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Šimšum in Habad Hasidism, 1796-1920: Thought, Literature, and History

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I, Eleazer Leib Rubin, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

Integrating disciplinary methods from the fields of philosophy, philology, hermeneutics, and historiography, an analysis of Habad’s internal discourse on *šimšum* illuminates broader questions concerning the movement’s intellectual, literary and historical trajectories. A critical review of existing scholarship first takes stock of the theological and cosmological significance of *šimšum* in Midrash, Kabbalah and Hasidism, and in the polemics that shaped Hasidism’s new consciousness as a distinct movement. In the case of Habad, it is argued, this consciousness is partly constituted and perpetuated through intergenerational engagement with *šimšum* to negotiate existential questions about being, meaning, and purpose—and also social questions of legitimacy, authority, and succession—through the 19th century and into the 20th century. Chapter one counters previous portrayals of early Habad doctrine as denuding *šimšum* of ontological significance and reducing the physical world to “an illusion.” This is achieved through systematic, close and carefully contextualized readings of relevant texts from the writings and transcribed oral teachings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (“Rashaz”), followed by comparative discussion of the reception of his teachings by his direct disciples and successors, especially Rabbi DovBer Schneuri and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (“the Šemaš Šedek”). Chapter two focuses on the 19th century, scrutinizing debates regarding *šimšum*’s mediation between infinite primordality and finite materiality through the prism of the succession controversy of 1865-6. From the very outset, it is shown, Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn of Lubavitch (“Maharash”) set out to trenchantly replace the rhetoric of acosmism with a metaphysics of materiality that foregrounded the apotheosis of the physical. Chapter three focuses on his son, Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn (“Rashab”), who brought Habad into the twentieth-century and pioneered its activist program of resistance and response to secularizing trends. His sustained and far-reaching reinvestigation of *šimšum*’s purpose cast the physical world as a site of doubt and rupture wherein an unprecedented and overabundant manifestation can be elicited from the very essence of G-d.

IMPACT STATEMENT

This thesis addresses an apparently esoteric topic that nevertheless continues to be actively engaged within the public discourse of contemporary Jewish communities, as well as in academic discourse among scholars of Jewish thought. In the post-Lurianic

period, and particularly in the Habad Hasidic context, the Kabbalistic concept of *šimšum* became a key locus for the development of new philosophical paradigms whose resonance with broader trends in modern philosophy should provide fecund ground for new interdisciplinary understanding and research. Given that I approach the topic through a distinctly historiographical prism, my findings will also be impactful for scholars of Jewish history. The contributions to the intellectual and social history of Habad from the middle of the nineteenth-century into the early twentieth-century fill important lacunas in a field that has been dominated by research on the late eighteenth-century and the latter part of the twentieth-century. Substantively and methodologically, this can shape future developments in the study of Hasidism through curricular changes and new research agendas. Given that Habad Hasidism is one of the most dynamic social movements in modern Judaism, this thesis will also be of interest to sociologists and to professionals working within the wider Jewish community, whether as clergy, providers of social services or as educators. My findings offer new insight into the complex ways in which theological and cosmological concepts shape social dynamics on the broader communal scale and are also manifest in the ways that individuals make sense and meaning of their own lives and activities. This could also provide a model for similar research projects beyond the field of Jewish studies, focusing on how theology and hermeneutics may shape the chronological trajectories of other religious communities or social movements. My work has already aroused interest among members of the contemporary Habad community, and among wider Jewish audiences as well, who continue to be interested in the ways that debates concerning the interpretation of *šimšum* have shaped Jewish history in the past and may shape their own Jewish experience in the present and the future. Throughout the period of my work on this thesis I have used twitter to instigate and participate in continuing conversations about *šimšum* and its implications, not only for theology and cosmology, but more importantly, for the ultimate question of what makes “being” meaningful. In these conversations *šimšum*, and the different approaches to its interpretation, has also emerged as a framework through which to interpret, or think through, complex questions regarding faith, reason, interpersonal relationships and current events. The completed thesis will provide many new openings for multi-directional scholarly and public engagement, via a range of different platforms, including articles, talks, books and media productions.

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“Being that in this world of action the illumination and vitality is all mediated by great *šimšum* (restriction), therefore the work is in a manner of *hoda’ah* (thanksgiving).”

— Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn (Rashab), *Sefer hama’amarim* 5668, 5.

Setting aside the significance of this passage when read in its original context, here I read it as reflecting a simple truth: We live in a world of scarce resources, and therefore it is incumbent upon me to thank all of those who provided me with the wherewithal to undertake and complete this work. The resources that sustained this project are spiritual and emotional, intellectual and social, temporal and spatial, financial and material. For all these things I thank G-d.

I thank my wife, Miri, and my children, Mottel, Shmulik, Chasiah and Tuvya. As Amos Funkenstein has emphasized, Habad’s foundational text—*Tanya*—richly explains that the principle of *imitatio dei* turns the idea of *šimšum* as an act of love into a blueprint for personal comportment. My wife and children have exemplified such comportment in practice, and I endeavor to reciprocate in kind.

My parents too have showered me with love, taught me to be fearless in the pursuit of knowledge, and eagerly host me whenever I come to London. My gratitude to them is endless.

As will be explained at greater length in the introduction, I am especially indebted to four scholars and mentors whose influence is felt directly or indirectly on every page of this thesis: Rabbi Elimelech Zweibel, Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert, Dr. Naftali Loewenthal, and Professor Elliot Wolfson. In addition, I thank Professor François Guesnet for shepherding this project from start to finish, and for helping me to see the forest as well as the trees. I am likewise grateful to the larger community of faculty, staff and students in the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University College London, who welcomed and supported me with collegiality and professionalism. In particular, I thank Dr. Israel Sandman for his sound advice as I began to explore the possibility of undertaking this project, and for all the hours of insightful conversation along the way.

This thesis has been many years in the making, and has benefited from the many small and large kindnesses done for me and my family by innumerable relatives, friends and

colleagues. I am especially thankful for the support of my siblings, the members of the Bnai Emunoh Chabad community in Greenfield, PA, and my colleagues at Chabad.org.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The Chicago Style system of citation is generally used throughout, with the following modifications:

In referencing the works of the seven rebbes of Habad, their common monikers rather than their full names are used (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi—Rashaz, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn—Şemaḥ Şedek, Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn—Maharash, Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn—Rashab, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn—Rayatz, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson—Ramash). An exception to this rule is made in the case of Rabbi DovBer Schneuri, as his moniker is hardly shorter than his name.

Rashaz’s foundational work, *Tanya*, is abbreviated as T followed by the section number (1—*Sefer shel beinonim*, 2—*Sha’ar hayihud veba’emunah*, 3—*Igeret hateshuvah*, 4—*Igeret hakodesh*, 5—*Kuntres aḥaron*). Thus, “Rashaz, T1:1” refers to Section 1, Chapter 1.

Citations to *Torah or* (abbreviated as TO) and *Likutei torah* (abbreviated as LT), the classic compendiums of Rashaz’s oral discourses, refer to the standard editions issued by Kehot, Habad’s official publishing house, and not to the original editions published respectively in Kopust (1836) and Zhytomyr (1848). In the latter case, the relevant section is indicated (for example, *LT vayikra*) before the folio. The series of volumes titled *Ma’amarei admor hazaken*, also published by Kehot, is referred to with the abbreviation *MAHZ*. Full publication details are provided the first time any individual volume is cited.

Citations to the published correspondence of the seven rebbes of Habad, as edited by Shalom DovBer Levine and published by Kehot, indicate their monikers followed by IG (for *Igerot kodesh*), followed by the volume number (for example, Rashab, IG3,). References to editors’ introductions use roman numerals. The first time a particular volume of *Igerot kodesh* is cited, full publishing details are provided.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. The original Hebrew or Yiddish text is also included. I have attempted to render my translations for maximum clarity to the English reader and therefore have not reproduced the grammatical quirks and apparent inconsistencies that often abound in Hasidic texts. I use the term “apparent” to reflect the

work of Lily Kahn demonstrating that “Hasidic Hebrew authors do seem to have employed a coherent system ... that follows different rules from other forms of the language,”¹ and that, contrary to general supposition, “Hasidic and Maskilic corpora have a high degree of morphological and syntactic correspondence.”²

Relatedly, in many of the texts discussed below, especially in Chapter 2, the terms *reshimah* (רשימה) and *reshimu* (רשימו) are used interchangeably. I have generally defaulted to the former form except when directly discussing the implications of texts in which the latter form appears.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATIONS

The transliteration of Hebrew in this work follows a simplified system, incorporating conventions that are generally familiar to academics in the field of Jewish Studies, and also to a wider audience of English readers who have some exposure to Hebrew. With some small exceptions it is based on the system used in publications by The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. In some cases, established transcriptions have been retained even when they are not fully consistent with the transliteration system described, and names have likewise generally been left in their familiar forms.

Importantly, the aim is generally to reflect common pronunciation, rather than the precise spelling or Hebrew word structure. For this reason, dashes and capitalization are not used to differentiate prefixes from roots, and only the first letter of the first word is capitalized when titles of Hebrew works are transliterated. Capitalization is not otherwise used.

Similarly, no attempt is made to indicate the distinctions between *alef* and *ayin*, *tet* and *taf*, *kaf* and *kuf*, *sin* and *samekh*, since these are not relevant to pronunciation; likewise, the *dagesh* is not indicated except where it affects pronunciation.

However, the distinction between *het* and *khaf* has been retained, using *h* for the former and *kh* for the latter, because the associated forms are generally familiar to readers, even if the distinction is not actually borne out in pronunciation. For the same reason the final *hei* is indicated with an *h*.

¹ Lily Kahn, “Grammatical gender in the early modern Hasidic Hebrew tale,” *Hebrew Studies* 54 (2013), 134.

² Lily Kahn, “Grammatical similarities between 19th-century Hasidic and Maskilic Hebrew narratives,” *Hebrew Studies* 53 (2012): 179. For a more comprehensive discussion see *ideam.*, *A Grammar of the Eastern European Hasidic Hebrew Tale* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

An apostrophe is only used in intervocalic positions where a failure to do so could lead a English-speaking reader to pronounce the vowel-cluster as a diphthong—as, for example, in *ha'ir* or *mizbei'ah*—or otherwise mispronounce the word. An apostrophe is not used to indicate an *alef* or *ayin*.

The letter *şadi* is indicated with an *ş*. The *sheva na* is indicated by an *e*—*perikat ol*, *reshut*. The *şei* is represented by *ei*. The *yod* is represented by *i* when it occurs as a vowel (*bereishit*), by *y* when it occurs as a consonant (*yesodot*), and by *yi* when it occurs as both (*yisra'eil*).

* * *

INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing Habad's Internal Discourse on *Šimšum*

Part 1 - A Note on Methodology and Structure

This work is concerned with how the interpretation of the Kabbalistic theme of *šimšum* is intertwined with the intellectual, literary, and social history of Habad, a distinct stream or school that emerged within the wider Hasidic movement as the 18th century came to a close.¹ Methodologically, three disciplinary elements are at play:

1) Philosophy. That is, a conceptual effort to clarify and articulate the way in which the discourse on *šimšum* should be understood. In this endeavor, I make use of a broad philosophical frame of reference, wherein—for example—terms such as ontology or epistemology indicate whether we are speaking of “reality” or “perception.” The foremost focus is on the internal development of Habad thought, but I will also touch on resonances and intersections with contemporaneous philosophical trends. The first chapter is accordingly contextualized with reference to German idealism, the second by the turn to materialism in the later half of the 19th century, and the third by the rise of continental philosophy in the 20th century. I will say more about the particular relevance of the philosophical discipline of phenomenology below.

2) Philology and hermeneutics. That is, an effort to understand different texts, of assorted genres, both on their own terms and in terms of their relationships to one another. In this endeavor, I am attentive to the specific literary forms that developed within Habad—and also to wider literary contexts—and draw on a broad array of textual material both in print and in manuscript. Questions about reception history, the relationship between literature and authority, and how to usefully parse polemical and hermeneutical literature, are also addressed.

3) Historiography. That is, an effort to discover and describe particular historical episodes, and broader historical trajectories, whether intellectual, literary, or social. In this endeavor, I am especially attentive to chronology, and also to the ways that episodes of social rupture and change are reflected in, and bound up with, the emergence and development of ideological and literary phenomena. Particular attention will be given to

¹ On the “emergence” or “origins” of Habad see Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and Immanuel Etkes, *Ba'al hatanya: rabi shnei'ur zalman mli'adiy vereishitah shel ḥasidut ḥabad* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 2011). Also see Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to G-d: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993).

the way such phenomena are at play in the negotiation of leadership succession, which has long been a topic of fascination among scholars of Hasidism.

In combining these three disciplinary elements, I also combine the influence of four scholars and mentors, who have all—each in their own particular way—been my teachers, instructing me and guiding me, directly and by example, in the study of Hasidic thought, literature, and history.

It was Rabbi Elimelech Zweibel (“Reb Meilich,” 1941-2016) who first taught me to parse the Kabbalistic formulae invoked in Habad texts, conceptually, or—one might say—philosophically; neither to reduce them to their literal sense, nor to treat them as symbols that are ultimately inexplicable, but rather to probe their significance, building up from the psychological, to the cosmological, and then to the theological. Rabbi Zweibel was himself trained, and in turn taught me, within Habad’s own educational tradition. The language in which he thought and taught was Yiddish, and in applying his influence on me in the context of the present work I am necessarily engaging in an act of translation, not only linguistically but disciplinarily and culturally as well.

It was also Rabbi Zweibel who first attuned me to Habad’s historiographical dimension. His own mentors had been students in the yeshiva established at the end of the 19th century by Habad’s fifth rebbe, in the Belarusian town of Lubavitch, and he drew on the many anecdotes he had heard from them to bring their world to life. In listening to him, I gained a rich sense of the complex historical, socio-political, and geographical trajectories that had shaped Habad over the course of the 20th century and up to my own time.²

My own traversal of the boundary that distinguishes Habad’s internal intellectual tradition from the disciplinary traditions of academic research on Hasidism began with my exposure to the field-changing scholarship of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert. Her critical historiography challenged narratives that had previously been axiomatic both among Hasidim and among scholars who studied Hasidism academically. Combining broad contextual knowledge with a keen attentiveness to the nuanced intersections of philology and chronology, she was able to detect and expose anachronisms, and to discern the

² For more on Rabbi Zweibel’s life of scholarship and education, see Eli Rubin, “Rabbi Elimelech Zweibel, 75: A Gentle Scholar, Beloved Teacher and Perpetual Student,” *Chabad.org* <chabad.org/3499763> (accessed May 6, 2021). For an account of a class I heard him teach on the conceptual import of *simsum*, and which can be said to mark the beginning of my fascination with the topic, see idem., “Creation Impossible: What is tzimtzum like?” *Chabad.org* <chabad.org/2298270> (accessed May 6, 2021).

diverse ideological, literary, and historical elements that authors drew on not only to craft narratives about the past, but also to shape the narratives of the future.³

Rapoport-Albert's project was no simplistic "debunking" but rather a sensitive and robust rereading, a careful parsing of blurred genres and accrued textual layers in order to more clearly examine the underlying historical bedrock. She particularly brought this lens to bear on questions concerning succession and the role of women in Hasidism, but in doing so was always very much alive to broader intellectual and literary contexts. As Wojciech Tworek has written, she taught her students "to write passionately yet critically about *tsadikim* and Hasidim: men and women of spirituality, wisdom, and charisma."⁴ I am especially grateful to her—on a personal level—for inviting me to research and write this thesis under her supervision, and for guiding and supporting its development up to her untimely death, in June 2020. Her influence is apparent in the historiographical thread that runs through from beginning to end, and especially in the centering of the succession crisis that followed the passing of Habad's third rebbe in the middle of the 19th century.

Dr. Naftali Loewenthal—Ada's longtime friend, colleague, and interlocutor—combines the two distinctions of being a committed Hasid embedded within the contemporary Habad community, intimately engaged in its tradition of learning and spiritual practice, while also being a distinguished scholar of Hasidism embedded within the academic community, and engaging with equal rigour in its tradition of critical research and disciplinary discourse. In his two books and many articles, Loewenthal has chronologically traced central intellectual threads and tensions through the generations of Habad, paying particular attention to the centrality of Habad's ethos of communication, and to the movement's negotiation of "modernity" and historical change.⁵

In both his scholarly work and in his own persona, Loewenthal has also investigated and illustrated the many ways Habad is "a form of hasidism beyond simple categories and polarities."⁶ He has argued that, as an intellectual, cultural, and social movement, Habad seems unusually amenable to a particular sort of capaciousness wherein apparent contrasts—such as tradition and progress, individualism and collectivism, particularism and universalism, faith and reason—can be held together, whether in synthesis or in

³ For appreciative overviews of her scholarly contributions see Immanuel Etkes and David Asaf, "Al mifalah hameḥkari shel adah rapoport-albert," introduction to Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidim veshabta'im anashim venashim* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2015), 7-21; Moshe Rosman, "Changing the Narrative of the History of Hasidism," introduction to Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender* (Liverpool, UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2018), 1-19.

⁴ Wojciech Tworek, "Ada Rapoport-Albert: In Memoriam," *East European Jewish Affairs* 50:1-2: 259.

⁵ For an autobiographical overview of his life and work, see "Introduction," in Naftali Loewenthal, *Hasidism Beyond Modernity* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020), 1-30

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

tension. In this spirit, I have followed Loewenthal in coming “to see the possibility of a bridge between hasidism as a personal experience and commitment” and as a domain of study that is subject to the sort of “objective, rational thought” that academic research and analysis aspires to.⁷ One element of this “bridge” is the adoption of what he refers to as a “a phenomenological approach” according to which the scholar doesn’t question the legitimacy of subjective experience or beliefs as reported by individuals and groups, but rather seeks to investigate the “ramifications” (or, one might say, the significance) of such experiences and beliefs from a variety of methodological perspectives; social, historical, political, philosophical, psychological, spiritual, economic, etc.⁸

This brings me to a fourth scholar, Professor Elliot Wolfson, who has similarly expressed a personal identification with a sense of capaciousness and complexity according to which his “lifelong involvement” with the Jewish mystical tradition exceeds the usual categories of scholarship, aspiring to “remain inside” the tradition “by being outside.”⁹ Especially important, however, is his distinctive centering of phenomenology as the basis of his research on Kabbalah and Habad thought. Going beyond the narrower sense mentioned above, which is simply respectful of religious subjectivity, Wolfson’s notion of phenomenology is deeply informed by its meaning in the tradition of continental philosophy, where it became an entire disciplinary field in its own right, concerned with the study of “conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view.”¹⁰ Further, the phenomenological method becomes the gateway to other areas of philosophical study such as ontology (the study of being or reality), epistemology (the study of knowledge), or ethics (the study of right and wrong).¹¹

Wolfson applies this principle to the mystical world of Kabbalah, arguing that “kabbalah itself is part of philosophy,”¹² and that the kabbalists use their own “imaginal” consciousness “to gain access to the realm of incorporeality.”¹³ Accordingly, in the internal philosophical tradition of Kabbalah discussions of G-d and the cosmos—as well

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid., 17-18.

⁹ Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan and Aaron W. Hughes, “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson, July 25, 2012” in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 201.

¹⁰ See David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>> (accessed May 5, 2021).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Tirosh-Samuelsan and Hughes, “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” 214-215.

¹³ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8; cited and discussed in Aaron W. Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” in *Poetic Thinking*, 16.

as of human states of religious devotion and experience—must be decoded phenomenologically. However counterintuitive this might seem, this means that ontological states cannot simply be thought of in superficial terms, but are rather understood to be endowed with an interiority at least as potent, rich, subtle, and complex as that seen in the diverse span of human experience. In my view, this was precisely the approach of the Habad masters, who articulated their investigations of the nature of G-d and the cosmos through hermeneutical interpretation of canonical texts and through penetrating reflection on the structure of consciousness as it is subjectively experienced. As Pinchas Giller has remarked, Wolfson’s “work is marked by an understanding of the mystic’s subjectivity,” which can be attributed not only to his deep literary sensitivity but also to his personal exposure to the living communities of Breslav and Habad Hasidim during his teenage years.¹⁴

This blurring of the boundary between being inside the living tradition of Habad and analyzing that tradition academically from outside of it—exemplified in different ways by both Loewenthal and Wolfson—is reflected in my occasional references to scholarly material that has been published on non-academic platforms, such as Chabad.org or in the journal *Heikhal habesht*. It is especially reflected in my own continued embeddedness within the Habad community.

Giller has further characterized Wolfson’s work as breaking with the “literary historiography” emphasized by Gershom Scholem and his students.¹⁵ In recent years Wolfson has countered the charge that his phenomenological approach is “anti-historical,” and argued that it instead “problematizes the commonplace belief that we can be certain that the future does not flow into the past through the present.”¹⁶ Much of his work deeply interrogates questions of temporality, and he maintains that a historically situated attunement to the subjective sense of “the moment” actually leads to “a variant construal of historicity, one that is not beholden to a linear historicism,” and that this is especially significant given that “this is precisely the understanding of time affirmed by many Hasidic masters.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Pinchas Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the study of Kabbalah in the wake of Scholem,” *Religious Studies Review* 25:1 (1999): 24. Also see Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes, “Interview,” 195.

¹⁵ Giller, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Overcoming the Body through the Body: Ascetic Enfleshment and the Phenomenology of Hasidic Ritual,” *Marginalia* (April 2020) <<https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/overcoming-the-body-through-the-body-ascetic-enfleshment-and-the-phenomenology-of-hasidic-ritual/>> (accessed May 6, 2021).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* For more on this variant reconstrual of temporality see, among other relevant works, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). For his most intensive engagement with Habad thought see *idem.*, *Open Secret:*

In keeping with Wolfson's insistence that his approach is not anti-historical, my own work reintegrates his phenomenological methodology with the sort of literary-historiographical and socio-historical work that he himself has mostly left to others. The structure of my work is chronologically linear in the conventional mode. Somewhat less conventionally, I do not allow myself to be forced into the dichotomized boxes of intellectual-history vs. social-history. Instead, I intend to provide one example of an apparently metaphysical and mystical concept—*šimšum*—whose hermeneutical and phenomenological meaning proved to be of weighty socio-historical significance.

This work has also benefited immensely from the sound guidance and critical advice of Professor François Guesnet, whose wider disciplinary perspective and contextual knowledge has broadened my frame of reference and helped me better shape the thesis as a cohesive whole.

This brings me to a general overview of the structure of this work:

The rest of this introductory chapter will place Habad's internal discourse on *šimšum* in its wider context, focusing first on the meaning of *šimšum* in Midrashic and Kabbalistic literature, then taking note of its dissemination as a philosophical and cultural motif far beyond the specificity of the Jewish tradition, as well as the distinctly anthropological dimension that overlays the normative cosmological significance of *šimšum* in early Hasidic teachings. This paves the way for a more focused discussion of the ways in which the question of how to interpret *šimšum* became imbricated in the larger socio-historical controversy that marked the emergence of Hasidism as a distinct movement, and the particular constitution of Habad as a socio-intellectual institution with a strong tradition of literary production and engagement. To be a Habad thinker, I will argue, is to think through the prism of *šimšum*.

The body of the thesis is divided into three chapters that flow chronologically from one to the next:

Chapter one takes up the debate among academic scholars as to whether or not Habad's interpretation of *šimšum* results in acosmism, a doctrine that ultimately denies the reality of the physical cosmos. Methodologically, this is approached through systematic, close and carefully contextualized readings of relevant texts from the writings and transcribed oral teachings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady ("Rashaz," 1745-1813), followed by a

Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) For more on Wolfson's path as a scholar of religion see Gregory Perron, "Open Secret: Henry Corbin, Elliot Wolfson, and the Mystical Poetics of Deification" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2020), 195-432.

comparative discussion of the reception of his teachings by his direct successors as leaders of Habad, especially with respect to the question of the ontological significance of *šimšum*.

