are spread outward.”<sup>50</sup> This was interpreted in Habad as an imperative to spread Hasidism in order to hasten the coming of “the master.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, *Sefer ha-Ma’amarim* 5747, 58. Kraus, *ba-Shevi’i*, 140–143; Dahan, *Go’el Abaron*, 235. The ultimate supremacy of “*ma’aseh*” over Torah study is already expressed by R. Shneur Zalman, *Likkutei Torah, Aḥarei Mot*, 26d.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, *Torat Menahem* 5719 vol. 2, 256.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, *Sefer Ma’amarim Melukatim* Volume 2, 197.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, *Likkutei Sifot* 3, 872–876; *Likkutei Sifot* 10, 243; *Likkutei Sifot* 33, 275. For many more references and an elaboration on how precisely revealing the secrets of the Torah on a mass scale fit into his messianic endeavors see Dahan, *Go’el Abaron*, 252–293; Kraus, *ba-Shevi’i*, 34–55.

<sup>50</sup> Printed in *Keter Shem Tov ha-Shalem* (Kehot, 2004), 4.

<sup>51</sup> It is interesting that scholars debate if this letter of the Bal Shem Tov was meant to diffuse or encourage messianic tendencies in the nascent Hasidic movement. For a summary of this debate see Jonathan Dauber, “The Baal Shem Tov and the Messiah: A Reappraisal of the Bal Shem Tov’s Letter to R. Gershon of Kutov,” *JSQ* 16:2 (2009), 210–212; 227–231. Of particular importance is the contention of Naftali Loewenthal, “The Neutralisation of Messianism and the Apocalypse,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Volume 13, 59–73 as he accepts Scholem’s argument that Hasidism put a great emphasis on “personal redemption” but argues that in the context of Habad Hasidism this focus on the particular did not obscure the focus on universal redemption.

The Rebbe dedicated a seminal discourse to the nature of the connection between the spread of Ḥasidism and Mashiah.<sup>52</sup> He explained that Ḥasidism is the *yehidah* or innermost soul of the world, the level at which different aspects dissolve into oneness. The reason that Ḥasidism in particular deserves this sublime description is that it teaches of the ultimate unity between the highest levels of divinity and our lowly world—the secret of the messianic era.

As the *yehidah* of the world, the essence of Ḥasidism illustrates that there is in truth no distinction between the “outside” and the “wellsprings” themselves. They are both equally the “wellsprings” for divinity. This will lead to the realization of the true nature of the unity of God, which will neutralize all differences that exist in the world—even the “dross of the body” will be seen as a pure expression of the divinity. When the essence of Ḥasidism permeates the entire world and people will realize that the physical world is a manifestation and not a concealment of divinity, then we will be in the Messianic age.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Kumtrus Inyanah shel Torat ha-Ḥasidut* (Kehot, 1971). English translation is *On the Essence of Chasidus*, translated by Rabbi Y.H. Greenberg and Dr. Susan Handelman (Kehot, 1986).

<sup>53</sup> See the key paragraph, *On the Essence of Chasidus*, 86-87 in the chapter entitled “Chassidus: More Than a Prelude to Moshiach”:

Indeed, for as long as the wellsprings are found only “inside,” their true nature is not yet expressed. And since the preparation and vessel for the coming of the Moshiach is – the **essence of Chassidus**, it is therefore imperative to disseminate the fountains specifically outwards - until the “outside,” too, will be transformed into wellsprings - for through this, the essential nature of the fountains is manifested, and then “the Master comes,” that is the King Moshiach. And in the words of the Alter Rebbe, “then the **dross of the body** will be purified (indicating that there will be physicality, but it will be purified) **and of the world** (and the light of G-d will shine forth to Israel ‘without any garment’) and from the overflow of the illumination on Israel, the darkness of the nations will also be illuminated, as it is written ‘... and all flesh shall see together. . . and all the inhabitants of the world...’