Chapter two is wholly situated in the 19th century. New intellectual and literary developments in Habad, with a focus on debates concerning how *šimšum* mediates between infinite primordiality and finite materiality, are scrutinized through the prism of the succession controversy of 1865-6 and the consequent split between Habad-Kopust and Habad-Lubavitch. Within that context, an analysis of the oeuvre of Habad's fourth leader (in the Lubavitch line) reveals the ways in which he reconstrued his father's intertextual approach, systematically reconsidering and recalibrating Habad's theological trajectory. From the outset, I will argue, he displaced the rhetoric of acosmism with a metaphysics of materiality that foregrounds the apotheosis of the physical.

Chapter three focuses on the figure of Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn ("Rashab," 1860-1920), the fifth rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, and sets his intellectual project within the wider context of his transition from "a path of introspection" or "self-seclusion," in the decade following his father's passing, to a path of energetic institution building and activist organization that aimed to change the face of Jewish leadership in the Russian Empire. For Rashab, it will be shown, the interpretation of *šimšum* provided a frame through which to negotiate a set of intertwined existential questions concerning the purpose of temporal existence and the relationship between past, present and future. In the background is the surging political and ideological ferment that would lead—most prominently—to the Russian Revolution. Casting the rupture of *šimšum* as a crucible of innovative return to an otherwise ungraspable origin, Rashab insisted that the continuities of nomian tradition could yet uncover a "new luminosity" that was transcendent, essential and unprecedented.

The concluding chapter ties these threads into a single narrative according to which *šimšum* is seen not only as a central a site for interpretive dynamism and ingenuity, but also as a prismatic phenomenological category through which the broader socio-historical story of Habad, from 1796 to 1920, is illuminated. Casting a sweeping eye on Habad's activist turn over the course of the 20th century, these developments are seen to have deep roots in the ideological and activist work of Rashab, which in turn constitutes a bold crystallization and realization of Habad's axiomatic concern with the reality and fecundity of *šimšum*.

Part 2 - *Šimšum* in Midrash, Kabbalah, and Habad Hasidism

Gershom Scholem wrote that “the origin of the term *Tsimtsum*” is to be found in Midrashic sayings that depict “God as having concentrated his Shekhinah, his divine presence, in the holiest of holies, at the place of the *Cherubim*, as though His whole power were concentrated and contracted at a single point.”¹⁸ He immediately follows this with the claim that “to the Kabbalist of Luria’s school,” referring to the famous sixteenth century kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria (“Arizal,” 1534-1572), “*Tsimtsum* does not mean the concentration of God *at* a point, but his retreat *away* from a point.”¹⁹

The distinction between *šimšum* as concentration and *šimšum* as retreat remains an important touchstone of academic scholarship. But it has not gone unchallenged. Moshe Idel has argued that the switch from the former concept to the latter can already be discerned in a text by the great exegete, halakhist, and kabbalist, Naḥmanides (1194-1270), who wrote that God “contracted (*šimšem*) the glory (*kavod*) itself ... like the measure ... between the two cherubs” (צמצם עצם הכבוד ... כשעור ... בין שני הכרובים) resulting in “darkness over the countenance of everything” (חושך על פני הכל).²⁰ Scholem had only referred to this passage in passing, but Idel deemed it “the most important text, and perhaps even the earliest, for the history of the concept of *šimšum* in Kabbalah.”²¹ According to Idel, Naḥmanides’ introduction of “darkness” as a corollary of *šimšum* transformed the meaning of *šimšum* from concentration to withdrawal.²²

Idel goes so far as to claim that “the Lurianic concept of *šimšum* doesn’t constitute an innovation in Kabbalistic thought.”²³ But this seems to overlook the Lurianic emphasis that *šimšum* does not simply entail concentration or withdrawal by degree—as in Naḥmanides’ measure of a handbreadth—rather, “the Infinite contracted Himself and withdrew that abundant light from that place completely.”²⁴ As far as I can tell, a direct

¹⁸ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 260. Also see Joshua Abelson, *The Immanence of G-d in Rabbinical Literature* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912), 94-5, for the comment that “the later Kabbalistic doctrine of ‘Zimzum’ (‘contraction’) took its start from this Rabbinic idea.”

¹⁹ Ibid. Italics are Scholem’s.

²⁰ Naḥmanides, *Perush sefer yeširah*, as quoted in Moshe Idel, “Al toldot musag ha‘šimšum’ bekabalah ubemaḥkar,” *Mehkerei yerushalayim bemaḥshevet yisra’el* 10 (1992): 60-1.

²¹ Idel., *ibid.*, 60. See Scholem, *Trends*, 260 and 410, n. 42.

²² Idel, *ibid.*, 68.

²³ Ibid., 91.

²⁴ *Eš ḥayim* (Koreš, 1782), 12a. Emphasis added. This work circulated in manuscript for two centuries before a version first prepared by Rabbi Meir Poppers (1624-1662) was published by the *maskil* Isaac Satanow (1733-1805) in Koreš. In Popper’s preface to the work the title *Derekh eš ḥayim* is used. On the background to this publication see Elke Morlok, “Isaac Satanow (1732–1804) on Moral and Intellectual Perfection,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 14:2 (2020): 300-333, and esp. 305-6. On the manuscript and print history of this text, see Yosef Avivi, *Binyan ari’el: mavo derushei ha’elokiyy rabi yiṣḥak luria zikhrono livrakhah* (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1987), 26-32, 68-70.

antecedent to this notion of *ṣimṣum* as a “complete” withdrawal of divine revelation has not been identified by scholars.

Contrary to Idel’s suggestion that Naḥmanides and Luria are separated only by “semantics,” the absoluteness of *ṣimṣum* in the latter’s depiction signals a revolutionary break with the classical neoplatonist model of cosmic emanation, according to which all created beings flow naturally and sequentially from their divine source. This break is especially striking given that—as described by Bracha Sack—Luria’s immediate predecessor as leader of the Kabbalistic circle in Safed, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (“Ramak,” 1522-1570), explained *ṣimṣum* in distinctly emanationist terms.²⁵ This is also reflected in the statement in some Habad sources that “Ramak ... did not know of the *ṣimṣum*” (רמ”ק ... לא ידע מהצמצום).²⁶ As will be made clear below, the Lurianic sources unequivocally assert that *ṣimṣum* constitutes an infinite divide between G-d and creation, to the extent that no single point in the cosmic hierarchy can be taken to be “closer” or “further” in relation to the infinite light that precedes *ṣimṣum*. In taking note of this departure, and of the “perpetual tension” it introduces, Scholem was right to declare that when compared to the “inoffensive simplicity” of the neoplatonist model “there is fascinating power and profundity in this doctrine.”²⁷ As Jonathan Garb has succinctly phrased it, “while for Cordovero connectivity is the organizing trope, for Luria it is that of rupture.”²⁸

Alongside our recognition of the radical reconstrual of *ṣimṣum* in the Lurianic context, we should take note of certain continuities that nevertheless endure. Dalia Hoshen has cogently argued against the assumption common to both Scholem and Idel that there is no real link between the cosmological concept of *ṣimṣum* found in Kabbalah and the use of the term in Midrashic sources.²⁹ In her view, such bifurcation is rooted in a methodological bias according to which Midrash was dismissed as mere exegesis, and as “unimportant” from a theoretical or philosophical perspective. Once those biases are overcome, she argued, it becomes clear that Midrashic discussion about the concealed

²⁵ Bracha Sack, “Torat ḥaṣimṣum shel r. moshe cordovero,” *Tarbiz* 58:2 (Jan.-March, 1989): 207-237, esp. 211. This is acknowledged by Idel, *ibid.*, 89.

²⁶ Şemah Şedek, *Or hatorah al marz”l ve’inyanim* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1983), 119. For direct attribution of this distinction to Habad’s founder (Rashaz, whose theorizations of *ṣimṣum* will be a central concern of the present study), see Rabbi Hilel Halevi (Malisov) of Paritch, *Pelaḥ harimon al sefer shemot* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1956), 412: אדמו”ר הזקן נ”ע א’ שהלל ריקן אינו מוזכר במקובלים ראשונים רק שהאריז”ל חידש זאת. For further discussion see Nochum Grunwald, “Hishtalshut lefi haramak vecha’arizal le’or haḥasidut,” *Heikhal habesh”t* 10 (2005): 54-61. We should add that this distinction between the cosmology of Luria and Cordovero is referenced by Rashaz himself in glosses to T1:2, 6b and T1:48, 68b.

²⁷ Scholem, *Trends*, 260-1.

²⁸ Garb, Jonathan Garb, *A History of Kabbalah: From the Early Modern Period to the Present Day* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 51.

²⁹ Dalia Hoshen, “Torat ḥaṣimṣum umishnat r”a: kabbalah umidrash,” *Daat* 34 (1995): 33-60.

presence of God within the world cannot be neatly disentangled from corollary implications concerning the cosmological processes by which God brings about the creation of the world.³⁰ Through a careful philological and chronological analysis of relevant texts she shows that the Midrashic literature on *šimšum* should be understood as a direct resource on which early kabbalists drew to formulate their more explicit cosmological theorizations. She also shows that already in this early period the term *šimšum* had a “paradoxical” dimension which bears the simultaneous connotations of revelation within (concentration) and concealment from (withdrawal).³¹

Scholem’s attempt to draw a clear cut distinction between *šimšum* as concentration and *šimšum* as withdrawal is likewise undermined by his own paraphrase of the Lurianic description of *šimšum*. While he initially emphasises God’s withdrawal from the space in which the worlds are to be emanated, he goes on to emphasize that this corresponds to a simultaneous concentration of God within His own self:

God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew ... Instead of emanation we have the opposite, contraction ... God ... descended deeper into the recesses of His own Being ... concentrated Himself into Himself.³²

To my mind, this suggests that even in the Lurianic context, Scholem ultimately understood the term *šimšum* to simultaneously indicate both withdrawal and concentration, much as the English word “contraction” conveys both of these meanings.³³ It is precisely the double meaning of this term that has made it such a fecund locus for an ever-changing spectrum of theoretical interpretations of how *šimšum* mediates the relationship between God and the created worlds.

³⁰ Ibid., 34. Michael Fishbane has similarly emphasized the need “to get behind the rationalistic depletions of myth so characteristic of modern ideological scholarship” and thereby recover Midrash as “ancient rabbinic theology” that “routinely takes the more mediated form of exegesis—boldly reinterpreting and recombining the received words and images of Scripture.” He further notes that “from that vantage point, the creation account in Genesis 1 clearly has a privileged position.” See Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 94.

³¹ Hoshen, *ibid.*, esp. 38, 42, 50-1, 59. For a related set of arguments, advanced more recently and without reference to Hoshen’s work, see Paul Franks, “The Midrashic Background of the Doctrine of Divine Contraction: Against Gershom Scholem on *Tsimsum*,” in *Tsimsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 39-60.

³² Scholem, *ibid.*, 261. Emphasis added.

³³ This argument counters Paul Franks’ reading of Scholem (“Midrashic Background,” 41) according to which the latter’s distinction between concentration and withdrawal is not merely an *interpretive* claim but rather intends to definitively change the *translation* of the word *šimšum* in the Lurianic context to mean only withdrawal.

One thing that undoubtedly sets the Lurianic account of *šimšum* apart is the breadth, clarity, and indeed vividness, with which this cosmological event is depicted, especially in the writings of Luria's student, Rabbi Ḥayim Vital (1543-1620). As Garb writes, "although this concept has earlier and perhaps even pre-modern sources [as argued by Idel and Hoshen], Vital crystallized it for subsequent generations" using "geometric and abstract symbolism," to the point that *šimšum* came to be seen as one of Arizal's "trademark ideas."³⁴

Moreover, Vital does not simply assert and describe the occurrence of *šimšum*, but also explains its necessity. Given the centrality of Vital's account of *šimšum* in Habad literature it is relevant to quote him at some length:

Before the emanations were emanated and the creations created there was a simple supernal light that filled all existence, and there was no cleared place, empty space, and void at all. Rather all was filled with that simple infinite light, and there was neither beginning nor end ... And when it arose in His simple will to create worlds and emanate emanations ... He then contracted (*šimšem*) Himself within the central point in Him, in the very center of His light ... and contracted that light to the parameters around the central point, and then a cleared place and space, and an empty void, was left from the central point ... And behold, this contraction was with a single equity around that central empty point, such that the void place was spherical on every side with complete equity ... and the reason was that since the infinite light is equal with complete equity it is necessary that it should likewise contract itself with singular equity. And it is known according to the wisdom of mathematics that there is nothing that is so equitable as the form of a sphere ...

And behold, after the contraction mentioned above ... there was already place wherein could be the emanations, creations, formations, and actualizations, and then a single straight line (*kav*) was drawn from the infinite light, from His spherical light, from above to below, and it devolves and descends within that void ...³⁵

The reason the contraction was necessary, that the Infinite contracted Himself in the center of His light to leave a place void and empty ... is in order to make

³⁴ Garb, *A History*, 49-50.

³⁵ Vital, *Eš ḥayim*, 11a-b. Franks' interesting argument ("Midrashic Background," 42) that the Lurianic account actually depicts "two *tsimsumim*"—a concentration at a point, followed by a withdrawal away from that point, which then leaves a void "between the central point and the extremities"—is not sustained by a careful reading of this text and the others he cites. The "central point" is rather indicated as the locus from whence the light is withdrawn to be concentrated at the extremities, or better said the "parameters."

containers; for by way of the contraction of the light and its minimization it is possible for the receptacle to be created and to be revealed, and when the light becomes overly abundant the receptacle will be nullified due to its minimal capacity to receive the abundant and great light ... And this explains the reason why the Infinite contracted Himself and withdrew that abundant light from that place completely, and afterwards returned it, measured and weighed, through that *kav*—and He could have left that *kav* in its place, and only the rest of that great light would have been withdrawn, since He would subsequently return it—but the reason was ... that the receptacles could not be created until the light would be withdrawn completely. And once the receptacles were created, He returned and drew forth the light, measured and weighed according to the quantity that suffices to illuminate them and vitalize them such that they can tolerate and be maintained and not be nullified.³⁶

טרם שנאצלו הנאצלים ונבראו הנבראים היה אור עליון פשוט ממלא כל המציאות ולא היה שום מקום פנוי בבחי' אויר ריקני וחלל אלא הכל היה ממולא מן אור א"ס פשוט שהוא ולא היה לא בחי' ראש ולא בחי' סוף ... וכאשר עלה ברצונו הפשוט לברוא העולמות ולהאציל הנאצלים ... אז צמצם את עצמו א"ס בנקודה האמצעית אשר בו באמצע אורו ממש ... וצמצם האור ההוא ונתרחק אל צדדי סביבות הנקודה האמצעית ואז נשאר מקום פנוי ואויר וחלל ריקני מנקודה אמצעית ... והנה הצמצום הזה היה בהשוואה א' בסביבות הנקודה האמצעית ריקנית ההוא באופן שמקום החלל ההוא היה עגול מכל סביבותיו בהשוואה גמורה ... והסיבה היתה לפי שכיון שאור הא"ס שוה בהשוואה גמורה הוכרח גם כן שיצמצם עצמו בהשוואה א' מכל הצדדים ונודע בחכמת השיעור שאין תמונה כ"כ שוה כמו תמונת העיגול ...

והנה אחר הצמצום הנ"ל ... הנה כבר היה מקום לשיוכלו להיות שם הנאצלים והנבראים ויצורים והנעשים ואז המשיך מן אור א"ס קו א' ישר מן האור העגול שלו מלמעלה למטה ומשתלשל ויורד תוך החלל ההוא ... סיבת צורך הצמצום אשר צמצם הא"ס א"ע באמצעית האור שלו להניח מקום חלל וריק ... הוא כדי לעשות בחי' כלים כי ע"י צמצום האור מעוטו יש אפשרו' אל הכלי להתהוו' ולהתגלות ובהתרבות האור יתבטל הכלי ממיעוט כחו לקבל האור הרב והגדול ... ובזה יתבאר טעם למה א"ס צמצם עצמו וסילק האור הרב ההוא מן המקום ההוא לגמרי ואח"כ החזירו במדה ובמשקל דרך הקו ההוא והיה יכול להניח אות' בחי' הקו ההוא במקומו ויסלק שאר האור הגדול בלבד כיון שהוא עתיד להחזירו אבל הטעם היה ... כי לא יכלו להתהוות הכלים עד שיסתלק האור לגמרי ואחר שנתהוו הכלים חזר והמשיך האור במדה ובמשקל כפי שיעור המספיק להם להאירם להחיותן באופן שיוכלו לסבול ויתקיימו ולא יתבטלו

This strikingly visual, dramatic, and dynamic account quickly captured the imagination of both Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers. From Safed it circulated throughout Europe, first

³⁶ Ibid., 12a.

orally and in manuscript, and then in a variety of printed works, including in Latin and English versions that were published in the later decades of the 17th century.³⁷

Christoph Schulte's broad survey of post-Lurianic discourse on *šimšum* ranges across the generations and far beyond the religious communities who considered themselves heirs to the Kabbalistic tradition. The 17th century scientific luminaries Leibniz and Newton, the philosophers Jacobi and Schelling a century later, the Jewish "enlighteners" (*maskilim*) Isaac Satanow and Salomon Maimon, all make appearances, and—closer to our own time—we encounter the literary critic Harold Bloom, the actress and writer Ulla Berkéwicz, and artists such as Christoph Loos and Anselm Kiefer.³⁸ As Daniel Reiser has discussed in some detail, *šimšum* is also a leitmotif in *Life of Pi* (2002), a bestselling novel by Yann Martel that was made into a blockbuster 3D-Film.³⁹ Centuries of debates among Rabbis in Italy, Eastern Europe, and North Africa, over the meaning and significance of *šimšum* are now revisited by academics as well as by contemporary rabbis and ordinary Jews.⁴⁰ As argued by the editors of *Tsimtsum and Modernity*, a collection of scholarly essays published in 2021, the Lurianic account of *šimšum* should be regarded "as a breaking point in the emergence of the modern intellectual world."⁴¹

In his chapter on *šimšum* in early Hasidism, Schulte points out that that *Eš hayim* was first published in precisely the locale and time period wherein Hasidic teachings were beginning to be disseminated, not only orally and in manuscript, but also in print. Schulte writes that the early Hasidic master Rabbi DovBer, known as the Maggid of Mezritch

³⁷ Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbala Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677); Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (London, 1692). See Brian P. Copenhaver, "Jewish theologies of space in the scientific revolution: Henry More, Joseph Raphson, Isaac Newton and their predecessors," *Annals of Science* 37:5 (1980): 489-548; Allison Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury Van Helmont (1614-1698)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). The first printed publication of the Lurianic account of *šimšum* in Hebrew appeared in Rabbi Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz's *Shefa tal* (Hanau, 1612), 29b. See Bracha Sack, *Shomer hapardes: hamekubal rabi shabtay sheftel huroviš miprag* (Be'er Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2002).

³⁸ Christoph Schulte, *Zimzum: Gott und Weltersprung* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 2014).

³⁹ Daniel Reiser, "Tsimtsum in *Life of Pi*" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 20:1 (Winter 2020-21): 107-143. Also see Christoph Schulte, "Tsimtsum: Media and Art," in *Tsimtsum and Modernity*, 419-421. Schulte identifies eight stages "in the semiotic history of tsimtsum" from "oral transmission" to "film with sound and music." Another example of the imprint of *šimšum* in the contemporary literary world is Sabrina Orah Mark's *Tsim Tsum* (Saturnalia Books, 2009).

⁴⁰ For a highly polemical attempt to synthesize various interpretations of *šimšum*, based largely on the pietistic assumption that the saintly rabbis of the past must have all adhered to a single religious truth, see Avinoam Fraenkel, *Nefesh HaTzimzum, Vol. 2: Understanding Nefesh HaChaim through the Key Concept of Tzimzum and Related Writings* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2015). For a recent engagement with *šimšum* from a psychological perspective, see Mordechai Rotenberg, *The Psychology of Tzimzum: Self, Other, and G-d* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015).

⁴¹ Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss, *Tsimtsum and Modernity*, xvi. Also see the related discussion in Shaul Magid, "Origin and Overcoming the Beginning: Zimzum as a Trope of Reading in Post-Lurianic Kabbala," in *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutic of Jewish Texts*, ed. Shaul Magid and Aryeh Cohen (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 163-214. Magid's work will be engaged more directly, below 3:3.

(1704-1772), was not only greatly influenced by Lurianic Kabbalah but was also “to some degree responsible for its popularity” since he frequently made use of Lurianic ideas in his homilies. Shortly after the posthumous publication of a collection of these homilies in the town of Kores, only 20 kilometers from Mezritch, *Eṣ ḥayim* went to press in the same town. It would be republished several more times within just a few years.⁴²

One important feature of the Maggid’s homilies, according to Schulte, is his adaptation of *ṣimṣum* from a more abstract cosmological register into a more anthropological one according to which “G-d’s love for his creation, and in particular for Israel ... prompted him to distill himself through *ṣimṣum* into *ḥokhmah*” and thereby “create all of creation and sustain its existence.”⁴³ This move is further reflected in Rabbi DovBer’s teaching that human beings must reciprocally emulate the divine *ṣimṣum* in their own behaviour. “The righteous withdraw, restrict themselves, concentrate themselves within, and efface themselves ... relinquish earthly, material things, and evacuate their place in this world to be able to unite spiritually with G-d.”⁴⁴

The continuity between the teachings of Rabbi DovBer and those of his disciple, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady—who would emerge as the founding leader of the Habad school of Hasidism between the years 1788 and 1805—can be seen in his expansive explanation of the divine *ṣimṣum* as an act of love that human beings are bound to mirror, in keeping with the verse, “As water mirrors a face to a face, so does a man’s heart mirror his fellow’s” (Proverbs 27:19). No less than four chapters of Rashaz’s foundational work, *Likutei amarim tanya* (published in 1797 and also known by the title *Sefer shel beinonim*, or simply *Tanya*) are devoted to the elucidation of this idea and its application.⁴⁵ In an article that is as succinct as it is well argued and insightful, Amos Funkenstein wrote that in the teachings of Habad *imitatio dei* merited “one of the richest treatments in mystical literature,” and highlighted this treatment of *ṣimṣum* to illustrate the point.⁴⁶

The central significance of Lurianic teachings for Rashaz is evident from the fact that less than two decades after *Eṣ ḥayim* was first published he was already citing it as an

⁴² Schulte, *Zimzum*, 249. I thank the author for providing me with the manuscript in progress of the English translation of this chapter. For further discussion of the impact of Lurianic teachings, and their publication, in early Hasidism, see Roe Goldschmidt, “Mesos kol hamitablīm: hadfasat sifrei kabalat ha’ari besof hame’ah hashemonah-esreh, hitkabalatam vehashpa’atam al ḥugei haḥasidim,” in *Derekh sefer: shay lezev gris*, ed. Avriël Bar-Levav et. al. (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2021), 333-346.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 254. For a more general discussion of *ṣimṣum* in Hasidism, see Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 89-95.

⁴⁵ T1:46-9, 65a-70a.

⁴⁶ Amos Funkenstein, “Imitatio dei umusag ḥaṣimṣum bemishnat ḥabad,” in *Sefer rapha’el mahler*, ed. Shmuel Yeivin (Merhaviva: Sifriyat Po’alim, 1974), 83-88, esp. 87.

authoritative source much in the same way that he cited Scripture, Talmud, Midrash and Zohar.⁴⁷ While almost all of his oral discourses begin with a quote from one of these canonical texts, a few begin with the words “to understand what is written in *Eṣ ḥayim*,” and more than ten discourses open directly with the topic of *ṣimṣum*.⁴⁸ Indeed, an entire monograph could be devoted to the manifold dimensions of the treatment of *ṣimṣum* in the thought of Rashaz alone, but this study aspires to something broader: an intergenerational study of Habad from 1796 to 1920, in which the reception of Rashaz’s teachings on *ṣimṣum* provides a window through which to explore the ways that intellectual, literary, and social history are intertwined. Of course, Rashaz’s own engagement with *ṣimṣum* must be properly engaged as the foundation upon which such a project can be built.

Funkenstein makes the important methodological move of reading Rashaz’s treatment of *ṣimṣum* in *Tanya* in light of related discussions that appear in transcripts of his oral discourses, especially as posthumously published in *Likutei torah* (Zhytomyr, 1848). While his analysis is far from comprehensive, Funkenstein’s conclusion is correct: As well as developing the anthropological (or “psychological”) applications of Lurianic cosmology, Rashaz also preserved the Lurianic notion of *ṣimṣum* as “a radical removal of divinity ... its withdrawal within itself, prior to its diffusion” and harmonized this with a revival of Cordovero’s emanationist interpretation of *ṣimṣum* as a series of increasing contractions and concealments of divine revelation within the cosmos: In its Lurianic sense, *ṣimṣum* opens up the fundamental possibility of cosmic emanation, while also establishing G-d’s infinite transcendence of the cosmos. In its Cordoverian sense, *ṣimṣum* increasingly circumscribes the subsequent flow of divinity that immanently vitalizes each cosmic station.⁴⁹

Rashaz is absolutely clear that G-d simultaneously transcends all aspects of existence and is immanent within all aspects of existence.⁵⁰ He is also clear that even the transcendence of G-d is immanent within all creations, emphasizing that the Lurianic notion of divine withdrawal to clear a space cannot be understood in a literal sense, “since the category of

⁴⁷ See the relevant entries (e.g. “ḥayim, rḥ”v” “yitṣhak, ha’arizal,” “eṣ ḥayim”) in Rabbi Menachem Mendel Scheerson, “Maḥte’ah shemot sefarim ve’anashim” appended to the Kehot editions of *Tanya*, beginning with the 1953 imprint.

⁴⁸ For a partial list see Rashaz, *MAHZ inyanim II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2015), 690-1. In addition to these, many other discourses offer detailed discussions of *ṣimṣum* within a broader hermeneutical context.

⁴⁹ Funkenstein, *ibid.*, esp. 88. For further discussion of Rashaz’s concept of *ṣimṣum* within its broader post-Lurianic context see Teitelbaum, *Harav miliady umifleget ḥabad I* (Warsaw, 1910), 24-27 and *ibid.*, *II* (Warsaw, 1913), 37-94; Elijah, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 79-91; Etkes, *Ba’al hatanya*, 190-5. Elijah’s reduction of the meaning of *ṣimṣum* in Habad to an entirely epistemological question rather than an ontological one, which has been very influential in subsequent scholarly literature, will be discussed below, in chapter one.

⁵⁰ See for example T2:7, 83b-84b.

space does not apply at all in the spiritual realm” (כי לא שייך כלל בחי' מקום ברוחניות).⁵¹ As Rashaz puts it elsewhere, “this *šimšum* is not according to its literal meaning, that the light departed ... rather the meaning is that this withdrawal is from revelation to be in a manner of concealment.”⁵² Notably, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Połonne (1710-1784) wrote that he heard from his master, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, that “the secret of *šimšum* is that it is from Himself, of Himself,”⁵³ i.e. the withdrawal is itself a form of divine presence.⁵⁴ Rashaz emphasizes that the infinite light of G-d immanently inheres within the material world even as it transcends all cosmic circumscriptions, and that the embodied Jewish soul intimately unites with this immanent transcendence through Torah study and *mišvah* observance.⁵⁵

This rejection of a “literal” understanding of *šimšum* as the withdrawal of G-d from the space within which the cosmos is emanated is linked to two controversies that are distinct but related:

1) An interpretive debate among academic scholars as to whether Rashaz understood *šimšum* as a real cosmological event, and indeed whether he understood the cosmos itself to be real. Below—in Chapter 1—the relevant literature will be reviewed, and the ontological significance of *šimšum* and the question of acosmism in early Habad thought will be thoroughly investigated.

2) A theological debate between Rashaz and early Hasidism’s most authoritative critic, Rabbi Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna (“Gra,” 1720-1797). This debate is certainly significant in its own right, but it also demonstrates that questions about the meaning of *šimšum* have been intrinsically bound up with Habad’s emergence and development from the very outset. Gershom Scholem famously accepted Martin Buber’s characterization of Hasidism as “Kabbalah become ethos.”⁵⁶ *Šimšum* can accordingly provide the Kabbalistic key through which to understand the ideological roots of Gra’s opposition to the new ethos of the emergent Hasidic movement. By taking a closer look at this debate, and the way that Rashaz defended his own position, we can better understand the centrality of *šimšum* and its meaning in Habad thought more broadly.

⁵¹ T1:48, 67b.

⁵² Rashaz, *LT vayikra*, 52c:

צמצום זה אינו כפשוטו שנסתלק האור ... אלא הפי' שהסתלקות זו הוא היינו מבחי' הגילוי להיות בבחי' ההעלם

⁵³ *Sefer toldot ya'akov yosef* (Kores, 1780), 48b:

סוד הצמצום שהוא מני' ובי'

⁵⁴ For this reading of the Baal Shem Tov’s teaching see Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 16.

⁵⁵ T1:46-9, esp 66a, 69a, and 70a.

⁵⁶ Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, edited and translated by Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 253-4; Scholem, *Trends*, 342,

Part 3 - Hasidim, Mitnagdim, and *Şimşum*'s Centrality in Habad's Institutional Constitution

On the day preceding Passover, Jews customarily consign any leftover bread to the flames in keeping with the Biblical commandment to “clear away all leaven from your houses” (Exodus 12:15).⁵⁷ In the year 1796, in Vilna, it wasn't only leftover leaven that was ignited. A letter signed by several leading members of the city's rabbinic elite attests that by the command of Gra, the book *Şava'at harivash* was burned “in the midst of a large crowd and congregation, prior to the burning of the leaven.”⁵⁸

This was not the first instance of opponents (“Mitnagdim”) of the nascent Hasidic movement burning such literature in public, but it is the most well documented.⁵⁹ As we shall see, this documentation also offers some important glimpses into the ideological elements at play in the controversy surrounding Hasidism during this period.

No less a personage than Mikhail Kutuzov—then the governor general of Lithuania, and later the commander of the Imperial Russian Army during the war of 1812—confirmed that *Şava'at harivash* was burned publicly by order of Gra.⁶⁰ One of the bitterest opponents of Hasidism, Avigdor ben Hayim, later attested that it was he who persuaded Gra that Hasidic books include “things that have ideologically departed from the good way, and according to our law they should be burned in public. They executed this in Vilna, and commanded the public burning of the books of this cult in front of the synagogue.”⁶¹ This attestation appears in an extensive denunciation of Hasidism

⁵⁷ See *Tur* and *Shlukhan arukh, Oraḥ ḥayim*, 445.

⁵⁸ Mordecai Wilensky, *Hasidim umitnagedim: letoldot hapulmut shebeineihem beshanim 5532-5575, I* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990), 182. Wilensky notes that the letter, which dates from the spring of 1796, implies that this occurred recently, likely in the same year. Also see the discussion in Yehoshua Mondshine, *Kerem ḥabad IV* (1992): 204, where it is suggested that *Şava'at harivash* may have been burned in Vilna at an earlier date.

⁵⁹ For a wider discussion of book burning and opposition to early Hasidism, see Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, inc. with Yeshiva University Press, 1977), 126-140. This account should, however, be treated with some caution as the translation of primary sources is sometimes inaccurate. The term “Mitnagdim” was discussed by Ada Rapoport-Albert, in a lecture titled: “From 'Mitnaged' to 'Litvak': On the Dynamics of a Polemical Tag” posted online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcBp8o7N_pk (accessed April 27, 2021).

⁶⁰ For a Hebrew translation of Kutuzov's report see Wilensky, *Hasidim umitnagedim*, 264-8.

⁶¹ Wilensky, *Hasidim umitnagedim*, 252.

[שבספרים כלולים] דברים ההוגים תם מן הדרך הטובה ועל פי דין שלנו יש לשרוף אותם בפומבי. הם ביצעו את הדבר הזה בוויילנא וציוו לשרוף בפומבי לפני בנין בית הכנסת את ספרי הכת הזאת.

See footnote 27 for Wilensky's deduction that this refers to *Şava'at harivash* in particular. Back in 1785, Avigdor had leased the office of the rabbinate of Pinsk following the ouster of the incumbent, a Hasidic leader whose name has since become indelibly linked to the town he subsequently moved to: Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. According to his own account, Avigdor waged a protracted battle against Hasidic loyalists in the region, which ultimately led them to retaliate, ousting him from the rabbinate and denying him financial compensation. See Wilensky, *Hasidim umitnagedim*, 230; Mordekhai Nadav, “R. avigdor ben ḥayim umilḥamto beḥasidut bepinsk ubelita,” *Zion* 36, 2-3 (1971): 200-219. For additional details see

submitted in 1800 to Paul I, Emperor of Russia, which led directly to the second arrest of Rashaz. By this point Rashaz had emerged as the foremost Hasidic leader in the Russian Empire, and also as Hasidism's most eloquent exponent and defender in the face of ideological critique.⁶²

Another contemporaneous reference to the burning of *Şava 'at harivash* appears in a letter addressed by Rashaz to Vilna's Hasidic community concerning "the debate with those who oppose us" (הריכוח עם שכנגדינו).⁶³ In two manuscript copies this letter is dated to the Hebrew year 5557, which began in the autumn of 1796.⁶⁴ Rashaz begins the letter by recounting his unsuccessful attempt, many years earlier, to meet with Gra "to debate with him and put an end to his complaints against us" (להתווכח עמו ולהסיר תלונותיו מעלינו).⁶⁵ Addressing the latter's censure of the Hasidim, "especially regarding faith" (בפרט בענין (האמונה), Rashaz writes:

According to what is heard in our province, by way of his disciples, this is the perception of the Gaon and Hasid [Gra] regarding the book *Likutei amarim*⁶⁶ and

Yehoshua Mondshine, *Hamasar harishon* (Jerusalem: Knizhniki Publishing House, 2012), according to the index.

⁶² For the most comprehensive account of Rashaz's emergence as the leader of Habad, and of his response to anti-Hasidic incitement see Etkes, *Ba'al hatanya*, especially chapters 1, 6, 7 and 8.

⁶³ Rashaz, *Igerot kodesh*, ed. Shalom Dovber Levine et. al. (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2012), 181-7. Following the publication of this letter by Wilensky (*Hasidim umitnagedim*, 196-203), Avraham Rubinstein argued that Wilensky should have first attempted to ascertain its authenticity before publishing it, and further claimed that since some letters attributed to Rashaz have been shown to be forgeries such an endeavor would ultimately be impossible (Avraham Rubinstein, review of Wilensky, *Hasidim umitnagedim*, in *Kiryat sefer* 47 (1972): 367). Rubinstein's suspicions—which he justified only on the basis of an assumption of guilt by association, rather than on any substantive analysis—can be discounted given that 1) some very early manuscript copies of this letter are extant, 2) its literary style and form is representative of the distinctive style and form found in other letters of this sort by Rashaz, some of which survive in autograph copies, and 3) many of its details are corroborated by other sources. Immanuel Etkes, Rashaz's biographer (as cited in the previous note), relies heavily on this letter and does not even consider the possibility that it may be a forgery. For further discussion see the editors' notes, Rashaz, IG, 181.

⁶⁴ For a full account of the various versions of this letter, both in print and in manuscript, and an overview of scholarly discussions as to when it is most likely to have been written, see the editors' notes, *ibid.*, 181. In my view it was likely written before Rashaz saw R. Eliyahu of Vilna's letter dated the 11th of Tishrei 5557 (which will be discussed below), as Rashaz states that his understanding of R. Eliyahu's position is based on "what is heard in our province, by way of his disciples" (as cited below, note 66) rather than on R. Eliyahu's own words. Thus Rashaz does not respond to Gra's written critique of the Hasidic doctrine of divine immanence in the world, but rather anticipates it. Given the time it would take for letters to be disseminated during this period it could nevertheless have been penned after Gra's letter, early in 5557. One way or another, these two letters are clearly in dialogue.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶⁶ Wilensky (*Hasidim umitnagedim*, 200, notes 30 and 31) takes this to refer to Rashaz's own work, *Likutei amarim tanya*. Given that this work had already been circulating for some years in manuscript form, and Gra does seem to refer to it in a contemporaneous letter that will be discussed below, I am inclined to agree with Wilensky. Levine and his co-editors (Rashaz, IG, 184) take this to refer to the Kores, 1781 publication bearing the title *Magid devarav leyakov - likutei amarim*, which is an edited compilation culled from a body of early Hasidic manuscript texts that originated as oral teachings heard from the early Hasidic master Rabbi DovBer of Mezritch. See the relevant discussion of this publication and its context in Ariel Mayse, *Speaking Infinities: G-d and Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritsh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 238-244. Given that this letter was written some fifteen years after

those like it, wherein is explicated the meaning of “[He] fills all worlds” (*Tikunei zohar* 5a) and “there is no place empty of Him” (*ibid.*, 91b) in their most literal sense. And in the eyes of his honor this is utter heresy to say that He, blessed be He, is found literally below in abject things and in the very lowest realms. And, per the letter of your excellencies about this, it was due to this that the known book was burned. And as to the interpretation of the aforementioned aphorisms, they have an esoteric and transcendent path, and “all the earth is filled with his glory” (Isaiah 6:3) refers to [divine] superintendence.⁶⁷

לפי הנשמע במדינותינו מתלמידיו אשר זאת היא תפיסת הגאון החסיד על ספר ליקוטי אמרים ודומיו אשר מפורש בהם פי' ממלא כל עלמין ולית אתר פנוי מינייה כפשוטו ממש. ובעיני כבודו היא אפיקורסות גמורה לאמר שהוא ית' נמצא ממש בדברים שפלים ותחתונים ממש. ולפי מכתב מעלתם על זה נשרף ספר הידוע. ובפירוש מאמרים הנזכרים יש להם דרך נסתרה ונפלאה ומלא כל הארץ כבודו היינו השגחה וכו'.

In this passage Rashaz explicitly associates the burning of *Šava'at harivash* with a fundamental theological disagreement that he understood to underpin Gra's objection to the Hasidic movement and its teachings. While early Hasidic books emphasized and embraced the principle that G-d is “literally” immanent within everything, Gra regarded such a view as “utter heresy.” Rashaz also notes that in rejecting a literal reading of authoritative passages that describe G-d as “filling” the earth, Gra insists that it is only the superintendence (*hashgahah*) of G-d that is immanent within the world. This latter point will be shown to be quite significant once this letter is read in the context of other relevant texts—by both Rashaz and Gra—that address intersecting questions of divine immanence, transcendence, and superintendence. These discussions will also be seen to turn on the crucial question of how to interpret *šimšum*. Before turning to these broader discussions, however, it is important to take note of a roughly contemporaneous letter penned by Gra, which explicates his particular disaffection with the immanentist teachings of Hasidism.

Dated the 11th of Tishrei—which is immediately subsequent to Yom Kippur, the most sacred day on the Jewish calendar—in the year 5557 (1796), this epistle reiterates and reaffirms Gra's opposition to Hasidism, and his call “to avenge the vengeance of the

this work appeared, it seems unlikely that Rashaz would single out this particular publication. By contrast, *Likutei amarim tanya* was being prepared for publication at exactly this time, and is likely to have been at the forefront of his mind. We should further note the internal tradition that Rashaz decided to publish an authorized and stable version of this work in order to prevent unscrupulous copyists from deliberately tampering with its contents in order to besmirch him and represent Hasidism as heresy. See Yehoshua Mondshine, “Sefer ha'tanya' shehidfis admu'r hazaken,” n9, published on *Shturem.net* from *Kfar ĥabad*, #1213 and #1214, <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?section=blog_new&article_id=103&lang=hebrew> (accessed April 2nd, 2021).

⁶⁷ Rashaz, IG, 184-5.

Torah whose glory these transgressors have felled to the ground” (לנקם נקמת תורת ה' אשר)⁶⁸ (אלה הפריצים הורידו לארץ תפארתה). This text is written in a highly illusive rabbinic style and generally does more to castigate the Hasidim than explain why they are to be castigated,⁶⁹ but one key passage coherently formulates the ideological root of its author’s antagonism:

Words towards the supernal they utter, “these are your G-ds, Israel” (Exodus 32:4), of every stick and every stone, and they interpret facets of Torah contrary to the law vis a vis the verse “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place” (Ezekiel 3:12), and vis a vis the verse “and you vitalize them all” (Nehemiah 9:6). Woe unto the evil leaders among them who have fabricated a new law and a new Torah from their hearts ... and the name of heaven is profaned by their hand ...⁷⁰

מילין לצד עלאה ימללו: אלה אלהיך ישראל, כל עץ וכל אבן, ומגלים פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה בפסוק: ברוך כבוד ה' ממקומו, ובפסוק: ואתה מחיה את כולם. הוי על הרועים הרעים שבהם שבדו מלבם משפט חדש ואולפין חדת ... ושם שמים מתחלל על ידיהם

Mordekhai Wilensky, who published a critical edition of this letter together with other documents related to these polemics, has already taken note of passages in *Šava'at harivash* and other early Hasidic texts that R. Eliyahu may be referencing in this passage. But even without getting too caught up in all the finer points of these illusions, the central point is clear: In declaring G-d to be immanent within inanimate sticks and stones the Hasidim have stepped over the line that separates the faithful Jew from the pagan. Borrowing the phrase “these are your G-ds, Israel” from the biblical episode of the golden

⁶⁸ Wilensky, *Hasidim umitnagedim*, 187-190. For a close interpretive reading of this letter see Zvi Einfeld, *Torat hagra umishnat haḥasidut* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2010), 183-197. See Mondshine, *Kerem ḥabad* IV, 207-9, for an argument that this letter was written on Gra’s behalf, and that his signature may even have been forged. It is clear from related documents discussed by both Wilensky and Mondshine that such claims were already made when this letter was first circulated, and of course claims of forgery are endemic to polemical material of this sort. But by that very token such claims are themselves to be regarded with suspicion. Following the approach indicated by Uriel Gellman, “Mitnagedim,” in *Studying Hasidism: Sources, Methods, Perspectives*, ed. Marcin Wodzinski (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 84, it is important to read texts of this sort “in comparison to other sources covering the same events.” When we do so, the passage excerpted here is seen to accurately reflect the way in which Gra’s position was understood by Rashaz. As I will further argue below, Rashaz’s perception of Gra’s theological position is also reflected in relevant non-polemical texts penned by the latter. Accordingly, while I don’t deem Mondshine’s arguments to be entirely misplaced, I do not grant them sufficient weight to displace the value of this text as an authoritative expression of Gra’s ideological critique of Hasidic doctrine.

⁶⁹ On the methodological problems arising from the “ambiguous argumentative style” that typified anti-Hasidic writing see Gellman, *ibid.* An example of this sort of elusive illusion in Gra’s letter is the accusation that the Hasidim regard masturbation as “precious in the eyes of G-d” (יִקָּרֵר בְּעֵינֵי הַשֵּׁם), see Wilensky, *ibid.*, 188, notes 15-17. See, however, Einfeld, *Torat*, 185 and 189-90, who offers a more nuanced interpretation of the illusion as referencing the Hasidic teaching that sin and impurity can be transformed through appropriate penance and return to G-d, thereby becoming “precious” which relates to the Lurianic concept of refining the divine sparks.

⁷⁰ Wilensky, *ibid.*, 188-9.

calf, Gra rhetorically equated the heresy of Hasidism with the archetypal example of flagrant mass idolatry. Another letter by Rashaz, addressing his Hasidim in Vilna in connection to the same debates, deals directly with a particular passage in *Ṣava'at harivash* wherein the *shekhinah* is said to be immanently vested in the speech of a non-Jew who disturbs a Jew during prayer. Rashaz defends the central claim with the caveat that such a scenario is one of divine exile.⁷¹

As Wilensky points out, some of the references in Gra's letter may actually be to Rashaz's own book, *Likutei amarim tanya*, which had already been circulating in manuscript form for several years,⁷² and which was being prepared to be published in print at exactly this time.⁷³ Moreover, it seems that Rashaz's general unwillingness to enter into fruitless debates with his opponents—as expressed in several letters (including the one excerpted above) and described by Immanuel Etkes⁷⁴—led him to self-censor a direct philosophical attack on Gra's theological position. This attack appears in extant manuscripts of *Tanya* that were circulated prior to its publication in 1797, but it did not appear in print till 1900.⁷⁵

The relevant passage appears in *Sha'ar hayihud veva'emunah* (also titled *Likutei amarim tanya helek sheini* and *Hinukh katan*), which offers a systematic account of the oneness (*aḥduto*) and singularity (*yihudo*) of G-d. For Rashaz the *shema*'s declaration that “G-d is

⁷¹ Rashaz, IG, 149-157. This letter was appended to *Tanya*, beginning with the Shklov 1814 edition. In the standard edition it appears as T4:25, 138a-142a.

⁷² See Wilensky, *ibid.*, n20-2. In the case of the verse “Blessed be the glory etc.” (Ezekiel 3:12), Wilensky suggests that this might refer to T1:42, where Rashaz exhorts his readers to spend time contemplating the literal immanence of G-d in the heavens above and in the earth below. This verse, however, is not cited there explicitly. It is more likely that the reference is to T1:49, where it is explained that the angels exclaim “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place” because “they do not know and apprehend His place” (אין יודעים ומשיגים מקומו), being that the Holy One, blessed be He, “is not vested within them” (אינו מתלבש בהן). “Rather, ‘the entire *earth* is filled with his glory,’ which refers to the collective [soul] of Israel above, and the people of Israel below” (אלא מלא כל הארץ כבודו היא כנסת ישראל למעלה וישראל למטה). This is precisely the sort of counter-hierarchal doctrine that would have been most likely to incite the wrath of Gra. Rashaz does not simply proclaim G-d to be immanent within the world below; he further declares that G-d cannot be known or apprehended by the heavenly angels but only by the souls of the Jewish people even as they inhabit earthly bodies. We should also note that a related liturgical formulation, “Blessed be the name of his glorious sovereignty for eternity” (ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד), appears in a brief preface to T2:1, and is returned to in T2:7, where Rashaz elucidates the Zohar's statement that this verse refers to “the Lower Unity” as expressing G-d's immanent union with the created cosmos. We should further note that while *Tanya* was already circulating in manuscript, and particular passages therein may have been brought to Gra's attention, there is no evidence that he ever took the opportunity to properly familiarize himself with its contents.

⁷³ On the dissemination of *Tanya* in manuscript form and its subsequent publication, see Shalom DovBer Levine, *Toldot ḥabad berusyah ḥasarit* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2010), 59-64.

⁷⁴ Etkes, *Ba'al hatanya*, 235-6 and 245-7.

⁷⁵ See Yehoshua Mondshine, *Likutei amarim hu sefer hatanya mehadoratav, targumav ubi'urav* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1981), 15. Also see, Teitelbaum, *Harav II*, 62, who notes that manuscript copies of this omitted section were in wide circulation among Habad Hasidim at the beginning of the 20th century, and also suggests that Rashaz may have omitted it “out of fear of the wrath of the Mitnagdim (מיראת חמת המתנגדים).” For the preprint manuscript version of *Tanya* see *Likutei amarim mehadura kama*, ed. Nachman Shapiro and Yaakov Yehudah Leib Altein (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1982).

One” (Deuteronomy 6:4) means that G-d is the one and only entity that truly exists, an important implication being that G-d must be immanent within—and one with—the created world. In this context, Rashaz invokes Maimonides’ statement that “G-d is the knower, G-d is that which is known, and G-d is the knowledge itself,” explaining that all instances of divine knowledge are instances of self-knowledge, the known object being nothing more and nothing less than a facet of the indivisible and singular subject. G-d’s knowledge of the world, accordingly, is self-knowledge.⁷⁶ As will be further discussed below (Chapter 1, Part 2) Rashaz applies this principle to construe *šimšum* and creation as the medium of divine union with the world rather than of partition from the world. Importantly, Maimonides’ statement also provides the basis—and the segue—for a polemic against a “literal” interpretation of *šimšum* that results in a denial of G-d’s immanence within the created world. The key passage reads as follows:

From this we can understand the error of certain sages in their own eyes, may G-d atone for them, who erred and were mistaken in their study of Lurianic writings and understood the doctrine of *šimšum*, which is mentioned there, literally; that the Holy One, blessed be He, removed Himself and His being—heaven forbid—from this world, and only superintends from above with exacting superintendence over all and each of the creations that are in the heavens above and on the earth below.