For a brief summary of the *ma’amar*, see R. Eli Rubin “The Essence of Chassidism: A Message Beyond the Medium” available at [http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article\\_cdo/aid/2619816/jewish/The-Essence-of-Chassidism-A-Message-Beyond-The-Medium.htm](http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/2619816/jewish/The-Essence-of-Chassidism-A-Message-Beyond-The-Medium.htm). The fact that for the Rebbe, Mashiah will come when the characteristics of the messianic age are already in place led Elliot Wolfson to an interesting conclusion about the Rebbe’s messianism. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 284–289. For a much tamer presentation of this same point regarding the nature of the teachings of Ḥasidism, see R. Yoel Kahn, “*Ḥasidut*

In summary, the philosophies of Rav Kook and the Rebbe both contain the following elements: (1) An assertion that they are living in a time that is close to the coming of Mashiah, (2) The fact that this knowledge requires shifting our perspective to be more in line with the characteristics of the messianic era in order to accelerate the process, (3) One of the characteristics of the messianic era is a higher valuing of the material world and physical actions than in the past. (4) A need to spread the secrets of the Torah to the masses in order to engender this shift in perspective.

### ***Atzmut* vs. Divine Ideals**

Despite these similarities, there are major differences between their philosophies. Let us begin by highlighting another key element in the Rebbe's thought. In his first discourse in which he focused on the obligation of the seventh generation to create a *dirab be-tahtonim*, the Rebbe elaborated on the connection between the inner essence of the *Shekhina* and our lowly world. He argued that it is not correct to simply assert that we need to draw the highest level of divinity *even* into our world, but rather a specific connection exists between the two.

The Rebbe differentiated between the indescribable and self-sufficient essence of God (*Atzmut*) and His manifestations (*Gilu'im*), which are not self-sufficient and can be described as bearing spiritual qualities.<sup>54</sup> All of the "higher" worlds that are described in kabbalah and Hasidism are manifestly spiritual and therefore angels and the like who occupy them can sense the presence of God. But the very fact that something is being felt indicates that they are tapping into the level of *gilu'im*. *Atzmut* itself is beyond any sensing. Therefore, the only world that can become a dwelling place for *Atzmut* is our physical world, which hides God's presence and seems to be self-sufficient. It is paradoxically the non-spirituality of this

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*u-Masbi'ah Haynu Hach*," in *Kovetz Masbi'ah u-Ge'ulah* Volume 2 (available at <http://chabad8.org/mug/mug2/hasidut-umoshiah-hainu-hach>).

<sup>54</sup> These terms occur frequently in R. Schneerson's *ma'amarim*. See Alon Dahan, *Dirab be-Tahtonim—Misbnato ha-Mesibit shel R. Menabem Mendel Schneerson* (submitted as a doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University Press, 2006), 16-17. For an elaboration of these terms in R. Schneerson's thought see R. Feitel Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 145-149.

world that makes it the “arena in which the most profound dimension of reality relates to the deepest recesses of the Divine.”<sup>55</sup>

This provided a unique conception of what the unification of our physical world and *Atzmut Or Ein Sof* would look like. In the Messianic era God will not be sensed or felt, but He will simply Be. Based on the Rebbe’s assertion that the nature of the Messianic era affects the nature of our service in the time immediately prior to the coming of Mashiah, this unique conception must have practical ramifications. It is specifically the “non-spiritual” physical activities that allow us to tap into the undiscernible *Atzmut*.

This idea manifests itself in the Rebbe’s inversion of previous hierarchies.<sup>56</sup> He emphasized the need to engage in physical actions with physical bodies specifically because they represent the lowest spiritual level and

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<sup>55</sup> R. Feital Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 33. For a short description of the Habad view of *Atzmut* and *mitzvot* see R. Tzvi Freeman, “Happiness is Being There,” available at [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1420700/jewish/Happiness-Is-Being-There.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1420700/jewish/Happiness-Is-Being-There.htm)

<sup>56</sup> The Rebbe’s general notion of inverting previous hierarchies has deep roots in Habad. R. Shneur Zalman often refers to this idea as “*sof ma’aseh be-mahshava tehilah*” or “*na’utz sofan be-tehilatan*.” See, for example, *Torah Or, parshat Hayyei Sarah*, 16b, where he connects these phrases with the messianic reality when we will be able to perceive God in our physical bodies and concludes the section “as *Hazal* said—‘the land was created first [before the heaven].’ ” Jerome Gellman, “Zion and Jerusalem,” in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, 288 note 14, lists many places where this idea appears in the thought of R. Shneur Zalman. In many instances, this inverted hierarchy is connected with the kabbalistic notion that the sefirah of *malkhut*, the lowest *sefirah*, will ascend in the end of times to above even the highest *sefirah*. See, for example, *Torah Or*, 44d and *Likutei Torah, Shir ha-Shirim*, 15c. It is for this reason that the Rebbe was very focused in his thought and practice on the *sefirah* of *malkhut* and its representations. For one example, see *Torat Menahem* 5752, 83. For dozens of sources and an elaboration see Dahan, *Go’el Aharon*, 133–139, 343–360; Krauss, *ha-Shevi’i*, 41–43. It is interesting to note that Rav Kook also at times seems to articulate a counterintuitive hierarchy of sanctity in that what seems to be lower really has a higher source. For example, see *Orot ha-Tehiyah* chapter 46: “The sanctity that is within the secular that has descended to complete secularization, is more holy and exalted than the holiness that is within the holy, but it is very hidden.” Jerome Gellman, “Zion and Jerusalem” in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, 276–288 notes these passages and traces them to the thought of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi. See also Bezalel Naor, *Orot* (Orot inc., 2004), 63–64 where R. Zvi Yehudah applied a similar theme to create a hierarchy within his father’s corpus, specifically favoring the passages that relate to the

that is what connects best to *Atzmut*. In the words of R. Feital Levin:<sup>57</sup>

Thus, when the worshiper does in fact take a piece of leather in his hand proposing to make it a vehicle for communicating with G-d—no intellectual, emotional or other religiously meaningful channels are available. But yet, even this religiously opaque object is part of G-d's world. In which way? Its being, and nothing else. Its being was catered for by G-d, it partakes in the Divine Being, and moreover, its very spiritual indifference represents transparency to and oneness with its core, the in-itself of the Divine Being. Hence, when the worshiper attempts to make a connection with G-d—it occurs on the wavelength of Being.

Hence it is specifically these “meaningless” actions that best express *Atzmut*.

This also affects the type of activities that should be the focus of the seventh generation. In his first discourse, the Rebbe underscored the need to employ “*Shetut de-Kedusha*” (Folly of Holiness), sacrificing one's personal spirituality for the sake of helping others both spiritually and materially. This form of service, which is “above reason/taste and logic,” connects the *Atzmut* to the lowest levels of reality.

A very practical illustration of this idea appears at the end of a speech that focused on the familiar theme of the higher importance of the body over the soul and action over Torah study (*Torat Menahem* 5711 Volume 1, 87–92). The Rebbe noted that some yeshiva students were upset that they did not have a desire to learn Torah and felt that this was a lacking in their service of God. He responded that based on the previous analysis, if one does not have a desire to learn and continues in his studies anyway, he is tapping into a higher level of divinity than one who learns out of a desire to learn. While there are practical advantages to having such a desire, from one perspective it is paradoxically the one who does not have a desire to learn that is engaging in the higher service of God.<sup>58</sup>

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“body” of the Jewish people as opposed to his father's metaphysical speculations.

<sup>57</sup> R. Feital Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 121-122.