Now, apart from it being altogether impossible to render the phenomenon of *šimšum* in its literal sense—which [thus construed] is a corporeal occurrence—in reference to the Holy One, blessed be He, Who is set apart from such occurrences by infinite myriads of separations, they moreover did not speak wisely, since they are believers, the sons of believers, that the Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the created beings in this lower world and exercises superintendence over them, and perforce, His knowledge of them does not add plurality and innovation to Him, for He knows all by knowing Himself. Thus, as it were, His being and essence and His knowledge [of all created beings] are all one. And this is what is stated in *Tikunim* ... “There is no place empty of Him, neither in the upper worlds nor in the lower worlds.”⁷⁷

מכאן יש להבין שגגת מקצת חכמים בעיניהם ה' יכפר בעדם ששגו וטעו בעיונם בכתבי האריז"ל והבינו ענין הצמצום המוזכר שם כפשוטו שהקב"ה סילק עצמו ומהותו ח"ו מעוה"ז רק שמשגיח מלמעלה בהשגחה פרטית על כל היצורים כולם אשר בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת

⁷⁶ Rashaz, T2:7, 81b-83a.

⁷⁷ Rashaz, T2:7, 83a-b.

והנה מלבד שא"א כלל לומר ענין הצמצום כפשוטו שהוא ממקרי הגוף על הקב"ה הנבדל מהם ריבוא רבבות
הבדלות עד אין קץ אף גם זאת לא בדעת ידברו מאחר שהם מאמינים בני מאמינים שהקב"ה יודע כל היצורים
שבעוה"ז השפל ומשגיח עליהם וע"כ אין ידיעתו אותם מוסיפה בו ריבוי וחידוש מפני שיודע הכל בידיעת
עצמו הרי כביכול מהותו ועצמותו ודעתו הכל א' וז"ש בתקונים ... דלית אתר פנוי מיניה לא בעילאין ולא
בתתאין

The "literal" interpretation of the Lurianic account of *šimšum* had previously been defended by the Italian kabbalist Rabbi Immanuel Ḥai Ricci (1688-1743). In his work *Yosher levav* (Amsterdam, 1737) he noted the problem of corporeality pointed to by Rashaz (which had already been raised by other kabbalists), and responds by emphatically eschewing the possibility of subjecting the meaning of *šimšum* to any sort of philosophical analysis. Rather, he concluded:

It is better settled in my heart that this is [to be taken] in accord with its literal sense, and that it is His superintendence that fills the place of the *šimšum* with immense particularity, and this is the meaning of what is written in the *Tikunim* that "there is no place empty of Him ...", rather than to say that is not literal, and thereby decrease His exalted glory in saying that His self is found among us, even in places that don't befit Him ... For it is not as disrespectful to say that the King superintends a filthy thing through his window as it is disrespectful to say, heaven forfend, that the King Himself is therein ...⁷⁸

מתישב יותר על לבי לומר שהוא כפשוטו ושהשגחתו היא הממלאת מקום הצמצום בדקדוק עצם וזהו מה
שאמרו בתקונים לית אתר פנוי מיניה ... משנאמר שאינו כפשוטו ונמעט בכבודו יתעלה באמרנו שעצמותו
נמצא בינינו אף במקומות הבלתי ראויים לו ... שאינו העדר כבוד שנאמר שהמלך משגיח מחלוננו דבר לכלוך
כמו שהוא העדר כבוד שנאמר ח"ו שהמלך עצמו בתוכו

⁷⁸ Rabbi Immanuel Ḥai Ricci, *Yosher levav*, 8a (1:1:13). For discussion of the wider historical and intellectual context of this passage see Roland Goetschel, "L'interpretation du Simsum dans le Yoser Lebab d'Emmanuel Hay Ricchi," in *Dutch Jewish History: Proceedings of the Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands, November 28-December 3, 1982, Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem*, ed. Jozeph Michman and Tirtsah Levie (Jerusalem: Tel-Aviv University, 1984), 87-110; Schulte, *Zimzum*, 212-234; Moshe Idel, "Conceptualizations of Tzimtzum in Baroque Italian Kabbalah," in *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience*, ed. Michael Zank and Ingrid Anderson (Leden: Brill, 2015), 28-54; Garb, *A History*, 108-9. The parable of a king looking at something filthy, rather than actually encountering that filthy thing directly, may be strikingly contrasted with two passages by Rashaz, one in which a sinner is likened to "one who grasps the head of the king and drags it down below, burying his face in a lavatory filled with excrement" (T1:24, 31a: האוחז בראשו של מלך ומורידו למטה וטומן פניו בתוך בית הכסא מלא (צואה), and a second where G-d's embrace of the Jewish people is likened to "a great and splendid king [who] shows his great and intense love to an ordinary and abject man ... a derelict laying in the dunghheap, and descends to him from his place of glory and helps him up and raises him from his dunghheap ... and secludes himself with him with true oneness and intimacy" (T1:46, 65a: מלך גדול ורב מראה אהבתו הגדולה והעצומה לאיש הדיוט ונבזה ... מנוול המוטל באשפה ויורד אליו ממקו' כבודו ... ומקימו ומרימו מאשפתו ... ומתייחד עמו שם (ביחוד וקירוב אמיתי). The latter excerpt is from an extensive discussion that explicitly engages the significance of *šimšum* and its non literal interpretation.

As Roland Goetschel has pointed out, in addition to defending the literal interpretation of *šimšum*, *Yosher levav* also promotes a “speculative shyness” according to which contemplating the oneness of G-d and attempting to probe its nature philosophically is forbidden.⁷⁹ By contrast, the larger argument of *Sha’ar hayiḥud veba’emunah* is that understanding and contemplating G-d’s oneness is the very foundation of spiritual inspiration and religious praxis.⁸⁰ It is in that context that Rashaz invokes Maimonides’ concept of divine knowledge and deploys it as the foundation of his rebuttal of the literal interpretation of *šimšum*.

Rabbi Immanuel was undoubtedly one of the “sages in their own eyes” indicated by Rashaz as targets of his critique. The plural formulation indicates that he had at least one more individual in mind, and the circumstances (especially the self-censorship mentioned above) support the consensus that this individual is the Gaon of Vilna.⁸¹ It is significant that the statement of the *Tikunim*, “there is no place empty of Him etc” appears not only in the passages from *Tanya* and *Yosher levav*, but also in Rashaz’s epistolary characterization of Gra’s position cited above. Mention of superintendence (*hashgaha*) occurs in all three sources as well.

What of Gra’s own writings on this topic? Is there any indication that he followed Rabbi Immanuel Ḥai Ricci’s interpretation of the theological significance of *šimšum*?

As Raphael Shuchat has noted, Gra’s writings are almost always commentaries to canonical works; a rare exception is his *Hakdamah lesod hašimšum* which is a commentary to a section of Rabbi Immanuel’s work *Mishnat ḥasidim*.⁸² It is not insignificant that Rabbi Immanuel himself cast the relationship between *Yosher levav* and the earlier *Mishnat ḥasidim* as like a soul to the body.⁸³ At the very outset of this commentary, Gra echoes the two claims that are made in *Yosher levav* to uphold the conclusion that G-d is not “among us ... in places that do not befit Him”: 1) Ultimately *šimšum* is an inscrutable mystery and therefore is not to be interpreted based on philosophical arguments. 2) G-d’s relationship with the cosmos is not one of presence, but of superintendence. In Gra’s own words:

⁷⁹ Roland Goetschel, *ibid.*, 91-2, and 96-8; Ḥai Ricci, *Yosher levav*, 6a-b (1:1:3). Considering Rashaz’s explicit invocation of Maimonides, it is interesting that Goetschel associates Rabbi Immanuel’s stance with the apophatic theology of Maimonides, though the latter is not cited in *Yosher levav*

⁸⁰ T2, Introduction, 76a-b. See Eli Rubin, “Questions of Love and Truth: New Perspectives on the Controversy between R. Avraham of Kalisk and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady,” *Shofar* 38:3 (Winter 2020): 242-286, esp. 266-268.

⁸¹ Teitelbaum, *Harav II*, 62. Etkes, *Baal hatanya*, 192, n. 223.

⁸² Raphael Shuchat, “Pirush hagr”a mivilna lemishnat ḥasidim: mashal venimshal bekitvei ha’ar”i,” *Kabbalah* 3 (1998): 365-30.

⁸³ *Yosher levav*, 2a; Goetschel, *ibid.*, 90.

Know that one should not think at all about the Infinite, blessed be He ... That which we say of Him and of *sefirot*, all refers to His will and His superintendence, which are known via their effects. And this is the rule for all the paths of Kabbalah. And it is known that just as He is without limit, so is true of His will ... and even of this it is utterly forbidden to think about, only that it is known that the worlds are finite and all are numerable, and therefore He contracted His will in creating the worlds, and this is the *šimšum*. And the line (*kav*) is His very minute superintendence ...⁸⁴

דע כי א"ס ב"ה אין לחשוב בו כלל וכלל ... מה שאנו מדברים בו ובספירות הכל מרצונו והשגחתו שידוע מצד פעולותיו. וזה הכלל לכל דרכי הקבלה. וידוע כשם שהוא בב"ת כן רצונו. ואף בזה אסור לחשוב כלל רק ידוע שהעולמות הן בעלי תכלית והכל במספר וע"כ צמצם רצונו בבריאת העולמות וזהו הצמצום. והקו הוא השגחתו במעט מן המעט ...

Allan Nadler read this passage exclusively as an epistemological explication of *šimšum*, which has no bearing on the theological and cosmological question of whether or not G-d is present in the world.⁸⁵ Yet Nadler's argument that Gra "did not elucidate a strict G-d-cosmos dualism based on a literal understanding of *zimzum*" can only be sustained because he ignored Gra's comment about divine superintendence—which is certainly theological and cosmological in nature—and because he ignored the wider discourse on *šimšum* in which this passage must be situated. He makes no mention of the fact that this passage is a direct commentary to a text by Rabbi Immanuel, the most explicit defender of the literal interpretation of *šimšum*. Nadler's position stands in contrast with Alan Brill's earlier conclusion that "Gra actually affirms a clear doctrine of duality ... Below the level of *'azilut*, there is only G-d's manifestations on earth by means of providence."⁸⁶ Closely following the argument charted in *Yosher levav*, the above passage by Gra first emphasizes that one is forbidden to think about these doctrines, and continues to insist that the relationship that G-d extends into the created realms must be understood exclusively in terms of superintendence. Even divine will, he later clarifies, is "withdrawn completely" (סילק מכל) in the act of *šimšum*.⁸⁷ This indicates that Gra accepted Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricci's "literal" interpretation of *šimšum*—though he doesn't use that

⁸⁴ This text was first published as an appendix to *Sifra dešniuta* (Vilna: Romm Press, 1882), 38b-39b [75-77] and is also extant in several manuscript copies. See Shuchat, *ibid.*, 281-302. For a discussion and dismissal of concerns raised about the attribution of this text to Gra see *ibid.*, 266-269, and 289.

⁸⁵ Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 17-18.

⁸⁶ Alan Brill, "The Mystical Path of the Vilna Gaon." *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993): 133.

⁸⁷ Gra, *Sifra dešniuta*, 38b.

particular term. Rashaz, in his letter to the Hasidim in Vilna, was thus accurate in characterizing Gra as rejecting the belief that G-d “is found literally below in abject things” and insisting that it is only divine “superintendence” that “fills” the cosmos. It is also possible that Rashaz’s characterization of Gra’s interpretive path as “esoteric and transcendent” refers to the latter’s strident claim that these doctrines are ultimately inscrutable.

Shuchat notes that the conclusion that Gra upheld the “literal” interpretation of *šimšum* is somewhat complicated when we consider the many instances wherein Gra is characterized by his students as insisting that the Lurianic doctrines are to be understood as parables. By this he apparently did not mean that they should be interpreted metaphorically rather than ontologically, but that their true ontological meaning is essentially esoteric and indiscernible. Ostensibly, this notion of Lurianic doctrine as “parable” stands at odds with the notion that *šimšum* should be understood “literally.”⁸⁸ I would argue that this complication is really a misnomer; it is quite possible to take *šimšum* to entail G-d’s “literal” absence from the created worlds, while also insisting that the geometric, visual and spatial terminology used to describe *šimšum* are parabolic symbols borrowed from our own corporeal realm to sketch an ontological doctrine that could not otherwise be discussed.⁸⁹

Shuchat resolves this complication with the suggestion that Gra regarded Lurianic doctrines as parables that are fundamentally mysterious but can nevertheless be interpreted to a limited degree. For example—in line with his understanding that *šimšum* restricts G-d’s relationship with the cosmos to superintendence—he interpreted the Lurianic idiom “spheres and linearity” (*iguilim veyosher*) as referring to general and specific modes of superintendence.⁹⁰

Be this as it may, Gra’s insistence that these doctrines are ultimately inscrutable actually squares very well with his insistence that we should not allow ourselves to “think” about G-d, nor about *šimšum*, but must simply accept that there is an utterly unbridgeable divide between the created cosmos and divine infinitude. For Gra, these parables are not keys through which ordinary human beings can understand or grasp G-d’s infinite self; they are rather enigmas that even the greatest prophets could only partially decipher, much less

⁸⁸ Shuchat, *ibid.*, 267-270.

⁸⁹ For a similar interpretation see Brill, “Mystical Path,” 134: “To the Gra, Lurianic Kabbalah is real, emanation did happen, yet the metaphors used in describing emanation are non-literal because of our finite minds. The limitation of *zimzum* is an ontological fact of His filtered confined presence in the world.”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 271-275.

the spiritually impoverished Jews of later generations.⁹¹ Indeed, the passage excerpted above can be read as a statement that this gap between the infinite and the finite—cosmologically unbridgeable and epistemologically inscrutable—is the very definition of *šimšum*: The *šimšum* is not simply instantiated in the cosmological contraction that withdraws divine infinitude from the finite worlds, but also in the impossibility of thinking about the infinite being and will of G-d at all, or—by extension—about *šimšum* itself. From this perspective, ontological and epistemological questions are seen to be fundamentally intertwined.

It is noteworthy that Rashaz similarly warned that the Lurianic doctrines could prove impenetrable to the uninitiated and lead them to conclusions that were ideologically problematic.⁹² As we have seen, he regarded *šimšum* as a prime example of this. But, rather than insisting on the inscrutability of the Lurianic depictions of *šimšum*, he stated that “we must understand all of this with proper elucidation, with expansive explanation, and with abstraction from corporeality” (צ”ל כל זה באר היטב בהרחבת הביאור ובהתפשטות) (הגשמיות).⁹³ In my view, this debate concerning epistemological possibility is a significant subsidiary of the debate concerning *šimšum*:

As discussed by Yosef Avivi, the Gra opined that the cognitive faculties of the divine soul remain inaccessible to the embodied human intellect.⁹⁴ This stands in direct contrast to the view of Rashaz who insists that even the soul of the least spiritually developed Jew “remains bound and united in wonderful and intense singularity with its primordial being and essence, which is the elicitation of supernal wisdom” (עודינה קשורות ומיוחדות ביחוד נפלא) (ועצום במהותן ועצמותן הראשון שהיא המשכת חכמה עילאה),⁹⁵ and that the function of the Torah scholars in each generation is to “draw knowledge (*beḥinat hada’at*) to the Jewish collective, to know G-d, each one according to the grasp of their soul and its supernal root” (ממשיך בחי' הדעת לכללות ישראל לידע את ה' כל אחד כפי השגתו ושרשה למעלה).⁹⁶ On this score, the epistemological capacity to perceive and understand divine transcendence is mediated via the psychological bond of the soul, which overcomes the apparent

⁹¹ Gra, *Sifra dešniuta*, 37d-38a [74-5], partially excerpted in Shuchat, *ibid.*, 269-270.

⁹² Rashaz, *MAHZ inyanim II*, 484.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, these comments appear at the outset of a discourse that explicitly sets out to explain the meaning of *šimšum* as described in *Eš ḥayim*.

⁹⁴ Yosef Avivi, *Kabalat haqr”a* (Jerusalem: Machon Kerem Eliyahu, 1993) 41-48. Avivi frames this as one of the issues on which Gra explicitly diverged from Lurianic doctrine, and relates this to the claim made by Rashaz that Gra did not accept all of the Lurianic teachings as authoritative (*ibid.*, 30-1). Also see Garb, *A History*, 130-2.

⁹⁵ Rashaz, T1:2, 6b.

⁹⁶ Rashaz, T1:42, 59a.

bifurcation of G-d from the created world.⁹⁷ Significantly, Rashaz anchors this in the very same Maimonidean dictum about the nature of divine knowledge upon which his argument against the literal interpretation of *šimšum* pivots, an argument that we will come back to soon.⁹⁸ As Jonathan Garb has remarked, Rashaz’s “psychological theory” aligns with “the general ontological system of Habad” in that “disclosure of G-d to the divine soul, without any concealment ... is in fact G-d’s own self-revelation through his wisdom and will.”⁹⁹

This brings us to a further reflection of the influence of Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricci on Gra, noted elsewhere by Garb, who links the dispute as to whether *šimšum* entails a literal “constriction of the divine presence” to the question of whether the divine light extends into the feminine aspect, *malkhut* or *shekhinah*, which is generally associated with *šimšum*.¹⁰⁰ Focusing on Gra’s commentary to the Zoharic treatise *Sifra dešniuta*, Garb writes that “R. Eliyahu shared in Hai Ricci’s marginalization of the lower feminine aspect.” This point, he continues, is “crucial for appreciating R. Eliyahu’s polemic against Hasidism” because it “is part of a wider reticence toward immanence, as in his insistence that the divine soul is hidden and removed from human perception ... just as for him, divine providence ..., rather than divine presence can be found in the world.”¹⁰¹ Garb’s analysis neatly complements my own, succinctly demonstrating that Gra followed Rabbi Immanuel in combining a literal interpretation of *šimšum* with a commitment to 1) divine

⁹⁷ Also see Nadler, *Faith*, 19, for the related point that Gra’s “firm resolution that man not try to arrive at a full comprehension of the infinitude and pervasive presence of G-d stands in diametrical opposition to the Hasidic insistence, most pronounced in the Habad doctrine of *hithbonenuth*, or the intense intellectual scrutiny of the saturation of the world with the Divine—that every Jew, regardless of his level of knowledge or spiritual sophistication, must strive to overcome the limitations of his natural senses, which veil the fullness of the divine presence from him.” As noted above, unlike Nadler, in the case of Gra I do not believe this epistemological distinction can be untangled from the theological-cosmological question of the actual immanence of G-d in the world. In this context, it is interesting to note that Habad’s emphasis of such “intellectual scrutiny” was also opposed by a Hasidic contemporary of Rashaz, Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk. Tradition has it that the latter had been a student of Gra before becoming a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch. See Ze’ev Gries, “From Mythos to Ethos: Contours of a Portrait of R. Abraham of Kalisk,” in *From Tiberias, with Love – A Collection of Tiberian Hasidism, vol. 2: R. Abraham ha-Kohen of Kalisk*, ed. Aubrey Glazer and Nehemia Polen (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 91n3; Shlomo Kohen, *Pe’er hador, vol. 1* (Netzach: Bnei Brak, 1966) 39-40. Despite this resemblance, the dispute between Rashaz and R. Avraham was more directly concerned with the practical spiritual techniques that would successfully realize the ethical-mystical ideals they shared. On this dispute—and on the centrality of communication, education, and contemplation in Habad more broadly—see Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, esp. 77-86. For further discussion see Rubin, “Questions of Love.”

⁹⁸ Rashaz, T1:2, 6a and 7a; T1:42, 59a.

⁹⁹ Jonathan Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul: Psychological Thought in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 157.

¹⁰⁰ Garb, *A History*, 109. For more on the dynamic of gender in relation to *šimšum* see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Divine Suffering and the Hermeneutics of Reading: Philosophical Reflections on Lurianic Mythology” in *Suffering Religion*, ed. Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 118-35. The association between *malkhut* and *šimšum* in Habad thought will be discussed below, in Chapters 1 and 3.

¹⁰¹ Garb, *A History*, 132.

inscrutability, 2) the inaccessibility of the divine soul, and 3) the substitution of divine presence in the world with superintendence or providence (*hashgahah*).

Having set Rashaz's critique of the literal interpretation of *šimšum* in its historical, literary, and ideological contexts, the nature of his contribution can be more clearly discerned. As noted above, the problem of attributing corporeality to G-d had already been raised and dismissed in *Yosher levav*. Rashaz only mentions it in passing, as if to add to the momentum of his chief line of argument, which seizes hold of the theological commitment to superintendence explicitly affirmed both by R. Immanuel and by Gra: "They are believers, the sons of believers, that the Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the created beings in this lower world and exercises superintendence over them ..."¹⁰²

A casual reader of *Tanya* might take this assertion to be unfounded, or pietistically aspirational; but as we have seen, both R. Immanuel and Gra crucially replaced divine presence with superintendence—which entails divine knowledge of the cosmos—in their "literal" accounts of *šimšum*. Per the Maimonidian principle that all divine knowledge is self-knowledge, Rashaz continues, G-d's superintendence of the world cannot occur unless the world is itself one with G-d. It transpires that the internal logic of the "literal" account of *šimšum*—and not only the extraneous concern about corporeality—dictates that a non-literal interpretation of *šimšum* is unavoidable; providence cannot replace presence because providence is synonymous with presence.¹⁰³

Other scholars, most notably Tsippi Kauffman, have paid a great deal of attention to the centrality of the doctrine of divine immanence in shaping ideology and practice in early Hasidism.¹⁰⁴ But the role that it played in inciting opposition to Hasidism has sometimes been elided or contested. Kauffman makes no mention of it. Immanuel Etkes mentions it only in passing.¹⁰⁵ Alan Nadler, as discussed above, argued that the question of immanence was never at issue.¹⁰⁶ Other scholars who discussed the debate concerning

¹⁰² Rashaz, T2: 7, 83b.

¹⁰³ It is possible that this is also the line of argument Rashaz had in mind when, in his letter to the Hasidim in Vilna, he wrote in reference to Gra's anti-immanentist arguments: "I received from my teachers, whose souls are in Eden, a victorious response to all his words" (קבלתי מרבותי נ"ע תשובה נצחת על כל דבריו). Rashaz, IG, 185.

¹⁰⁴ Tsippi Kauffman, *Bekhol derakheikha da'ehu: tefisat ha'elokut veba'avodah begashmiyut bereishit hahasidut* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁵ Etkes, *Ba'al hatanya*, 244.

¹⁰⁶ Also see David Biale et. al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 86, for the verdict that "despite its vehemence" the opposition to Hasidism should be viewed as a "family feud" rather than "a rift that exposed irreconcilable theological ... differences." Of course, this view is in keeping with the general inclination of Biale and his collaborators to describe Hasidism in purely socio-historical terms rather than give weight to hermeneutical and phenomenological concerns. On this point, see Wolfson, "Overcoming the Body through the Body." On the authors' "clear preference for the external, estranged perspective," see Tsippi Kauffman, "Hasidism: Reflections on the New Narrative,"

šimšum have tended to focus not on Gra, but on his student Rabbi Ḥayim of Volozhin (1749-1821), who did much to calm the heated antagonism towards the Hasidim and seems to have gone some way to closing the theological gap as well.¹⁰⁷ Along with the more recent intervention by Jonathan Garb, an early exception to this trend is Alan Brill's study of Gra's mysticism, which he described as "the source of his critique of Hasidut."¹⁰⁸

Given the above analysis, such elision and contestation can no longer be defended. At the height of the agitations against Rashaz and his Hasidim, the question of G-d's presence in the world or absence therefrom, and the associated debate over the meaning of *šimšum*, was the crucial locus of contention. This wasn't a cool headed debate between cerebral scholars but a full scale religious and social schism whose impact was sharply felt in multiple Jewish communities in the region. In addition to the public burning of Hasidic books and other forms of Mitnagdic antagonism, denunciations to civil authorities led to investigations and arrests. In particular, the arrest and liberation of Rashaz, who was twice taken to St. Petersburg for investigations at the highest echelons of the imperial government, would become the occasion for a yearly celebration that—a century later—come to be called the Rosh Hashanah of Hasidism.¹⁰⁹

Ada Rapoport-Albert has argued that it was precisely the opposition of the Mitnagdim, beginning in 1772 and culminating with the second imprisonment of Rashaz in 1801, that generated "the new consciousness of hasidism as a movement."¹¹⁰ It was in this context that the Hasidim—and the particular subgroups that were concurrently emerging within Hasidism—began to develop a "growing recognition of distinctive identity."¹¹¹ Rapoport-Albert's analysis of "the institutionalization" of particular Hasidic streams and "the stabilization ... of the community of followers ... over a period of several generations"

Marginalia, <<https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/hasidism-reflections-on-the-new-narrative/>> (accessed May 6, 2021).

¹⁰⁷ See Tamar Ross, "Shenei pirushim letorat ḥasimšum: rabi ḥayim mivolozhin verabi shneur zalman miliady," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981): 153-169; Norman Lamm, "The Phase of Dialogue and Reconciliation" in *Tolerance and Movements of Religious Dissent in Eastern Europe*, ed. Béla K. Király (Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1975), 115-129. Lamm writes that "R. Hayyim's technique of dialogue and reconciliation ... consisted of accepting the theological structures, modes, and even vocabulary of Hasidism, especially that of R. Shneur Zalman, but so reformulating them that the basic Mitnagdic position is salvaged and elucidated" (117). For a more recent contribution see Benjamin Brown, "But Me No Buts': The Theological Debate Between the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim in Light of the Discourse-Markers Theory," *Numen* 61:5-6 (2014): 525-551.

¹⁰⁸ Brill, "Mystical Path," 131. For a wider discussion of the Gra's polemic against Hasidism, which partially relies on Brill's work, see Eliyahu Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (New Haven: Yale, 2013), 83-114.

¹⁰⁹ On the arrests and investigations of 1798, including the recorded interrogations of twenty-two arrested Hasidim, see Yehoshua Mondshine, *Hamasar harishon*; Etkes, *Ba'al hatanya*, 248-316. On the celebration of Rashaz's liberation see Wojciech Tworek, "The Scroll of 19 Kislev and the Construction of an Imagined Habad Lubavitch Community in Interwar Poland," *Polin* 33 (2021): 309-337, and esp. 313-9.

¹¹⁰ Rapoport-Albert, "Hasidism After 1772," in *ideam*, *Hasidic Studies*, 77.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77-79.

focused mainly on heredity.¹¹² In the case of Habad such a notion of “institutionalization” should rightly be extended to include the intellectual and literary legacy bequeathed by Rashaz.¹¹³

From this perspective, it is easy to understand why the interpretation of *šimšum*, particularly, might emerge as a central conceptual prism through which the successors of Rashaz would continue to negotiate existential questions relating to being, meaning, and purpose, and also social questions of legitimacy, authority, and succession. After all, the debate between Rashaz and Gra concerning *šimšum* was the central theological element in the formation of Habad’s identity as an intellectual institution. As has been noted above more briefly, this debate is deeply connected to two other pillars of Habad’s intellectual constitution; the philosophical preoccupation with the nature of G-d’s oneness, and the emphasis on theosophic contemplative practice as the very foundation of spiritual inspiration and religious praxis.

Habad’s internal and intergenerational discourse on *šimšum* is accordingly integral to the ongoing intellectual and literary constitution of Habad; to be a Habad thinker is to think through the prism of *šimšum*. In the chapters that follow we will see that over the course of the 19th century and beyond, key points of internal rupture and debate within Habad would be marked by new ideological points of departure in which questions relating to *šimšum* were again sites of contention or reinterpretation. This study seeks to demonstrate that our understanding of the intergenerational development of Habad thought, literature and social history can be enhanced by leaps and bounds through using the discourse on *šimšum* as a window through which to negotiate larger methodological, ideological, and historiographical questions.

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¹¹² Ibid., 81-83.

¹¹³ Some aspects of this have been described by Ariel Roth, *Keišad likro et safrut ḥabad* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2017). Roth’s approach to questions regarding the Habad corpus draws centrally on Habad’s own internal historiographical literature, dating mainly from the 20th century, and thus constructs a picture of how the corpus is perceived today, rather than a more fine grained literary-historiographical account that could be attained by centering manuscript and print history together with other philological methodologies.

CHAPTER ONE

The Question of Acosmism and the Ontological Significance of *Šimšum* in the First Three Generations of Habad, 1796-1866

Introduction - Acosmism and the Ontological Significance of *Šimšum*

In recent years an interdisciplinary interest has emerged at the nexus of Hasidism and German Idealism, two movements that developed roughly contemporaneously in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The historical figure linking these two movements is Solomon Maimon, who visited the court of Rabbi DovBer of Mezritch before traveling to Berlin and acquiring a reputation as a critic of Immanuel Kant.¹ Yitzhak Melamed has persuasively argued that Maimon's use of the term "acosmism" in his evaluation of Spinoza's philosophy derived from his earlier coinage of the term to describe the doctrine he encountered among the early Hasidim.²

For Melamed this uncovers a degree of "historical irony" in the debate between Rachel Elior and Yoram Jacobson—which we shall turn to below—as to whether or not acosmism is an accurate characterization of Habad Hasidic doctrine. Yet Melamed also hints that more clarity might be brought to this debate if a more precise definition of acosmism is first agreed on.³ For this purpose we will begin with the succinct definition offered by *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, according to which acosmism is "denial of the reality of the material world."⁴

Leaving Maimon aside, is this an accurate characterization of Habad doctrine?

The question of acosmism in Habad, whether in academic or internal discourse, is fundamentally intertwined with the question of how to interpret the Kabbalistic doctrine of *šimšum* and its ontological significance. This cosmological and theosophical

¹ On Maimon's life and intellectual legacy see Abraham P. Socher, *The Radical Enlightenment of Solomon Maimon: Judaism, Heresy, and Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Peter Thielke and Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Salomon Maimon", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/maimon/>> (accessed April 15, 2018).

² Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Spinozism, Acosmism, and Hassidism: A Closed Circle," in Amit Kravitz and Jörg Noller (eds.), *Der Begriff des Judentums in der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr Seibek, 2018), 75-85. See also Socher, *ibid.*, 77.

³ Melamed, *ibid.*, n29. For the question of whether or not Maimon was justified in labeling Spinoza an acosmist, see Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Acosmism or Weak Individuals? Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48:1 (2010): 77-92.

⁴ Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

intersection can already be discerned in Gershom Scholem's brief summation of the Lurianic rationale for *šimšum*:

The existence of the universe is made possible by a process of shrinkage in G-d ... How can there be a world if G-d is everywhere? If G-d is "all in all," how can there be things which are not G-d? ... G-d was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself ... ⁵

From this perspective, the Lurianic conception of the primordial *šimšum* can be seen as an outright rejection of acosmism, and as a sharp affirmation that G-d did indeed create the world from nothing. Scholem, citing R. Jacob Emden, calls it "the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing."⁶ On the other hand, Scholem writes, "if *šimšum* is merely a metaphor to which no real act or occurrence, however shrouded and mysterious, corresponds, then the question how something that is not G-d can really exist remains unsolved."⁷

In Habad *šimšum* is re-interpreted in a manner that rejects its "literal" implications, and Scholem accordingly asserts that the "pantheistic, or rather acosmistic, interpretation of the universe" is one of the elements that give "the writings of the Habad-school their distinctive feature."⁸ Others, however, dissented from that conclusion. Indeed, the Habad masters themselves grappled with the interlinked questions of acosmism and the ontological significance of *šimšum*, both implicitly and explicitly. An investigation of the question of acosmism in Habad can therefore help us achieve a more sophisticated and accurate view of Habad's interpretation of *šimšum*, beyond its standard reduction to mere metaphor.⁹

In part 1 of the present chapter this question is approached through a critical review of the existing academic discourse on questions of acosmism in Habad. Parts 2 and 3 turn more directly to the primary sources—the writings and oral teachings of Rashaz—systematically investigating the question of whether they reflect an acosmistic stance.

⁵ See Gershom Scholem, *Trends*, 260-261.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 261-262. Cf. Schulte, *Zimzum*, 47-48.

⁷ Scholem, *Trends*, 262. Also see the relevant discussion and citations in Tsippi Kauffman, *Bekhol derakheikhah da'ehu*, 73-74, 88, 90-91.

⁸ Scholem, *Trends*, 341.

⁹ For a critique of such reductionism see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Nequddat ha-Reshimu—The Trace of Transcendence and the Transcendence of the Trace: The Paradox of *Šimšum* in the RaShaB's Hemshekh Ayin-Beit," *Kabbalah* 30 (2013): 79-81. I concur with Wolfson's judgment that the Habad position on *šimšum* "is not adequately categorized as either figurative or literal," and will return to this point below. For a far more impressionistic approach to the many discussions of *šimšum* in Habad thought, see Dov Schwartz, *Mašshevet ḥabad mereishit ad akharit* (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press, 2010), as cited in the relevant entry in the index (*ibid.*, 423).

Particular attention is given to the doctrines of “Lower Unity” and “Upper Unity,” and to the distinction made by Rashaz between the divine appellations *Ehad* (“one”) and *Yahid* (“singular”). Parts 4 and 5 turn to texts by Rashaz’s son and grandson, Rabbi DovBer Schneuri (“the Mittlerer Rebbe,” 1773-1827) and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (“the Şemaḥ Şedek,” 1789-1866), both of whom were his direct disciples and also became his spiritual successors as leaders of Habad-Lubavitch. Particular attention is given to the former’s sharp apotheosis of the created entity, and to the latter’s explicit rejection of acosmism.

Part 1 - Acosmism in Academic Scholarship on Habad

The general consensus among academic scholars—formulated by Gershom Scholem, developed by Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer, and enshrined by Rachel Elior—is that acosmism is indeed characteristic of Habad thought. What they mean by this, however, is not necessarily clear or uniform.

Schatz-Uffenheimer approaches the topic through an analysis of Rashaz’s discussion of divine unity, or monism, in *Sha’ar hayiḥud vebaemumah*, the second section of *Tanya*. Therein, she tells us, “the acosmistic approach ... is analyzed at great length and emphasis.”¹⁰ She makes particular reference to a passage emphasizing that:

The *zimzum* and concealment is only for the lower worlds, but in relation to the Holy One, blessed be He, “everything before Him is considered as actually naught.”¹¹

אין הצמצום וההסתר אלא לתחתונים אבל לגבי הקדוש ברוך הוא כולא קמיה כלא ממש חשיבי

In Schatz-Uffenheimer’s view, this indicates that all active verbs associated with the creation of the world are “no more than a figure of speech.”¹²

Against the acosmic view stands a single explicit line, cited by Moshe Hallamish and later by Naftali Loewenthal, but otherwise elided in scholarly discussions. With equal

¹⁰ Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 261.

¹¹ Rashaz, T2:6, 81b, as cited and translated in Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 263.

¹² Schatz-Uffenheimer, *ibid.* We should note that later on Rashaz does explicitly argue that all the various terms used to describe the interface between G-d and the world are figurative in the sense that they are borrowed terms that ordinarily refer to human processes. As applied to G-d they must be interpreted differently, in a sense that is less rigid and linear, and more abstract and transcendent. See, in particular, Rashaz, T2:8-9, 85a-87a. In my view, however, it would be erroneous to construe this to mean that these terms do not refer to real ontological events and phenomena. This point will be further developed and justified below.

measures of clarity and brevity Rashaz states that as of now the world does indeed exist, even from G-d's own perspective:

Now, after the worlds have been created, before Him all are as nothing. But this is "like naught," with a comparative *kaf*, and not naught literally.¹³

עכשיו אחר שנבראו העולמות הרי קמי' כולא כלא אלא שהוא כלא בכ"ף הדמיון ולא לא ממש

The ambiguity that arises from these two quotes accounts for the panorama of positions taken by scholars on the question of acosmism in Habad thought, and for the ambiguity that sometimes marks the analysis of individual scholars as well.

Schatz-Uffenheimer's discussion is a case in point: She initially describes a tension in Rashaz's conception between seeing worldly existence as "a kind of distortion of the divine reality," versus "assuming the world to be no more than an image."¹⁴ But in the final analysis she seems to move away from both of these conceptions, concluding that for Rashaz "the world is the G-dhead in contracted form," and arguing that in his teachings "we do not find ... a struggle with the world for the sake of its redemption; rather, one feels here a quiet, tranquil sense of wholeness and continuity, of 'the even handed presence' of G-d in all."¹⁵

It is hard to understand the logic of Schatz-Uffenheimer's sharp transition from an acosmistic interpretation of the Habad doctrine to her ultimate conclusion that Habad is "anti-spiritual," and indeed, that conclusion has already been rejected out of hand by Elliot Wolfson.¹⁶ But the continuation of Wolfson's remarks open the possibility that she might actually have read Rashaz through a Spinozian lense, according to which acosmism is ultimately pantheism by another name; not an erasure of the cosmos, but the erasure of any distinction between the cosmos and the divine.¹⁷ Here's how Wolfson construes his own interpretation:

¹³ Rashaz, *LT devarim*, 38d. See Moshe Hallamish, "Mishnato ha'iyunit shel r. shneur zalman miliady" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1976), 129, as cited and discussed in Naftali Loewenthal, *Hasidism Beyond Modernity* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 133-134. A similar formulation appears in an alternate transcript of this discourse made by Rashaz's son, R. DovBer, indicating that it should not be regarded as an interpolation by the editor of the published version. See *MAHZ 5566 II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2005), 5669: ראו ע"פ שגם עכשיו נא' דכולא קמי' כלא חשיב היינו כלא בכף הדמיון ולא לא ממש. More will be said below about the interpolation of glosses in transcripts of Rashaz's discourses.

¹⁴ Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 262.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 267-9.

¹⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 150.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the intersections and divergences between pantheism in the thought of Spinoza and pantheism in the thought of Rashaz see Schneur Zalman Rothschild, "The Role of Materiality in Early Hasidism: Divine Immanence, Religious Service with the Corporeal, and Law in the Theology of the Maggid of Mezritch and Shneur Zalman of Lyady" (PhD diss., New York University, 2016), 11-38.

[In Habad] the difference between divinity and nature is erased, in a manner that strikes me as a reversal of Spinoza's notorious maxim *Deus sive Natura* ... that is ... [the Habad approach should be characterized as] the divinization of nature rather than the materialization of G-d.¹⁸

This is a subtle distinction, but a very important one; while Spinoza reduces divine being to the material circumscriptions of the cosmos, in Habad the cosmos is elevated and enhanced beyond its material circumscriptions, such that it takes on the metaphysical quality and identity of the divine.

It is possible that Scholem was thinking along similar lines to Schatz-Uffenheimer when, as cited above, he mentioned pantheism and acosmism in the same breath.¹⁹ At any rate, neither her reading nor Wolfson's result in a straightforward "denial of the reality of the material world," and the latter has developed a far more sophisticated conception of the Habad view, under the labels "acosmic naturalism" and "apophatic panentheism," which will be returned to below.²⁰

Dov Schwartz puts acosmic and pantheistic readings of Rashaz's doctrine into tension with another, and argues that his thought is generally characterized by dialectical paradoxes that are ultimately irreconcilable. In this case, "nonexistence and existence concurrently," which results in what might be termed a "soft" or "ambiguous" acosmism.²¹ Louis Jacobs can also be included in the camp of the "soft acosmists." At one point he acknowledged that the application of the term acosmism to Habad "is not as precise as one would wish," and emphasized that "the world and its creatures ... are not an illusion" nor "a cosmic conjuring trick."²² For the most part, however, he left such qualifications aside and made no attempt to provide a more precise characterization.²³

For Rachel Elijor, on the other hand, Habad's acosmism apparently does entail an utter "denial of the reality of the material world," and no caveates are necessary. In her influential book on Habad doctrine she devotes an entire chapter to textual citations in support of the conclusion that for Rashaz and his successors "G-d is the only reality and

¹⁸ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 150.

¹⁹ Also Cf. Joseph Weiss, *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism* (London and Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation, 1997), 45: "The pantheistic attitude of Hasidic thought cannot, however, be denied, and is actually generally accepted; the Habad system, for instance, is very close to a-cosmism, the denial of the materiality of the cosmos."

²⁰ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 46-48 and 87-103.

²¹ Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad*, 36.

²² Louis Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity: The Life and Works of Aaron of Starosselje* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1966), 11 and 153.

²³ See *ibid.*, 15 and 157, where Jacobs seems to equate "panentheism" and "acosmism," and *ibid.*, 73, where he writes that according to the Habad doctrine, "nature is not really 'there' at all."

all else is but a veil of illusion...” and that “all things perceivable by man as discernible dimension or as possessing a separate aspect of reality are simply reflections of his own shortsightedness, an illusion, a lie, or mere imagination.”²⁴

The unequivocal conclusiveness of Elijah’s sharp formulations were fiercely critiqued and countered by Yoram Jacobson:

The root of all Elijah’s conclusions ... is implanted in the acosmistic axiom ... Indeed, there is no greater mistake than this in the formulation of her approach. The assertion of the divinity of the world does not depend at all on the negation of its ontological reality as an independent entity ... The divine is indeed “the only reality” ... [but] the meaning of the “unique” existence of the divine is embedded in the fact that it confers existence — it confers its own existence — to all the differentiated beings of the world ... The denial of independent existence does not entail a denial of differentiated existence.²⁵

Jacobson’s argument is theoretically compelling, and Melamed has noted that it seems to anticipate the distinction made by Jonathan Schaffer between existence monism (“exactly one concrete object token exists”) and priority monism (“exactly one basic concrete object exists—there may be many other concrete objects, but these only exist derivatively”).²⁶

The conflict between Elijah and Jacobson may be partly rooted in the fact that while the former views Habad mainly through the prism of its first two generations, the latter reads these earlier teachings in the light of later Habad teachings, up to and including those of the seventh Rebbe, a point that Jacobson acknowledges at the outset of his critique.²⁷

Here Jacobson partially anticipates Elliot Wolfson’s more holistic approach to the Habad corpus, albeit with far less nuance.²⁸ However, Jacobson’s critique does not specifically engage the textual evidence arrayed by Elijah in support of what can be labeled her “hard”

²⁴ Rachel Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to G-d: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 49-50.

²⁵ Yoram Jacobson, “Bimevokhei ha’ayin’ uvimevukhat hayesh,” *kiryat sefer* 68 (1998): 231.

²⁶ Melamed, “Spinozism, Acosmism, and Hassidism,” n29; Jonathan Schaffer, “Monism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/monism/>> (accessed April 16, 2018).

²⁷ Jacobson, *ibid.*, 229-230.

²⁸ Cf. Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 17-23: “All seven masters of Habad-Lubavitch are bound together in such a way that in each one the sum of all the others is to be found ... [requiring] a temporal configuration that is circular in its linearity and linear in its circularity.” See the relevant discussion in Eli Rubin, “A Linguistic Bridge Between Alienation and Intimacy: Chabad’s Theorization of Yiddish in Historical and Cultural Perspective,” *In geveb* (January 2019), <<https://ingeveb.org/articles/a-linguistic-bridge-between-alienation-and-intimacy>>. Accessed Dec 26, 2019, Part 3.

acosmistic reading. While Jacobson had already offered his own close analysis of Rashaz's doctrine, Elijor's account deserves the courtesy of a closer engagement with the texts that she cites.²⁹

Below we will first offer a critical response to Elijor's readings of specific texts by Rashaz as promulgating an acosmistic doctrine. Building on that critique, this chapter will develop an intergenerational exploration of the different ways in which Rashaz's successors as leaders of Habad engaged with questions of acosmism, both implicitly and explicitly. As we shall see, it is precisely Rashaz's concern with the problem of how to uphold a doctrine of divine monism in the face of our empirical experience of worldly reality that implicitly brings the prospect of acosmism into play, and explicitly engages Rashaz in a complex theorization of creation that fundamentally depends on the question of how to understand the Lurianic doctrine of *šimšum* and its ontological significance. As pointed out by Naftali Loewenthal, who was also critical of Elijor's exaggerated treatment of acosmism in Habad, at the heart of this theorization are two distinct and complementary conceptions of divine monism, namely the "Higher Unity" and the "Lower Unity."³⁰

Part 2 - Are the Doctrines of "Lower Unity" and "Upper Unity" Acosmic?

Paying attention to earlier and later versions of *Sha'ar hayiḥud veba'emunah*, Loewenthal has noted that in the earlier manuscript version "the acosmistic aspect was more pronounced." In the printed version, however, the distinction between "Upper Unity" and "Lower Unity" brings "the return to the world and the discovery that the divine is there too" into sharper focus.³¹ Loewenthal further argues that these different conceptions of unity relate to the two sides of a split that occurred in the second generation of Habad: In his own lifetime, Rashaz had appointed his eldest son, R. DovBer, and his protégé, R. Aharon Halevi Horowitz, as mentors to the many Hasidim who flocked to his court in Liady. Following Rashaz's passing they each set up independent courts—the former in Lubavitch and the latter in Staroselye—and they each developed their own distinctive paths. Loewenthal asserts that "we could describe the distinction between R. Aaron and

²⁹ See Yoram Jacobson, "Torat haberi'ah shel rabi shneur zalman miliady," *Eshel beer sheva*, 1 (1976): 368-307, reprinted in *idem.*, *Emet emunah ukedusha* (Tel Aviv: Idra Publishing, 2018), 217-278. See esp. Pages 236-241.

³⁰ Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 50. For his critique of Elijor see *idem.*, "The Paradox of Habad," review of *The Paradoxical Ascent to G-d: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, by Rachel Elijor, *Jewish Studies* 34 (1994), 65-73.

³¹ Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 50.

R. DovBer as that between the quest for the “Upper Unity,” in which the world is dissolved in the One, and the struggle for the “Lower Unity,” in which the world—as world—expresses the One.”³²

Loewenthal demonstrates that there is a tension at play in Habad’s understanding of the relationship between G-d and the world that does not allow for an uncomplicated acosmic reading. Describing the particular approach of R. DovBer, he concludes that:

[On the one hand, he] sought to communicate the sense of self abnegation which was the core of the teachings of the Maggid and early Hasidism. At the same time he was concerned that this self-abnegation should not simply transcend and virtually annihilate all existence, absorbed in an acosmistic ecstasy in which G-d is the only reality ... In the Lubavitch teachings, contrasting strongly with those of Staroselye, the world qua world is therefore imbued with ultimate reality ...³³

Loewenthal seems to acknowledge that an acosmic element is at play even in R. DovBer’s doctrine. But while we may surmise that this should not be read as a “hard” acosmism, Loewenthal does not clarify the ontological significance of the term. Moreover, while he does show that R. DovBer was concerned to affirm the reality of the world, he does not cite any texts in which R. DovBer explicitly opposed the acosmistic perspective or explicitly attributed “ultimate reality” to the material cosmos. As we will see below, such texts do exist, but they are a rarity. As noted above, Elliot Wolfson has offered a full ontological theorization of the tension between acosmism and the affirmation of the world that is here exposed by Loewenthal, especially as it is manifest in the teachings of the seventh Rebbe, but Wolfson did not trace the historical development of Habad’s own internal discourse on the key question that concerns us. That is, does the doctrine of divine unity, along with the non-literal interpretation of *šimšum*, constitute a “denial of the reality of the material world”?

Loewenthal’s discussion of the “Lower Unity” and the “Upper Unity” provides a conceptual framework through which we can begin to analyze a sampling of texts cited by Rachel Elijor and better discern how they bear on this question.

The following is excerpted from the first text cited by Elijor in her chapter on acosmism:

³² Ibid., 137. For more on R. Aharon of Staroselye see Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity*, and Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent*. See also Rachel Elijor, “Hamaḥloket al moreshet ḥabad,” *Tarbiz* 49:1-2 (1979-80): 166-86; Jonathan Garb, “Contemplation, Meditation and Metaphysics in Second Generation Habad,” in *Jewish Spirituality and Social Transformation*, ed. Philip Wexler (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019), 185-201. Garb’s interpretation is not entirely consistent with Loewenthal’s, but a full discussion of the relevant texts far exceeds the scope of the present study.

³³ Loewenthal, *ibid.*, 170-1.