<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, the Rebbe elaborated on the proper motivation for performing *mitzvot*. After analyzing two lower levels that correspond to the aspects of divinity of *mimalei kol almin* and *sover kol almin*, he concluded that the highest level of performance is when it flows from “*Atzmut*” or the “quintessential essence of one's being” (which is “above reason and logic”). See, for example, *Torat Menahem* 5722 1, 188–197 (specifically 193 and on) and *Torat Menahem Leket Ma'amarim* (Kehot, 2013), 1–9 (specifically 6-7). For an English summary of the

In this matter Rav Kook represents the opposite poll. In an essay written soon after he arrived in Israel, Rav Kook emphatically argued against directing one's cognitive activities towards *Atzmut Elokait*, an enterprise that he refers to as childish and idolatrous.<sup>59</sup> As several scholars have noted, in isolating the *Atzmut* from the realm of direct<sup>60</sup> human thought, Rav Kook follows a large group of Mitnaged kabbalists, including the Vilna Gaon.<sup>61</sup>

Instead of focusing on the unknowable Divine Essence, Rav Kook recommended that one focus on the “divine ideals” that teach the individual and community how to live a godly life. The mature contemplation of these “divine ideals”:

provides the space for a person to expand his mind and to find his inner value in the best and most elevated way. [These divine ideals]

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latter *ma'amar*, see R. Tzvi Freeman, “When Your Child Will Ask,” available at [http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article\\_cdo/aid/2895342/jewish/When-Your-Child-Will-Ask.htm](http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/2895342/jewish/When-Your-Child-Will-Ask.htm). For more sources and elaboration, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 167–169.

<sup>59</sup> “*Da'at Elokim*” in *be-Ikvei ha-Tzon*, 130–141 (specifically, 130-131).

<sup>60</sup> I qualify with “direct” because in a letter (*Iggerot ha-Raiyah* volume 1, letter 11) Rav Kook clarifies that one cannot say that “Israel’s uniqueness lies in its being a nation which relates to the ways of the Divinity—and not to its essence” as the latter half of the statement is incorrect. In Rav Kook’s words “focusing on the divine ideals without connecting them to the essence of the light of Infinite God (*Atzmut*) is both utterly absurd and impossible, for without the light of life, all falls and perishes” (translation from Tzvi Feldman, *Rav A. Y. Kook: Selected Letters* [Ma’alot Publications, 1986], 162-163). In other words, we need to recognize *Atzmut* as the source of the divine ideals and try as we can to connect with the latter, but through the former.

<sup>61</sup> Tamar Ross, *Musag ha-Elokut*, 115–120; R. Yosef Avivi, “*Akdamut le-Kabalat ha-Raiyah*” available at [http://yosefavivi.blogspot.com/p/blog-page\\_9100.html](http://yosefavivi.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_9100.html). In particular, see Tamar Ross, *Musag ha-Elokut*, 118 note 37 where she quotes nearly identical statements from the Vilna Gaon and Rav Kook on this matter. There is also probably a Kantian influence in Rav Kook’s assertion, regarding the unknowability of the thing in itself. See *Iggerot ha-Raiyah*, Volume 1, letter 44 (p. 47-48) where Rav Kook connects the thrust of the ideas discussed in “*Da'at Elokim*” with Kant, but asserts that “Even the “neo-Kantian revival” cannot match even the smallest part of Israel’s strength. It is true, and we have always known it—and we did not need Kant to reveal this secret to us—that all human cognitions are relative and subjective. This is the “*Malkhut*” as a vessel that has nothing of its own” (translation from <http://etzion.org.il/vbm/english/archive/igrot/10igrot.htm>). Rav Kook then asserts that what gives meaning to our subjective perception (which he associates with the *sefirah* of *malkhut*) is the fact that it is connected ultimately with the “Source of Sources.”



continuously shine on a person with light after light, from one goal to a more exalted goal, and from one ideal to a more exalted ideal, infinitely.

What are these “divine ideals”? A close reading illustrates that they are to be identified with the *sefirot*<sup>62</sup> through which God relates to our world. Rav Kook describes these divine ideals as ideas and values that we can understand, inculcate, identify with and use as a model in all aspects of our individual and communal lives. This ability to connect with God through the understanding and application of these ideals is a distinguishing point between Judaism and other religions and allows for an all-encompassing spiritual life.<sup>63</sup>

With this background, it is no wonder that Rav Kook differed from the Rebbe in many significant ways.<sup>64</sup> To conclude this article I will note one major difference.

As opposed to the Rebbe, Rav Kook emphasized the importance of personal identification and the feeling of “spirituality” in one’s service of Hashem. As a counter example to the Rebbe’s approach of the supremacy of learning Torah without a desire as the “non-spiritual” act can tap into *Atzmut*, Rav Kook writes at great length of the need to feel joy and pleasure in one’s learning.<sup>65</sup> In regard to the fulfillment of *mitzvot*, Rav Kook even tried to limit the Gemara’s preference for one who fulfills a mitzvah after being commanded over one who voluntarily performs a mitzvah

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<sup>62</sup> Tamar Ross, *Musag ha-Eloket*, 120; R. Yosef Avivi, “*Akdamut le-Kabalat ha-Raiyal*” *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Another distinguishing point is if the ultimate goal of the messianic era is a monistic unity in which all differences are dissolved into the “true *yesh*” or differences between people and items will exist even in the end of days. The Rebbe moved as much as possible in the direction of a physical, but monistic, reality. An example of this are his teachings about the Land of Israel. He often spoke of its uniqueness with the highest of terms of his philosophy (see *Torat Menahem* 5718 volume 1, 29 that “the essence of the physical Land of Israel is *Atzmut mamash*). However, he also emphasized the midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yeshayahu, remez* 503) that “in the future, the Land of Israel will spread to all of the Lands” (*Torat Menahem* 5714 Volume 1, 115) and the need for specifically America, which he referred to as “the lower half of the world,” to become the “well-spring” of Hasidism (*Likkutei Sichot* 33, 275). In contrast, Rav Kook emphatically and consistently argued for the uniqueness of the Land of Israel. The same holds true regarding the uniqueness of individual personalities.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, the essay “*ba-Oneg ve-ha-Simha*” in *be-Ikvei ha-Tzvon* 117-118 and *Orot ha-Torah* 9:1, 6.

(Kiddushin 31a). In the end of his analysis, Rav Kook preferred the service of the Avot who voluntarily did *mitzvot* over the service of the Jewish people post Sinai.<sup>66</sup> This is all in line with his notion that the highest levels of sanctity that exist from our perspective are the “ideals” that can be felt and sensed and lived.<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusion

To conclude, I will cite the continuation of the opening quote from Rav Kook:

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. But I constantly warn the great ones of our nation not to be satisfied with a single discipline, even regarding the spiritual aspects of the Torah, just as we do not suffice with a single approach and opinion in the practical side of Torah. It is just as necessary in the spiritual disciplines that together with the discipline of Habad one needs to learn well the wisdom of the early sages, the researchers of the divine, until the last generations. And also all of the opinions of the kabbalists and all of the methods of revelation of the secrets by the Gra z”l and his students. And through the integration and expansion of the ideas a great light will emerge for holiness...

יהי זכרם ברוך



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<sup>66</sup> *Iggerot ha-Raiyah*, Volume 1, letter 89. Rav Kook even uses a feeling of joy and pleasure that is engendered by an idea as an indication of its truth value. See, for example, *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:55. See Tamar Ross, *Musag ha-Eloket*, 122 note 62 who ironically finds a parallel for this epistemological factor in early Habad thought.

<sup>67</sup> The Rebbe, however, in several talks directly addressed the same issue and emphatically concluded that the service of the Jews after the giving of the Torah is of a superior nature than that of the Avot. It is the divine command that allows for an action to bring down *Atzmut* and for the action to be performed for no knowable or sensible reason. See the references in note 43.