But as for His blessed Being and Essence, it is written, “I, the Lord, I have not changed” (Malachi, 3:6) ... Just as He was alone, one and unique, before the six days of creation, so He is now after the creation. This is because everything is absolutely as nothing and naught relative to His being and essence.³⁴

אבל לגבי מהותו ועצמותו יתברך כתיב אני ה' לא שניתי ... כמו שהיה הוא לבדו הוא יחיד ומיוחד לפני ששת ימי בראשית כך הוא עתה אחר הבריאה והיינו משום שהכל כאין ואפס ממש לגבי מהותו ועצמותו

Elior takes this to mean that “G-d is the only reality and all else is but a veil of illusion.” But Rashaz himself does not use the word “illusion.” We should note, moreover, that he doesn’t say “everything is absolutely nothing and naught,” but rather, “everything is absolutely **as** nothing and naught **relative** to His being and essence.” This distinction is not mere pedantry; Rashaz is not advocating a radical acosmism, but is describing the relative insignificance of worldly phenomena in comparison to the transcendent plenitude of G-d’s essential self. In Schaffer’s terms this is not existence monism but priority monism.³⁵

Lest there be any doubt as to Rashaz’s intention, in the direct continuation of this passage—which Elior neglected to quote—he crystallised his argument via an analogy:

Everything is absolutely as nothing and naught relative to His being and essence, and like one word uttered by a person, or even [like] one of his thoughts, relative to the general being of the intelligent soul and its essence.³⁶

הכל כאין ואפס ממש לגבי מהותו ועצמותו וכמו אות אחד מדבורו של אדם או אפילו ממחשבתו לגבי כללות מהות הנפש השכלית ועצמותה

No one would suggest that the relative insignificance of a throw-away remark—or of a stray thought—renders it unspoken, unthought, non-existent, or a mere illusion. The word or thought is certainly real, and yet it is insignificant relative to the rich span of a person’s entire life experience and the essential depth of a person’s inner life. We should conclude, therefore, that for Rashaz the world likewise exists, but is an utterly insignificant expression of G-d’s transcendent self.³⁷

Indeed, if we take broader stock of the epistle in which this passage appears we find that Elior’s reading must ultimately be turned on its head. The epistle is one of Rashaz’s annual appeals on behalf of the Hasidic community in the Holy Land, who relied on the

³⁴ Rashaz, T4:6, 110a, as cited, translated and capitalized in Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent*, 49.

³⁵ Schaffer, “Monism.”

³⁶ Rashaz, *ibid.*

³⁷ For a lengthier elaboration of the speech analogy, see Rashaz, T1:20, 26a.

financial support of their brethren in Eastern Europe. In this example he explains why giving charity, in the material sense of making a fiscal contribution in aid of people of lesser means, is essential to the attainment of truth in one's spiritual service of G-d.³⁸ The particular section of the letter quoted above appears as part of a contemplative technique designed to inspire the individual to have compassion "on the spark of the divine in one's soul, which is distant from the luminosity of G-d's countenance when it journeys in the dark vanities of the world."³⁹ The purpose of cultivating this sense of compassion is that the individual will thereby be inspired with love and awe before G-d who shields the divine spark of the soul, "giving it strength and might to wage war with the body and its passions and to be triumphant over them..."⁴⁰ Yet, Rashaz emphasizes, spiritual contemplation is insufficient. Religious ecstasy and ascent from worldly vanities can itself be vanity, and will certainly be utterly incommensurate with divine truth, so long as it is not anchored in the concrete truth of the material realm:

The seal of G-d is truth for He is the perfect truth, and all the truth of the creations is as nothing in comparison. But what then is the path by which a person shall merit the truth of G-d?

... The solution to this is the quality of charity, which is the quality of compassion for those who have nothing of their own, to rejuvenate the spirit of the abject etc. And the arousal from below elicits an arousal from above ... to bring great compassion and supernal kindness from concealment to revelation ... to illuminate with the light of life, the truth of G-d ... [This applies] especially [to] the charity and true kindness that is practiced in relation to the Holy Land, may it be built and established, fulfilling the verse, "truth grows from the earth" (Psalms, 85:12), through sowing charity in it...⁴¹

הקב"ה אמת שהוא אמת האמיתי וכל האמת שבנבראים כלא חשיבי קמיה אך איזה הדרך שיזכה האדם לאמת
ה' ... העצה לזה היא מדת הצדקה שהיא מדת הרחמים על מאן דלית ליה מגרמיה להחיות רוח שפלים כו'
ובאתעדל"ת אתעדל"ע ... רחמים רבים וחסדים עליונים הנעלמים לצאת מההעלם אל הגילוי ... לאור באור
החיים אמת ה' ... ובפרט בצדקה וחסד של אמת שעושים עם אה"ק טובב"א לקיים מ"ש אמת מארץ תצמח על
ידי זריעת הצדקה בה

³⁸ For more on this epistle and its context, see Rashaz, IG, xx-xxii, and 264-267; Eli Rubin, "Questions of Love and Truth," esp. 258-62.

³⁹ Rashaz, T4:6, 109b.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 110b.

⁴¹ Ibid., 110b-111a.

[הקב"ה מגן לו ונותן לו עוז ותעצומות ללחום עם הגוף ותאותיו ולנצחן]

For Rashaz, mystical contemplation and the attainment of spiritual compassion is also to be included in the category of “vanity” unless they result in acts of compassion for others. In stark contrast to the radically acosmistic interpretation offered by Elijor, Rashaz’s ultimate position is that divine truth—ultimate reality—can only be attained in the concrete realm of charitable activity.

Another passage cited by Elijor is excerpted from *Sha’ar hayihud veva’emunah*, Chapter 7, the locus classicus for questions of acosmism in Habad. She correctly notes that Rashaz invokes the doctrine of divine immanence within creation in order to explain that creation does not change the fact that “Just as He [G-d] was alone before the creation of the world, so He is alone after it is created.”⁴² Elijor concludes that “the unchanging nature of G-d versus human experience of the limited existence of the world, in itself, nearly obliges that denial of all empirical experience ... reality is nothing but an illusion in relation to the truth of the divine *Yesh*.”⁴³

I concur with Elijor’s diagnosis of the problem of divine immutability. Indeed, this is one of the central questions addressed by Rashaz in this treatise: How does G-d’s singular being remain intact and utterly unaltered by the divine work of creating the world? But he does not devote the twelve chapters of *Sha’ar hayihud veva’emunah* to the simple conclusion that the world does not really exist. Instead he offers a far more sophisticated answer that depends on the two concepts of divine unity already mentioned above (“Lower Unity” and “Upper Unity”), and on a detailed explanation of how divine processes of revelation, concealment, and creation mediate the relationship between G-d and the world.

An axial principal in this treatise—introduced a few lines after the passage excerpted by Elijor—is the doctrine of divine knowledge articulated by Maimonides: “G-d is the knower, G-d is that which is known, and G-d is the knowledge itself. All is one.”⁴⁴ As Rashaz explains:

The being, essence, and knowledge of G-d are all literally one from every perspective and angle, in every manner of unity. G-d’s knowledge is not something additional to G-d’s being and essence as it is in the soul of the human, whose knowledge is additional to its being, and is fused onto it. When a human studies and knows something, their intelligent soul already existed prior to the

⁴² Rashaz, T2:7, 82b: כמו שהיה לבדו קודם בריאת העולם כך הוא לבדו אחר שנברא

⁴³ Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent*, 50-1.

⁴⁴ Rashaz, T2:7, 82b: הוא היודע והוא הידוע והוא הידעה עצמה הכל אחד

study and acquisition of knowledge, and afterward ... this knowledge was added to their soul ... and this is not a pure unity, but a composite one. But G-d is a pure singularity, without any composite elements or any multiplicity at all.

Accordingly, perforce, G-d's being, essence, and knowledge are all literally one thing ... In knowing Himself G-d recognizes and knows all the celestial and terrestrial beings, including a tiny worm in the sea ... Nothing is hidden from Him, and this knowledge does not add any multiplicity or composite element to G-d, for it is nothing more than self-knowledge.⁴⁵

הקב"ה מהותו ועצמותו ודעתו הכל אחד ממש מכל צד ופינה בכל דרך יחוד ואין דעתו דבר נוסף על מהותו ועצמותו כמו שהוא בנפש האדם שדעתה דבר נוסף על מהותה ומורכב בה שהרי כשהאדם לומד ויודע איזה דבר כבר היתה בו נפשו המשכלת בטרם שלמד וידע ואחר שלמד ... ניתוספה ידיעה זו בנפשו ... ואין זו אחדות פשוטה אלא מורכבת אבל הקב"ה הוא אחדות פשוט בלי שום הרכבה וצד ריבוי כלל ואם כן ע"כ מהותו ועצמותו ודעתו הכל דבר אחד ממש ... בידיעת עצמו מכיר ויודע כל הנמצאים עליונים ותחתונים עד שלשול קטן שבים ... אין דבר נעלם ממנו ואין ידיעה זו מוסיפה בו ריבוי והרכבה כלל מאחר שאינה רק ידיעת עצמו

In knowing the world, G-d is thought thinking itself, a pure singularity that is self-contained and self-referential. The roots of this idea can be traced as far back as Aristotle.⁴⁶ But Rashaz harnesses it in support of a novel argument: We should not think of divine knowledge as a mode of mediation between two distinct entities, namely, G-d and the cosmos. Instead, divine knowledge of the cosmos entails the collapse of the divide between G-d and the cosmos. With this conception of divine knowledge of creation as self-referential, we cannot think of the cosmos as something other than G-d; just as G-d was alone prior to creation, so G-d is alone **with** creation.⁴⁷

The larger significance of the passage excerpted by Elijah is that Rashaz applies this Maimonidean paradigm to the very act of creation itself: Like divine knowledge, the divine act of creation would conventionally be understood as the point of partition, as mediating **between** G-d and the world. But Rashaz sees creation as the point of union via which G-d and the world are one.⁴⁸ Read in this context, the above cited statement—"just

⁴⁵ Rashaz, *ibid.*, 82b-83a. Cf. Maimonides, *Hilchot yesodai hatorah*, 2:10.

⁴⁶ See Thomas De Koninck, "Aristotle on G-d as Thought Thinking Itself," *The Review of Metaphysics* 47:3 (Mar., 1994): 471-515. For references to Maimonides see esp. pages 473 and 511-512.

⁴⁷ Also see the discussion of this text in Rothschild, "The Role of Materiality," 190-1.

⁴⁸ On the confluence of divine knowledge and creation see Rashaz, T1:48, 68b: "His thought and knowledge, that He knows all creations, encircles each creation, from top to bottom, within it and within its most inward being, all in literal actuality ... for this knowledge is the vitality of the entire expanse of the earth's globe entirely, and its creation from nothing to something."

מחשבתו ודעתו שיוודע כל הנבראים מקפת כל נברא ונברא מראשו ועד תחתיתו ותוכו ותוך הכל בפועל ממש ... שהרי ידיעה זו היא חיות כל עובי כדור הארץ כולו וההתוותו מאין ליש

as He was alone before the creation of the world, so He is alone after it is created”⁴⁹— does not reduce our empirical experience of the world to illusion, as Elior presents it, but rather counters our assumption that the concrete existence of the world should be construed as something other than G-d.

In terms of the *sefirot*, Rashaz tells us, the fulcrum of this creative union is the divine faculty of *malkhut* (sovereignty), which is synonymous with the divine name *adnut* (lordship), and also with *šimšum*.⁵⁰ The faculty of *malkhut* entails sovereignty over a populace who are “separate, distant and far from the station of the sovereign. For even if he had very many sons the term sovereignty could not be applied [to his authority] over them ... Rather, the splendor of the king depends specifically on the throng of the populace.”⁵¹ Accordingly, it is G-d’s manifestation as “sovereign of all the earth” (Psalms 97:5) that creates and sustains the world, “that it shall be a world as it is now ... a distinctly independent entity ... [with] the dimensions of space and time specifically.”⁵² Yet, as Rashaz continues to explain, it is via the faculty of sovereign transcendence that G-d is immanently manifest within the world:⁵³

Though G-d transcends space and time, G-d is nevertheless also present below in space and time. That is, G-d unites Himself with His faculty of sovereignty from which space and time are drawn and created, and this is “Lower Unity” [integration of *havayah* in *adnut barukh hu*].⁵⁴ This means that the being and essence of G-d, which is called *eyn sof barukh hu*, literally fills the entirety of the earth, within time and space ... which is existentially effaced in the *or eyn sof barukh hu* that is vested in it via the faculty of His *malkhut* ... that is, the faculty of *šimšum* and concealment [that serves] to conceal the *or eyn sof barukh hu* so that time and space shall not be completely effaced from existence.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ See above, note 42.

⁵⁰ Rashaz, T2:7, 81b: “The faculty of His blessed *malkhut* is the name *adnut*”: מדת מלכותו ית' הוא שם אדנות
Ibid., 82b: “The faculty of His *malkut* is the faculty of *šimšum*”: מדת מלכותו הוא מדת הצמצום

⁵¹ Ibid., 81b.

[תכלית בריאת העולם הוא בשביל התגלות מלכותו יתברך דאין מלך בלא עם פי' עם מלשון עוממות שהם דברים] נפרדים וזרים
ורחוקים ממעלת המלך כי אילו אפילו היו לו בנים רבים מאד לא שייך שם מלוכה עליהם ... רק ברוב עם דווקא הדרת מלך

⁵² Ibid., 81b-82a.

[ונמצא כי מדה זו ושם זה הן המהוין ומקיימין העולם] להיות עולם כמות שהוא עכשיו ... דבר נפרד בפני עצמו ... בחי' מקום ובחי' זמן דווקא

⁵³ For a rather different account of the paradoxical relationship between transcendence and immanence in Rashaz’s thought, see Rothschild, “The Role of Materiality,” 37-8 and 146-7.

⁵⁴ These parentheses appear in the original text.

⁵⁵ Rashaz, T2:7, 82a-b. See the citation and discussion of the last line of this passage in Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad*, 39, n42.

אף על פי שהוא ית' למעלה מהמקום והזמן אף על פי כן הוא נמצא גם למטה במקום וזמן דהיינו שמתייחד במדת מלכותו שממנה נמשך ונתהווה המקום והזמן וזהו יחודא תתאה [שילוב הוי"ה באדנות ב"ה] דהיינו שמהותו ועצמותו יתברך הנקרא בשם אין סוף ברוך הוא מלא את כל הארץ ממש בזמן ומקום ... הוא בחי' מקום הבטל במציאות באור אין סוף ברוך הוא המתלבש בו על ידי מדת מלכותו ... היא מדת הצמצום וההסתר להסתיר אור אין סוף ב"ה שלא יבטלו הזמן והמקום ממציאותם לגמרי

What preserves the singular lonesomeness of divine being? Not the denial of earthly reality, but the utter union of G-d within the dimensions of worldly reality. The being of the world is nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of the divine faculty of *malkut*, which is itself nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of G-d's own being. The illusion is not that the world exists, but rather that the world stands in a relationship of otherness relative to a transcendent and distant G-d. Moreover, to borrow a phrase from the realm of computer programming, this illusion—this concealment of divine immanence—is not a bug (i.e. an anomalous and inexplicable quirk) but a feature; this is how *malkhut* functions. The majestic affectation of divine transcendence serves as the bricks and mortar with which “the world qua world” is constructed and as the medium via which G-d's transcendent self is rendered immanent within that construction.

As Elliot Wolfson has emphasized, the Habad interpretation of *šimšum* “is not adequately categorized as either figurative or literal.”⁵⁶ *Šimšum* is not to be construed as a mere metaphor, but rather as a cosmological event that is literally real and yet renders G-d figuratively and epistemologically transcendent in order for divine being to be transfigured in the guise of created existence. As Wolfson has expressed it elsewhere, we are not speaking here of “the illusion of reality” but rather of “the reality of illusion.”⁵⁷

This paradox was coherently grasped by the 20th century philosopher R. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, who described two general ontological approaches, that of “cognitive man” and that of “homo religiosus.” The world is approached by the former as fundamentally revelatory, by the latter as fundamentally mysterious. He goes on to say that “these two attitudes parallel the twofold nature of existence itself. The ontological dualism is a reflection of an ontic dualism.”⁵⁸ He later acknowledges that his concept of ontic dualism is rooted in Habad's conception of *šimšum*:

⁵⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 79–81.

⁵⁷ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 108.

⁵⁸ Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 5-8.

The attribute of *tzimtzum* expresses itself in two ideas: concealment and disclosure. On the one hand, G-d sustains the cosmos through concealing and hiding His glory... for who can withstand the splendor of His excellence when he comes forth to overawe the earth? ... On the other hand, the Almighty gives life to and sustains all existence through the disclosure of his glory... for He is the root and source of reality...⁵⁹

The ontic reality of the world is sustained not only by divine disclosure, but—just as fundamentally—by the epistemological concealment of divine glory. Thus construed, epistemological concealment cannot be reduced to a sleight of hand that turns creation into mere illusion; epistemological concealment is part and parcel of the ontic structure of the created cosmos.

This understanding of Habad's approach to *šimšum* stands in stark contrast to that of Elijah. The latter concluded that "Rashaz ... denies the ontological meaning of the doctrine of *tzimtzum*," and that "Habad's acosmic conception ... transfers the discussion from the ontological to the epistemological level."⁶⁰ Though at one point she seems to endorse a more complex view, writing that "the constriction of the g-dhead and its concealment is the revelation of the world,"⁶¹ in the final analysis she makes it clear that, in her view, this "does not refer to a process within the g-dhead, but to the degree of revelation and concealment within human understanding ... *Tzimtzum* is concealment and obscurity ... but that limitation has no ontological status from the divine point of view."⁶²

Above we noted Elijah's citation from *Sha'ar hayihud ve ha'emunah*, Chapter 7, with reference to the question of acosmism and the ontological significance of *šimšum*. In that citation the Hebrew term *bateil bimesi'ut* is translated as "completely nullified," thus:

All, [heaven and earth]⁶³ are within the dimensions of space which are completely nullified in the light of the En Sof.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibid., 151-152, n61. For additional aspects of R. Soloveitchik's concept of *šimšum* and its scholarly reception—which are beyond the scope of the present discussion—see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Eternal Duration and Temporal Compresence: The Influence of Habad on Joseph B. Soloveitchik," in *The Value of the Particular*, ed. Michael Zank and Ingrid Anderson (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 195-238; Heshey Zelter, "The Mystical Spirituality of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," *Hakirah* 11 (2011): 135-148; Schwartz, *Mašshevet ḥabad*, 367-385.

⁶⁰ Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent*, 79-91, esp. 83 and 87.

⁶¹ Ibid., 86.

⁶² Ibid., 89-90. For a critique of Elijah's position which complements the argument I make here, see Rothschild, "The Role of Materiality," 198-199.

⁶³ These parentheses are added in the translation that appears in Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent*, 51.

Given the broader context of this passage, however, it should now be clear that this translation misleadingly hews towards Elior's acosmistic reading. "Existentially effaced" could be posited as a more fitting alternative—albeit with the caveat that this effacement should not be construed in a conventional ontological sense, but rather in a phenomenological sense that relates to the deep structure of being. In Heideggerian terms, this is not an ontical effacement but an ontological one; an effacement that does not bear on the question of whether or not the world exists, but which is part and parcel of the inner structure of the world's existence.⁶⁵ Thus Rashaz can describe time and space as being "existentially effaced in the *or eyn sof barukh hu*" and simultaneously as being "not ... completely effaced from existence." Moreover, it is "*malkhut* ... that is, the faculty of *simsum*" that both facilitates effacement and prevents effacement.⁶⁶

Here Wolfson's application of the term "apophatic panentheism" is helpful; this is a panentheistic conception because the one G-d is affirmed in everything, but this panentheism is apophatic because such affirmation is synonymous with the existential negation of everything in relation to the one G-d.⁶⁷ Similarly, Wolfson coins the term "acosmic naturalism" to underscore that in Habad the utter lonesomeness of divine being does not constitute a denial of the reality of nature as we know it, for through the medium of *malkhut* and the affectation of transcendence the divine infinitude that effaces nature is rendered the immanent ground of nature itself.⁶⁸

Yet the case for a "hard" acosmic reading of Rashaz's doctrine cannot simply be closed here. After all, the texts assessed so far refer primarily to the "Lower Unity" according to which G-d is united within the world, thus affirming the divine reality of the world's existence, and the reality of space and time. Now we must turn our attention to the question of whether or not the doctrine of "Upper Unity" should be construed as acosmic.

⁶⁴ Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent*, 51; Rashaz, T2:7, 82b.

⁶⁵ My thinking on this point was clarified via personal correspondence with Elliot R. Wolfson, and is also informed by his comment that "effacing is always also a facing of what cannot be faced." (*Open Secret*, 90.) However, in Wolfson's own translation of this text (*ibid.*, 89), the term *bateil bimesi'ut* is rendered as "ontically nullified." Elsewhere he writes that "nonexistence does not imply a negation of the existence of the phenomenal world, but a reassessment of its existence" (*ibid.*, 113). This conception of "nonexistence" seems to align with the notion of "existential effacement" outlined here.

⁶⁶ Rashaz, T2:7, 82a-b. Above, n55.

⁶⁷ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 90.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

Rashaz dedicates the latter chapters of *Sha'ar hayihud veva'emunah* to explaining this doctrine in detail. But for our purposes it will suffice to cite a briefer encapsulation that occurs as an aside in the midst of his earlier discussion of *malkhut*:

The definition and designation “world” applies to the dimension of space and the dimension of time specifically ... All these dimensions have no bearing on the supernal holy faculties [of G-d]. Only regarding His faculty of *malkhut* alone is it possible to say that He is sovereign above without limit and below without end, and likewise in the four directions, and likewise in time, “G-d is sovereign, G-d was sovereign, G-d will be sovereign” ... And since His faculty of sovereignty is united with His essence and being to the ultimate degree of union, as will be explained, therefore the dimensions of time and space too are existentially effaced (*beteilim bimesi'ut*) in relation to the being and essence of G-d, like the light of the sun within the sun. And this is the integration of the name *adnut* within the name *havaya* [i.e. the “Upper Unity”].⁶⁹

גדר ובחי' שם עולם נופל על בחי' מקום ובחי' זמן דוקא ... כל בחי' אלו אין להן שייכות במדות הקדושות העליונות כי אם במדת מלכותו ית' לבדה שייך לומר שהוא ית' מלך למעלה עד אין קץ ולמטה עד אין תכלית וכן לד' סטרין וכן בבחי' זמן ה' מלך ה' מלך ה' ימלוד ... ולפי שמדת מלכותו ית' מיוחדת במהותו ועצמותו ית' בתכלית היחוד כמו שיתבאר הלכך גם בחי' המקום והזמן בטילים במציאות ממש לגבי מהותו ועצמותו ית' כביטול אור השמש בשמש וזהו שילוב שם אדנות בשם הוי"ה

Regarding the “Lower Unity,” Rashaz wrote that “the faculty of *simsum* and concealment [serves] to conceal the or *eyn sof barukh hu* so that time and space shall not be completely effaced from existence.”⁷⁰ Yet here, when it comes to the “Upper Unity,” he says that this very faculty is itself one with the being and essence of G-d, and “the dimensions of time and space too are existentially effaced.” What is the nature of this existential effacement? Does it mean that the existence of the time space continuum is erased? One might suppose so, but such a supposition is not borne out when we take note that Rashaz illustrates this point with an analogy of the light of the sun within the sun. This is the second occurrence in *Sha'ar hayihud veva'emunah* of this analogy. The first occurrence, a few chapters prior, is more elaborate:

It is obvious that this light and ray exists within the body and matter of the globe of the sun itself, which is in the heavens, for if it extends and shines to such great

⁶⁹ Rashaz, T2:7, 82a. The parentheses appear in the original.

⁷⁰ As cited above, n55.

distances it must certainly be able to shine literally in its place. Only that there, literally in its place, this ray is considered literally as nothing and naught because it is literally existentially effaced there relative to the globe of the sun itself ... When it is in its source in the sun itself the term “entity” does not apply to it at all ... for nothing shines there but its source alone, which is the shining sun itself, and beside it naught.⁷¹

זה פשוט שאור וזיו הזה ישנו ג"כ בגוף וחומר כדור השמש עצמו שבשמים שאם מתפשט ומאיר למרחוק כ"כ כ"ש שיוכל להאיר במקומו ממש רק ששם במקומו ממש נחשב הזיו לאין ואפס ממש כי בטל ממש במציאות לגבי גוף כדור השמש ... כשהוא במקורו בגוף השמש אין נופל עליו שם יש כלל ... שאין מאיר שם רק מקורו לבדו שהוא גוף השמש המאיר ואפס בלעדו

Here it is emphasized that the light does exist within the source wherein it is existentially effaced. What is lost is not its existence but its nominal identification as an independent “entity”.⁷² Within the globe of the sun, sunlight is nothing more and nothing less than the sun itself. Within the being and essence of G-d, likewise, divine sovereignty is nothing more and nothing less than G-d’s self. The existence of the time space continuum is not erased, but its independent identity is overcome because it is enfolded within the divine self. There is only G-d, and G-d encompasses all, including the reality of the time space continuum. Here too, *bitul bimesi’ut*, existential effacement, is not synonymous with the effacement of existence. As Rashaz puts it later on in the same treatise, the point here is that “in its source within the body of the sun ... there the ray and light are one essence with the radiant luminary itself.”⁷³

To contemplate “Higher Unity” is to contemplate the one G-d within whom the world is enfolded. To contemplate “Lower Unity” is to contemplate the one G-d who is unfolded within the world. In Loewenthal’s succinct formulation: “Existence is absorbed in the Infinite and the Infinite is expressed in existence.”⁷⁴ Neither of these conceptions entail a denial of material reality, nor do they exhaust Habad’s understanding of the relationship between G-d and the cosmos.

⁷¹ Rashaz, T2:3, 78a-b.

⁷² Cf. the relevant discussion of the analogy of the sun and sunlight in Schwartz, *Mahshevet ḥabad*, 31-42. After lengthy deliberation he concludes that “without the *simsum* the world does not exist **independently**, and its **independent** existence borders on cognitive illusion” (ibid., 40, emphasis added).

⁷³ Rashaz, T2:10, 87a-b: הזיו והאור שם עצם אחד ממש עם גוף המאור המאיר ... במקורו בגוף השמש ... For further aspects of Rashaz’s use of this analogy, both here and elsewhere in his corpus of teachings, see Rothschild, “The Role of Materiality,” 65, 141-4, 192-9, and 231-2.

⁷⁴ Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 147.

Part 3 - Does the Distinction Between *Eḥad* and *Yaḥid* Provide an Acosmic Opening?

The two words *eḥad* and *yaḥid*, which respectively translate as “one” and “singular” provide another prism through which Rashaz develops his conception of divine unity. The juxtaposition of these two words appears frequently in the transcripts of his oral discourses—but not in *Tanya*—and here we will focus on examples that appear in the classical compendia *Torah or* and *Likutei torah*. Later Habad masters did find an acosmic opening in the conception of *yaḥid*, but their interpretation is not explicitly found in Rashaz’s own words and must therefore be dealt with separately.⁷⁵ As will be shown here, even his most radical elaborations of the meaning of this term affirm that even from the perspective of *yaḥid* the material world does indeed exist.

Elliot Wolfson—who to my knowledge is the only scholar to have subjected the juxtaposition of *eḥad* and *yaḥid* to academic scrutiny—has characterized the former as “the enumerated one” and the latter as “the unique One.”⁷⁶ He appropriately aligns *eḥad* with “the transcendental and immanent aspects [of the divine] ... that are notionally and semantically meaningful only in relation to the world,” and *yaḥid* with “the light of the Infinite in and of itself ... [that] is ‘not in the category of worlds at all.’”⁷⁷ He goes on to make the crucial argument that ultimately the sharp distinction between these two terms must be problematized:

Even if we grant that the divine essence is not circumscribable within the dual frame of the light-that-is-transcendent and the light-that-is-immanent, we would insist nonetheless that it cannot be completely removed therefrom.⁷⁸ Indeed, the vocation of the Jew in giving witness to the oneness of the Creator underscores the point ... In the declaration of faith “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4) ... the worshipper gives verbal assent to and thereby participates in the puzzle of incarnation, the commingling of the metaphysical and physical. The liturgical confession, therefore, is the axial event that provides habitation for the light that exceeds the boundaries of time and place in the world that is bounded by time and place.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ See Yoel Kahn et. al. *Sefer ha'erekhim ḥabad*, vol. 8 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2009), 196n48, and further elaboration *ibid.*, vol. 9 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 20??), 204-10.

⁷⁶ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 79. Also see Kahn et. al, *ibid.*, vol. 8, 335-60.

⁷⁷ Wolfson, *ibid.*, 88.

⁷⁸ Cf. Kahn et. al, *ibid.*, vol. 9, 208.

⁷⁹ Wolfson, *ibid.*, 89.

Wolfson footnotes this argument with a citation to a text by the sixth Rebbe, but it can already be found in a text by Rashaz that Wolfson himself cited earlier as one of the sources for the distinction between *ehad* and *yahid*:

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one (*ehad*)” ... The word *ehad* requires explanation, for it apparently does not indicate the true singularity of G-d—that He alone exists and there is nothing aside from Him. The word *ehad* does not indicate this, for *ehad* is the first of a series. By way of example, Jacob had twelve sons and Reuben is nevertheless called *ehad*. Isaac, by contrast, is called *binkha yehidkha* [your only (“singular”) son], and here too [in the Shema] it should have said G-d is *yahid* (“singular”) ... On the part of the being and essence of the Holy One the word *ehad* is not applicable at all, for He is singular and unique (*yahid umeyuhad*), and only He exists. But [the explanation is] as the sages said, He is one (*ehad*) in the seven heavens, on earth, and the four directions of the world, meaning that even in heaven and on earth ... [which are] in the aspect of divisiveness and separation, nevertheless His singularity and unity (*yihudo ve’ahduto*) dwells and self-reveals [therein], and they are united in [the divine] *ehad* and subject to the light of G-d that is revealed within them ... In the time of exile the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends to the uppermost heights, that is, to his being and essence, the aspect that is singular and unique (*yahid umeyuhad*), which is not within the circumscription of the worlds at all ... But even in exile the one G-d has not forsaken us and gave us the power ... to draw down His singularity and oneness (*yihudo ve’ahduto*) into the lower realms, that the name of G-d shall be manifestly *ehad* even within the differentiated dimensions, up and down etc., in the physical and in the spiritual, and this is [the meaning of] “Hear, O Israel” ...⁸⁰

שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד ... מלת אחד שאינו מורה לכאורה על אמתית יחודו ית' שהוא לבדו הוא ואפס זולתו ואין מלת אחד מורה על זה שהרי יש אחד המנוי ג"כ ע"ד משל יעקב היה לו י"ב שבטים ואעפ"כ נק' ראובן אחד. אך יצחק נק' בנך יחידך וגם כאן הוי ליה למימר ה' יחיד ... לגבי קוב"ה מצד עצמותו ומהותו ית' לא שייך עליו מלת אחד כלל שהרי הוא יחיד ומיוחד והוא לבדו הוא אלא כמאמר רז"ל שהוא אחד בשבעה רקיעים ובארץ ... בחי' התחלקות ופירוד אעפ"כ שורה ומתגלה יחודו ואחדותו ית' ואינן מתייחדין באחד שכולם בטלים לגבי אור ה' השורה ומתגלה בהם ... בימי הגלות סליק קוב"ה לעילא לעילא דהיינו לגבי בחי' מהותו ועצמותו בחינת יחיד ומיוחד שאינו בגדר עלמין כלל ... אלא שאף בגלותנו לא עזבנו ה' אחד ונותן לנו הכח ... להיות יכולים להמשיך בחינת יחודו ואחדותו ית' למטה בתחתונים להיות שם ה' אחד בגילוי גם בבחי' התחלקות הקצוות מעלה ומטה כו' בגשמיות ורוחניות ... וזהו שמע ישראל

⁸⁰ Rashaz, *TO*, 55b-c.

At the outset, the utter transcendence marked as *yaḥid* is sharply juxtaposed with the immanent union marked as *eḥad*. But when this juxtaposition is read in the full context of the argument being made, it becomes clear that such a divide marks an exilic state in which G-d's presence is not felt in the world. The true meaning of *eḥad* is that G-d's singular uniqueness (*yaḥid*) should be made imminently manifest even within the world. The call "Hear, O Israel" is a reminder and realization of the redemptive mission to draw down divine "singularity and oneness (*yihudo ve'ahduto*)," such that even the differentiated and enumerable dimensions of the lower realms should be transparent to the singular being of G-d. Ultimately, in other words, the phenomenology of *yaḥid* must be affirmed within the realm of *eḥad*.

This point is further underscored and elaborated in another text in which Rashaz equates the revelation of *yaḥid* within the cosmos with the affirmation of the "Upper Unity," and explains that this is the purpose for which the soul of man descends into this physical realm:

The descent of the souls is for the purpose of ascent, for before their descent they were in the aspect of *eḥad* ... but after their descent below to refine [the terrestrial world] via their toil in Torah and the commandments ... they draw forth the revelation of the *or eyn sof*, which is called *yaḥid*.⁸¹

הירידה של הנשמות צורך עליה שקודם ירידתן היו בבחי' אחד ... אבל לאחר ירידתם למטה לברר ע"י עסקם בתומ"צ ... ממשיכים גילוי אור א"ס ב"ה הנק' יחיד

Yaḥid marks the affirmation that G-d is the only being, that He alone exists. But it is clear from these texts that this does not entail an acosmic denial of earthly existence. On the contrary, it is specifically in this world that the exclusive being of G-d can be attested to and affirmed via the cosmic activities of embodied souls. It is precisely this conception that Wolfson has termed acosmic naturalism. In his own words:

The adjective *acosmic* connotes that there is no world that is not enfolded in the essence that is the light of the Infinite, whereas the noun *naturalism* indicates that there is no unfolding without the enfolded, no manifestation but in the occlusion that is the world.⁸²

⁸¹ Rashaz, *LT bamidbar*, 70a-b.

⁸² Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 93.

Acosmic naturalism, accordingly, expresses the paradoxical notion that the utter singularity of divine being, the fact that G-d alone exists, can only be properly expressed, unfolded, and affirmed, in the concrete reality of the natural world.

This paradox is related to the argument developed above according to which Rashaz's oft repeated declaration that the world is "existentially effaced" should properly be understood in a phenomenological sense that relates to the very construction of reality itself. Just as the singularity of divine being can only be affirmed in the creation of an apparently independent cosmos, so creation depends on its own phenomenological effacement within the singular being of G-d. This conception is further borne out in a third text—from a discourse in *Torah or* beginning with the words *Yavi'u levush malkhut*—that similarly invokes the sharp distinction between *eḥad* and *yaḥid* and then upends it:

Of this radiance and manifestation from the [light that] encircles all realms (*sovev kol almin*) ... it is said "the Lord was sovereign, attired in majesty" (Psalms, 93:1). The meaning is as it is said, "singular (*yaḥid*), life of the worlds, sovereign (*melekh*) etc." Meaning that He, blessed be He, is singular and unique (*yaḥid umeyuḥad*). He is alone, just as it was before the world was created etc. As it is written, "You are G-d, alone etc." (Isaiah, 37:20.) And this is the difference between the meaning and explanation of the word *eḥad* and the meaning and explanation of the word *yaḥid*: For the word *eḥad* refers to the extension of His blessed unity, and it is drawn into the seven heavens and earth, and the four directions of the world, that they shall be subjugated and encompassed in His supernal singularity ... Whereas *yaḥid* refers to His blessed unity that is true and literal, before it is drawn into the worlds, that He alone exists (*hu levado hu*), and therefore [even] after the creation of the worlds it is written that "there is none other than He" (Deuteronomy, 4:5) because all is literally considered as nothing before Him, and that which is drawn forth to be the life of the worlds is only the aspect of [the divine] "sovereign" (*melekh*) ... By way of a parable, this is like a king who rules over a state, and whose essence and being remains transcendent and does not extend throughout the state. Only his name alone, ... the glory of his sovereignty and the splendor of his greatness, extends throughout his state, [and] due to this they accept upon themselves the yoke of his sovereignty and rule. Similarly, this manifestation from the [light that] encircles all realms (*sovev kol almin*) for the maintenance, life and creation *ex nihilo* [of the world] is the

extension of His sovereignty and transcendence. By dint of Him being “the sovereign who is exalted alone (*levado*) from aforeside” and “the one who transcends the days of the world” life and creation is drawn to all the creations, something from nothing, that is, [the substance of created existence arises] from the transcendence that is a radiance of real nothingness.⁸³

על הארה והמשכה זו שמבחי' סוכ"ע ... נאמר ה' מלך גאות לבש. והענין הוא כמאמר יחיד חי העולמים מלך כו'. שהוא ית' יחיד ומיוחד הוא לבדו כמו קודם שנבה"ע כו'. וכמ"ש אתה ה' לבדך כו'. וזהו ההפרש שבין פי' וביאור מלת אחד לפי' וביאור מלת יחיד. כי מלת אחד מורה על המשכת יחודו ית'. ונמשך בז' רקיעים וארץ וד' רוחות העולם להיות בטלים ונכללים ביחודו העליון ... משא"כ בחי' יחיד מורה על יחודו ית' האמת ממש טרם שנמשך בעולמות שהוא לבדו הוא ולכך אחר בריאת העולמות אין עוד מלבדו כתיב דכולא קמיה כלא חשיבי ממש אלא שנמשך להיות חי העולמים הוא רק בחי' מלך ... כמו המלך המושל במדינה עד"מ שאין עצמותו ומהותו נתפס ומתפשט במדינה כולה רק שמו לבדו ... כבוד מלכותו ותפארת גדולתו הוא המתפשט במדינתו מזה מקבלים עול מלכותו וממשלתו עליהם כך המשכה זו שמסוכ"ע לקיום וחיות והתהוות יש מאין הוא בבחי' התפשטות מלכותו והתנשאותו ית' כי לפי שהוא המלך המרום לבדו מאז והמתנשא מימות עולם מזה נמשך חיות והתהוות כל הנבראים ליש מאין דהיינו מבחי' ההתנשאות שהוא הארת אין ממש

In this text, Rashaz invokes “the difference between the meaning and explanation of the word *ehad* and the meaning and explanation of the word *yahid*” precisely in order to explain that each of these stances depends upon the other. Indeed, it is only “by dint of Him being ‘the sovereign who is exalted alone from aforeside and the one who transcends the days of the world’ (corresponding to *yahid*) [that] life and creation is drawn to all the creations (corresponding to *ehad*).” Thus, the liturgical formulation “singular (*yahid*), life of the worlds, sovereign (*melekh*)” is not read simply as a list of laudatory appellations, but rather as an indication that divine singularity and divine sovereignty are fundamentally intertwined.

Here we see that the glorious transcendence associated with *yahid*—before which the world is as nothing—does not result in the acosmic nonexistence of physical reality, but is actually manifest as the creative faculty of divine sovereignty, *malkhut*. This is a figurative transcendence that operates with literal immanence as the creative vitality of the world, a phenomenological acosmism that is the very ground of nature. The “unity that is true and literal,” before which “there is none other than He,” is present in the world as “a radiance of real nothingness” which is the ground of the created something. This aligns with Rashaz’s statement elsewhere regarding the direct dependency of creation on the essence and being of G-d and its union with the *sefirah* of *malkhut*:

⁸³ Rashaz, *Torah or*, 90c.

He alone has it in His power and ability to create something out of absolute nothingness and naught, without this “something” having any other cause preceding this “something.” In order that this “something,” created by the power of the Infinite, should have a limit and measure, the light of the Infinite was vested in the containers of the ten *sefirot* of *ašilut*, and becomes united in them to the ultimate degree of union ... However, it is known that the principal coming to be of the *yesh* and the totally distinct entity, is through *malkhut* of *ašilut*.⁸⁴

הוא לבדו בכחו ויכלתו לברוא יש מאין ואפס המוחלט ממש בלי שום עילה וסיבה אחרת קודמת ליש הזה וכדי שיהיה היש הזה הנברא בכח הא"ס בעל גבול ומדה נתלבש אור א"ס בכלים די"ס דאצילות ומתייחד בתוכן בתכלית היחוד ... אמנם מודעת זאת שעיקר התהוות היש ודבר נפרד לגמרי הוא ממל' דאצילות

This passage, which is frequently cited in later Habad texts, crystallizes the fundamental point that the transcendent essence of divine being is the intimate and immanent ground that endows creation with existence. It is accordingly understood that the concrete construction of the created cosmos notwithstanding, “He is alone, just as it was before the world was created etc.”⁸⁵ The status of G-d as *yahid*, in other words, cannot be bifurcated from creation, but must rather be understood as essential to the ontological reality thereof.

We have already noted that this paradoxical conception of *malkhut* is articulated in Chapter 7 of *Sha'ar hayihud veba'emunah*. But in the passage from “Yavi'u levush malkhut” it is expressed in terms that are both more esoteric and more dramatic, and which make it far clearer that it is precisely the effacement of the cosmos, its existential nullity relative to the transcendence of G-d's being and essence, that is most fundamental to its existence.⁸⁶ To cite another relevant formulation by Elliot Wolfson, “existence is procured through the nullification of existence.”⁸⁷ Moreover, as in the first two texts cited from *Torah or* and *Likutei torah*, in this discourse too Rashaz goes on to say that Torah study and observance of the commandments ultimately makes the transcendent *yahid* openly manifest within the physical realm as well, revealing G-d's sovereignty on earth:

⁸⁴ Rashaz, T4:20, 130b.

⁸⁵ Rashaz, *Torah or*, 90c. Above, n83.

⁸⁶ Also see Rashaz, *LT bamidbar*, 68d where this is articulated even more directly: “He [G-d] creates something from nothing via his faculty of *malkhut*, which is the aspect of exaltation and transcendence ... [and] from this transcendence itself is their vitality and endurance.”

⁸⁷ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Mysticism and the Quest for Universal Singularity—Post-Subjective Subjectivity and the Contemplative Ideal in Habad,” in *Jewish Spirituality and Social Transformation*, ed. Philip Wexler (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019), 47. See also *idem.*, *Open Secret*, 113: “The annihilation of all beings in the nothing makes possible the bringing forth of each discrete thing as something from nothing. And yet, insofar as all things persist in that nothing, to the extent that they are annihilated therein, every innovation cannot but be a renewal of that annihilation.”

Since all is considered as nothing before Him, upon whom is it possible to say [that G-d is] sovereign? But this is [possible] because the *or eyn sof barukh hu*, which transcends all realms, is drawn forth and shines in the objects with which the commandments are enacted ... for the creation *ex nihilo* of the physical something that is vested in them is from the *or eyn sof barukh hu*, which transcends all realms and encompasses all of them with total equality.⁸⁸

מאחר דכולא קמיה כלא חשיב על מי יהיה שייך ונופל לשון מלוכה אלא היינו מחמת שיומשך ויאיר אור א"ס ב"ה הסוכ"ע בגלוי ממש בדברים הנעשים בהם המצות ... שהתהוות מאין ליש הגשמי שבהם הוא מאוא"ס ב"ה הסוכ"ע ומקיף כולן בהשוואה אחת

The question with which this passage begins does not assume that the world does not exist, but that G-d so transcends the world that the relational category of sovereignty does not apply. The answer establishes that the relational link between the world and G-d's transcendent sovereignty is twofold: 1) The ritual observance of the Biblical commandments makes physical objects transparent to G-d's transcendent sovereignty. 2) The very existence of the physical realm is itself a direct incarnation of transcendent *or eyn sof*.⁸⁹

Leah Orent has suggested that “the scholarly debate on the role of mystical union and acosmic expressions in the writings of Shneur Zalman is, to a great extent, a methodological debate” that hinges on whether to pay more attention to text or to context: “Perhaps, contextual assumptions should not interfere with the plain reading of the text. On the other hand, if we ignore completely the contextual interpretation, our understanding of the quote or the phrase is deficient.”⁹⁰ I would argue, however, that it is

⁸⁸ Rashaz, *Torah or*, 90c-d. Cf. Idem., T1:48, 67b-68b: “Transcending all realms, and this does not mean transcendent and encircling from above ... His thought and knowledge, that He knows all creations, encircles each creation, from top to bottom, within it and within its most inward being, all in literal actuality ... for this knowledge is the vitality of the entire expanse of the earth's globe entirely, and its creation from nothing to something.”

סובב כל עלמין. ואין הפי' סובב ומקיף מלמעלה ... מחשבתו ודעתו שיוודע כל הנבראים מקפת כל נברא ונברא מראשו ועד תחתיתו ותוכו ותוך תוכו הכל בפועל ממש ... שהרי ידיעה זו היא חיות כל עובי כדור הארץ כולו והתהוותו מאין ליש

⁸⁹ It is noteworthy that the particular discourse under discussion here—“*Yavi'u levush malkhut*”—is one of two texts that are well known within more learned circles of the contemporary Habad community as early articulations of this point. The other is Epistle 20 of Rashaz, T4:20, 129a-133a, which was briefly cited and discussed above, note 81.

⁹⁰ Leah Orent, “Mystical Union in the Writings of the Hasidic Master, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady,” *Studies in Spirituality* 18 (2008): 69-70. Orent's own conclusion regarding Rashaz's cosmology is aligned with my own, though she draws on different texts to make her point and does not fully explain how the synthesis she points to is theorized with reference to cosmological processes of *simsum* and creation: “The transcendent dimension, as a comprehensive monistic thesis is his [Rashaz's] starting point. It presents the possibility of worlds crumbled to dust when facing transcendent reality. This principle is modified and mitigated by the immanent dimension, which presents an essential theistic gap between the created world and the supreme source of creation. The two opposing dimensions come together, as it is assumed that ‘the end is embedded in the beginning’.” (Ibid., 81.)

a mistake to juxtapose text and context as if they stand in competition with one another, and that on both counts we have demonstrated that Rashaz does not adopt an acosmic position.

This analysis also counters Roman A. Foxbrunner's claim that Rashaz's corpus of teachings should be regarded as an "unsystematic synthesis." His goal, per Foxbrunner, "was not to educate but to inspire" and "sources of inspiration need not be conceptually compatible to be effective."⁹¹ Against this position, we have shown that by reading both carefully and widely, we can better discern the complex theorization of divine union and creation that was so central to his doctrine, and also discern that the innovative and incisive theoretical paradigms through which he addressed fundamental ontological and theological questions do appear systematically throughout his corpus.

In my view, Foxbrunner's claim is more a reflection of the unsystematic nature of his own methodology than of Rashaz's, and his dichotomization of rationalism and mysticism is too simplistic to be useful.⁹² When reading these texts it is necessary to pay attention to the words, to the work the words are doing within the broader arc of the argument of the text, and to the way these formulations, arguments and texts relate to other texts within the corpus. It is also necessary to pay attention to the development and reception of these arguments within the larger historical trajectories of intellectual discourse, especially by those who were most influential in extending the living tradition of Habad learning and thought up to the present day. It is to that end that we now turn to the discourse on acosmism in the work of Rashaz's immediate disciples and successors in the Habad-Lubavitch dynasty.

Part 4 - "The Separated Something is ... the True Something"

While *Torah or* and *Likutei torah* are the best known and most studied compendia of Rashaz's discourses, they were not in fact the first to be published. They did not appear till 1837 and 1848 respectively, and they were preceded by *Be'urei hazohar* and *Siddur im da''h*, which both appeared in 1816.⁹³ There are several reasons why *Torah or* and *Likutei torah* became preeminent among Habad hasidim, and likewise predominant in scholarly treatments of Habad. But in the context of Habad's intellectual history what

⁹¹ Roman A. Foxbrunner, *Habad: The Hasidism of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), 55-6.

⁹² See Naftali Loewenthal, "Reason and 'Beyond Reason' in Habad Hasidism," in *idem.*, *Hasidism Beyond Modernity*, 129-187.

⁹³ See Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 146-7.

really sets them apart is that they were compiled and edited by Rashaz's grandson, the Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek, who was especially concerned to preserve his grandfather's original formulations as accurately as possible, and therefore prized transcripts that best adhered to Rashaz's own language rather than those that focused more on crystallising and elaborating the conceptual content of his teachings.⁹⁴ By contrast, *Be'urei hazohar* and *Siddur im da''h* were published by the latter's son, R. DovBer Schneuri, who took a much freer approach to the transcription of his father's discourses. He developed an extensively explanatory style, and more heavily relied on philosophical terminology, departing from Rashaz's words in order to more fully articulate, extend and crystallise his ideas.⁹⁵ It is partly for this reason that the authorship of these works is generally attributed to R. DovBer rather than to Rashaz.

In the context of the discourse on acosmism, the distinction of R. DovBer's approach may be better appreciated when we consider a passage in *Be'urei hazohar* that speaks directly to the question of the reality of creation:

In prayer, when one's soul expires with desire, it is effaced from its being and from something it is made nothing, and is not separate [from G-d] at all etc. And higher than this in stature is when one draws down divinity through one's prayer... that [the divine name] *havayah* [representing divine transcendence] should be revealed in this world ... in the aspect of 'something' and a substantive being specifically etc. Then the separated something is made the true something.⁹⁶

בתפלה כשכלתה נפשו בתשוקתו הוא מתבטל ממציאיותו ונעשה מיש אין ואינו נפרד כלל וכלל כו' ולמעלה ממדריגה זו הוא כשמשיך אלקות בתפלתו ... שיתגלה בחי' הוי' בזה העולם ... בבחי' יש ודבר מה דוקא כו' הרי נעשה מהיש הנפרד יש האמיתי

The first sentence excerpted here provides a relatively conventional account of mystical union with G-d, or *devekut*, in which the subjective self is entirely effaced and absorbed within the divine, undergoing a complete phenomenological transformation (“something is made nothing”). This aligns with what we have characterized as “existential effacement,” or what Loewenthal has described as an “acosmistic ecstasy in which G-d is the only reality.”⁹⁷ But R. DovBer goes on to say that there is yet a loftier form of union; rather than ascending into the transcendence of divine reality one should draw divine

⁹⁴ Ibid., 67-68 and 71.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 105-7.

⁹⁶ Rabbi DovBer Schneuri, *Be'urei hazohar* (Brooklyn: Kehot, Revised Edition 2015), 96c [192] (43c in the old pagination).

⁹⁷ Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 171. See further discussion above, p. 49.

transcendence down and make it manifest within the reality of this world. The phenomenology of earthly somethingness, substantiveness, and even separateness, should be preserved and embraced rather than transcended and effaced. More importantly, it should be reassessed and seen for what it really is, not something that stands in opposition to divine truth, but rather the concrete incarnation of divine truth. Here we have an explicit textual affirmation of Loewenthal's discerning comment that for R. DovBer "the world qua world is therefore imbued with ultimate reality."⁹⁸

In this "higher" conception, moreover, the fact that creation seems to stand as an independent reality is not an illusion at all, but actually reflects its rootedness in the true being of G-d:

The fact that it appears as if it truly exists, etc., is perforce due to a divine faculty that conveys this, that is, because it was primordial in [divine] thought, and there it is the true something.⁹⁹

מה שנראה כאלו הוא באמת יש כו' מוכרח שיהיה לזה כח אלקי השופע זה כו' והיינו מצד שקדם במחשבה ששם הוא היש האמיתי

This turn of phrase, "primordial in thought," plays on a formulation found in the mystical liturgical hymn, *lekhah dodi*, sung on Friday nights to welcome the onset of Sabbath according to which "the last in action is the first in thought" (סוף מעשה במחשבה תחילה).¹⁰⁰ In the Habad context this aphorism is usually invoked to underscore that although the physical realm, the realm of action, appears to be the lowest rung in the cosmic hierarchy, it is precisely therein that ultimate cosmic purpose lies.¹⁰¹ As Leah Orent has phrased it, "The human domain is present at the very beginning of creation as a final destination."¹⁰² Here this is invoked more specifically to explain that the true being of G-d is most concretely manifest, not in the spiritual realms of the cosmic chain, but in the physical realm that is its ultimate telos.

⁹⁸ Ibid. For a related example in which R. DovBer emphasizes the loftier status of forms of devotion that draw "that which is beyond reason into the realm of logical, rational thought and life," see Loewenthal, *Hasidism Beyond Modernity*, 135-136. Also see, *ibid.*, 141-142, for a discussion of a statement by R. Yitzchak Aizik of Homel (1780-1857), in a letter written in defense of R. DovBer: "the world is a world, but it does no harm."

⁹⁹ Rabbi DovBer Schneuri, *Be'urei hazohar*, 96b-c [191-2] (43c).

¹⁰⁰ See Reuven Kimelman, '*Lekhah dodi*' vekabalat shabbat hamashma 'ut hamistit (Magnes: Jerusalem, 2003), 47-48; S.M. Stern, "'The First in Thought is the Last in Action': The History of a Saying Attributed to Aristotle" *Journal of Semitic Studies* 7:2 (autumn 1962): 234-252, esp. 252-252.

¹⁰¹ See, for some examples, Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 195 and 207.

¹⁰² Orent, "Mystical Union," 81-82.

R. DovBer precedes to read the biblical account of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, in which it is said that the Israelites “walked on dry land in the midst of the sea” (Exodus, 15:19), as a characterization of this higher form of divine union. On the one hand, the Israelites were “in the midst of the sea,” signifying their absorption in the “supernal sea” of transcendent divinity and the effacement of their being. On the other hand:

They nevertheless walked on their feet as separate entities ... for the radiance of the true being was within them [below], as [it is] above, which is loftier than the effacement within the sea.¹⁰³

אעפ"כ הלכו ברגל בבחי' יש נפרד ... שהיה בהם בחי' הארת היש האמיתי כנ"ל שלמעלה מבחי' הביטול שבים

This explanation reflects Loewenthal’s judgement that for R. DovBer the physical world “originates and is discovered in the highest levels of the Divine,” and is therefore “a realm where the Essence of the Infinite can be communicated and expressed in the life of man.”¹⁰⁴ It is notable, however, that Loewenthal’s formulations here embody a subtle but significant shift from his own statement just one page earlier that “the Lubavitch contemplative would rise higher and higher through the realms of the Divine ... beyond the *Zimzum*, to the inwardness of the radiance of the *Ein Sof*. There, beyond existence, he would discover the *hitkalelut*, integration and absorption of all lower levels within the essence of the Divine.”¹⁰⁵ In the text by R. DovBer that we excerpted above we see that ascent and absorption within G-d is actually a lesser achievement, and the loftier station is attained when worldly existence is seen to be nothing less than a manifestation of the true something.

This text supports our broader argument that the characterization of early Habad thought as acosmistic is mistaken, and at best an unsophisticated oversimplification. More noteworthy, however, is the explicit affirmation, and even embrace, of the “somethingness” of the created realm. Such affirmation, moreover, is incorporated within a form of *devekut* that is held to be more ideal than that characterized by the transcendence of worldly embodiment. Such a positive endorsement of the ontic reality of the world—indeed, a phenomenological apotheosis of worldly reality—has no known parallel in any text whose formulation can be ascribed with certainty to Rashaz. This is not to say that in this regard R. DovBer broke new conceptual ground in absolute terms. We have already seen that Rashaz himself articulated a conception of the physical realm

¹⁰³ Rabbi DovBer Schneuri, *Be'urei hazohar*, , 96c-d [192] (43d).

¹⁰⁴ Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 171.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

as the incarnate radiance of the “real nothingness” of transcendent divinity. But he never went so far as to unequivocally declare that “the separated something is ... the true something.”

R. DovBer’s innovation, accordingly, is more idiomatic than ideological. He is breaking with the more conservative or esoteric formulations that are characteristic of his father’s original teachings and embarking on an unprecedented explication of their phenomenological implications, openly affirming an apotheosis of the created entity that previously could only be read between the lines. The *Şemaḥ Şedek*, as noted above, was more attentive to the preservation of Rashaz’s original language, and in his own notes to this particular discourse he wrote: “It was delivered by our teacher [i.e. Rashaz] on Passover 1802, but it seems that the wording is not accurate.”¹⁰⁶ He was apparently attuned to the philological departure from the characteristic idiom of his grandfather’s delivery, but did not take issue with ascribing the ideological content to Rashaz. On the contrary, in his own glosses to this discourse he notes that its content is aligned with Rashaz’s teaching that the creation of the physical realm is rooted in the transcendent divinity of the *or eyn sof*, and specifically cites Epistle 20 of Rashaz’s *Igeret hakodesh*, and the discourse “Yavi’u levush malkhut,” both of which were discussed above (Part 3).¹⁰⁷

Indeed, the sharpness of R. DovBer’s pronouncement that “the separated something is ... the true something” is highlighted when we compare it with Rashaz’s parallel statement that “life and creation is drawn to all the creations ... from the transcendence that is a radiance of real nothingness.”¹⁰⁸ Both of these formulations indicate that the separate creation is constructed from the truth of G-d’s transcendent self. But while Rashaz’s language emphasizes the “radiance of real **nothingness**” that is the ground of the created something, R. DovBer’s language emphasizes the radical implication that “the created something” is therefore “the true **something**.” Reading this distinction against Wolfson’s theorization of the Habad conception as “acosmic naturalism” we can suggest that Rashaz might have been inclined to underscore the first word in this neologism (“acosmic naturalism”) while R. DovBer might have preferred to underline the second (“acosmic naturalism”). The Habad conception is sufficiently complex that such a shift in emphasis cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Indeed, according to Loewenthal’s argument, it was

¹⁰⁶ *Şemaḥ Şedek*, in “Hosafot” to Rashaz, *MAHZ 5562 II* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2012), 609.

הוא מרבינו ז"ל בפסח תקס"ב אך כמדומה שאין הלשון מדויק

¹⁰⁷ *Şemaḥ Şedek, Be'urei hazohar I* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2013), 214. See above, notes 83 and 84.

¹⁰⁸ Rashaz, *Torah or*, 90c. Above, n83.

precisely this shift that was exacerbated in the controversial parting of ways between R. DovBer and R. Aharon of Staroselye.

A related formulation by the Şemaḥ Şedek is likewise notable:

The apparent something, which is not a true something and entity but only appears to be something, derives from the true something.¹⁰⁹

יש המדומה שאינו יש ודבר אמיתי רק שנראה ליש נלקח מיש האמיתי

While drawing back with one hand, the Şemaḥ Şedek gives with the other; the bold association of “the apparent something” with “the true something” is preemptively walked back by the insistence that though the former derives from the latter it is nevertheless “not a true something and entity but only appears to be something.” This stance will be further illuminated by the broader discussion of the Şemaḥ Şedek’s contribution to the discourse on acosmism below (Part 5).

The boldness of R. DovBer’s formulation in *Be’urei hazohar* was especially noted by the seventh Rebbe (“Ramash,” 1902-1994), who paraphrased it, cited it, and elaborated on its implications many times over the course of his tenure. In the very first discourse he delivered he sequentially cited teachings from each of his predecessors, and it is to this teaching that he turned when he came to R. DovBer.¹¹⁰

A further contribution by R. DovBer to the discourse on acosmism appears in a discourse dating from 1827, the last year of R. DovBer’s life, but which remained in manuscript till 1986.¹¹¹ The discourse exemplifies the breadth of exposition for which the author is known, and this particular passage provides another illustration of the way in which R. DovBer crystalizes and elucidates conceptions that are implicit, but more indistinct, in Rashaz’s teachings.

Above (Part 2), we addressed the distinction between the Lower Unity and the Upper Unity, which in many of the latter’s discourses is paralleled by a distinction between two forms of effacement: *bitul hayesh* (“effacement of something”) and *bitul amitiy* (“true

¹⁰⁹ Şemaḥ Şedek, *Or hatorah - vayikra, Vol 4* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1984), 1’14.

¹¹⁰ See Ramash, “Bati Legani 5711” in his *Sefer hama’amarim melukat II* (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 2012), 266-7. Further examples are cited by the editors in the Revised Edition of Rabbi DovBer’s *Be’urei hazohar*, 96c, n63. Adding to that list but not exhausting it, see Ramash, *Torat menaḥem 5711:III* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1995), 114-5; *Torat menaḥem 5713:I* (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 1997), 235; *Torat menaḥem 5716:I* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2000), 9; idem., *Sefer hasiḥot 5752 I* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2003), 87; *ibid., II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2000), 349.

¹¹¹ R. DovBer Schneuri, “Vaye’aneḥa vayarivekha” in *Ma’amarei admor ha’emša’i - devarim I* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1986), 298-336. According to one account the last discourse delivered by R. DovBer before his passing began with this opening. See Yehoshua Mondshine (ed.), *Migdal oz* (Kfar Chabad, 1980), 409.

effacement,") or *bitul bimeši'ut* ("existential effacement"), which Elliot Wolfson has respectively rendered as the lower and higher forms of denegation.¹¹² In general terms, the former (*bitul hayesh*) indexes the insignificance of the created "something" relative to the transcendent grandeur of divine infinitude, while the latter (*bitul amitiy*) indexes the existential effacement of creation as it is enfolded within that transcendence. In the passages cited above both forms of *bitul* are described in similar terms: "everything is absolutely as nothing and naught relative to His being and essence,"¹¹³ "literally as nothing and naught because it is literally existentially effaced there."¹¹⁴ In this discourse, however, R. DovBer clarifies that, in truth, the term "like naught" is only fit to describe the effacement of the world as it stands in relation to the the transcendent and immanent manifestations of the divine, but it does not sufficiently communicate the utter denegation of the world relative to the essence of G-d's self:

Even [the divine manifestations termed] *keter* ("crown"), *hokhmah* ("wisdom"), and *binah* ("understanding") of *ašilut* ("emanation") are considered literally like naught relative to the essence of the simple pleasure in *malkhut* of *eyn sof* ... but all this is possible only with that which is drawn from the essence of the *eyn sof*, blessed-be-He, in the aspects of transcendence and [of] immanent revelation ... But in the actual essence of the Infinite, blessed-be-He—which is called "singular king, alone"—it is impossible even to say that "all before Him is considered like naught" ... Rather they are not in existence and substantive at all etc. for "there is none other than He" (Deuteronomy, 4:5), and all are encompassed in the essential singularity, verily as it is, and there is nothing outside of Him upon which to apply the designation 'entity existing independently' at all.¹¹⁵

אפי' כח"ב דאצי' מקורם כלא ממש חשיבי לגבי עצמי' התענוג הפשוט במל' דא"ס ... אך כ"ז אינו שייך רק במה שנמשך מעצם א"ס ב"ה בבחי' מקיף ואו"פ ... אבל בעצמי' אא"ס ב"ה ממש שנק' מלך יחיד לבדו לא שייך לומר גם זה דכולא קמי' כלא חשיב ... אלא אינם במציאות ומהות כלל כו' כי אין עוד מלבדו והכל נכללו ביחוד העצמי' ממש כמו שהוא ואין ובר חוץ מממו שיפול עליו שם דבר במציאות בפ"ע כלל

As far as I have been able to ascertain, this may be the first explicit articulation of a distinction between "like naught" and "non other" as two different categories of effacement. This distinction would become much more significant in 20th century Habad,

¹¹² See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 112 and 122-123.

¹¹³ Rashaz, T4:6, 110a. Above, n34.

¹¹⁴ Rashaz, T2:3, 78a-b. Above, n71.

¹¹⁵ R. DovBer Schneuri, *ibid.*, 315.

when it would be further crystallized and built upon by the fifth and seventh rebbes.¹¹⁶ Substantively, however, the general conception that there is “non other” than G-d is directly aligned with that signified by the characterization of G-d as *yaḥid* (“singular”) as elucidated in Rashaz’s discourse “Yavi’u levush malkhut.” It is also aligned with the conception developed in R. DovBer’s *Be’urei hazohar* according to which “the separate something” is nothing other than “the true something.” While the 1827 discourse emphasizes the utter effacement of creation rather than its apotheosis as “the true something,” the reality of all created beings is nevertheless affirmed: “all are verily encompassed in the essential singularity.” Likewise, both texts clearly delineate the essence as a third category, which overcomes and enfolds the binary dialectics of immanence and transcendence, something and nothing, creation and creator.¹¹⁷ This further illustrates the way that R. DovBer clarifies conceptions and categories that are already present in Rashaz’s teachings in less distinct form.

One more relevant text similarly remained in manuscript till 1986, when it was published in *Ma’amarei admor hazaken - ketuvim II*. The editor, Gavriel Shapiro, noted that it was found in a manuscript that contains discourses by both Rashaz and R. DovBer, and that it was not clear which of them was the author of this particular discourse.¹¹⁸ The relevant passage reads as follows:

The world is constantly renewed from nothing to something via many great devolutions from above to below, from cause to effect, and the effect is effaced and secondary relative to the cause; for it cannot be said that there are no worlds at all, meaning that they are null and don’t exist at all, for we tangibly see worlds without end, and it is impossible to say that they are an optical illusion.¹¹⁹

תמיד מתחדש העולם מאין ליש השתלשלות רבות ועצומות מלמעלה למטה מעילה לעלול והעלול הוא בטל וטפל להעיקר, דא"א לומר שאין כלל עולמות פי' שהם בטלי' ואינם לגמרי, דהא אנו רואים בחוש עולמות אין מספר, וא"א שהם אחיזת עינים

Putting the question of authorship aside, the explicit rejection of acosmism that appears here is formulated in terms that closely preempt the much more developed rejection of acosmism found in the discourses of the fourth Rebbe of Habad-Lubavitch, which will be

¹¹⁶ See Rashab, *Sefer hama’amarim 5660-5661-5662* (Brooklyn, BY: Kehot, 1985), 197-199; Ramash, *Likutei sihot*, vol. 25 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1987), 202n86.

¹¹⁷ For further development of this point, as reflected in *Be’urei hazohar* specifically, see below, note 131.

¹¹⁸ See Rashaz, *MAHZ ketuvim II* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2012), 110n1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

examined in the next chapter. It is possible, therefore, that the latter had seen this text or a close parallel.

Taken together, the various texts discussed above clearly counter the view that either R. DovBer or his father promulgated an acosmic doctrine. Yet, the fact that we can point to only a few texts that make this explicit is not insignificant. Indeed, the impression made upon most scholars who have perused the early Habad corpus has been that an acosmic conclusion is inescapable.¹²⁰ Though we have, I believe, more than satisfactorily extricated ourselves from that conclusion, and established that Rashaz and R. DovBer did believe the world to be real, the question begs to be asked: Why is it that neither of them felt much of a need to expressly affirm the reality of the physical world? We have only one confirmed example in which the former did so, and the latter did not so much affirm that the world exists as reconstrue our understanding of the “separated something” as identical with the “true something.” Why the ambiguity?

But perhaps this really is not so puzzling. After all, the reality of the world hardly needs approbation; the world asserts its reality as the most elemental fact. From the Habad perspective, however, the sheer obviousness of this reality constitutes a brutal obscuration of G-d’s all-encompassing presence. In an important piece of testimony R. DovBer wrote that the entire lifework of Rashaz was “to fix the simple oneness of G-d, that is, the essence of the Infinite, in the mind and heart of each individual.”¹²¹ From this perspective the brutal opacity of physical reality was precisely the obstacle that he needed to educate his disciples to overcome. It is likely that the reality of materiality was for the most part understood to be a self evident fact. But it was a fact that needed to be transfigured through the interpretive frames of the “Lower Unity” and the “Upper Unity,” as well as other theological and cosmological paradigms, as described above.

Part 5 - Disambiguating the Ontological Reality of *Şimşum* and the World

We have already argued that Rashaz’s discussion of *şimşum* in *Sha’ar hayiḥud veḥa’emunah* is designed, at least in part, to address the question of how G-d remains eternally immutable and singular while also creating the world. This philosophical problem is more sharply delineated in the writings of his grandson, the Şemaḥ Şedek,

¹²⁰ In addition to the sources reviewed earlier in this chapter, also see the relevant remarks in Immanuel Etkes, *Ba’al hatanya*, 213.

¹²¹ R. DovBer Schneuri, *Imrei binah* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, Revised Edition 2008), VIII.

לקבוע אחדו' ה' הפשוטה שהוא בחי' עצמות אא"ס ב"ה במוח ולב כל א'

who became the third Rebbe of Habad-Lubavitch following the passing of R. DovBer Schneuri in 1827. In a treatise of particular substance, published in the influential work *Derekh mišvotekha*, he addressed—among other things—the conspicuous challenge to the doctrine of divine immutability posed by the Lurianic doctrine of *šimšum*:

Understood simply, this matter is a wonder. How is contraction and removal to the sides (*šimšum vesiluk lešedadim*) possible in the infinite light, which has no corporeal form, and moreover, scripture tells us “I, G-d, have not changed” (Malachi 3:6), and *šimšum* is seemingly a great change?¹²²

לפי פשוטו הדבר פלאי איך יתכן צמצום וסילוק לצדדים באור א"ס שאין לו דמות הגוף, ומה גם שהכתוב אומר אני ה' לא שניתי (מלאכי ג' ו') והרי ענין הצמצום הוא שינוי גדול לכאורה

The Šemaḥ Šedek initially rebuffs this question by citing a distinction, already made by Rashaz, between G-d's essential self (“the luminary”) and the extension of revelatory light from G-d's self:

It was within this light that the aforementioned *šimšum* occurred, and not in the essence ... and therefore there is no change at all in the essence.¹²³

בבחי' האור הזה הוא שהי' הצמצום האמור ולא בעצמותו ח"ו ... ולכן אין שום שינוי כלל בעצמותו

A few pages later, however, he returns to probe this question more deeply, and concludes that this explanation is ultimately unsatisfactory:

After all, it is the divine self—which is infinite, immutable and immovable—that contracts its light in order to radiate a finite revelation ... and this finite revelation is bound into the divine self and drawn therefrom each moment.¹²⁴

מ"מ הוא ית' עצמו הבבע"ג ובלתי בעל שינוי' והתפעלות, הוא המצמצם אורו להאיר ממנו הארה מצומצמת ... והרי הארה מצומצמת זו אדוקה היא בו וממנו נמשכת בכל רגע

Despite the theoretical distinction between the essence and its revelation (or the luminary and the light), in other words, all the processes associated with creation must ultimately be attributed to the divine essence; they are all functions of G-d's self, even if they do not define and constrain G-d's essential being. Accordingly, this distinction does not resolve the problem of how *šimšum* can be reconciled with the principle of divine immutability.

¹²² Šemaḥ Šedek, “Mišvat ha'amanat elokut,” in *Derekh mišvotekha*, 51a.

¹²³ Ibid., 51a-b. Cf. Rashaz, *TO*, 14a-b: “The light (*or*) is called revelation ... and the Infinite Himself is the luminary, that is, the source from which the light is drawn. And behold the *šimšum* occurred in the *or eyn sof* ... but in the luminary, which is the Infinite Himself, *šimšum* is not possible.”

אור נקרא הגילוי ... וא"ס בעצמו הוא בחי' המאור שהוא מקור האור וממנו נמשך האור: והנה הצמצום היה באור א"ס ... אבל במאור שהוא א"ס עצמו לא שייך צמצום

¹²⁴ Šemaḥ Šedek, *ibid.*, 54a.

The easy way out of this problem would be to say that *šimšum* and the creation of the world are not real events, but illusions. Yet the Şemaḥ Şedek insists that this is not the case:

When G-d reckoned to contract the light and radiate in the manner of *šimšum* ... in truth so it was, and that reality was created ... and our statement that the *šimšum* has substance does not contradict the statement that “all before Him is considered like naught (*kelo*),” which implies that it is as nothing and literally null—as is explained in *Likutei amarim*, Part 2 [i.e. *Sha’ar hayiḥud veḥa’emunah*—because the meaning of “like naught” is not that they do not have any substance at all. That would be the meaning of “naught literally,” but not the meaning of “like naught,” with the comparative *kaf* ... Moreover, “all before Him is considered like naught” refers to this physical world, and we see that there exist inanimate beings, vegetation, animals, and humans, stones, houses, and earth, and how can it be “naught literally”? Rather, the meaning of “like naught” is that it does not emerge as an independently identifiable entity, analogous to the radiance of the sun when it is encompassed in the body of the sun’s globe ... There, all that is seen is the globe of the sun, for the radiance is *bateil bimeši’ut*, but this does not mean that the radiance does not exist there at all, for this is not so. Certainly the radiance is present there ... But it is effaced, and this is the meaning of “like naught.” This is likewise the case of all the worlds, that once they are created they have substance, only that before G-d they are “like naught,” like the effacement of the radiance described above, and not “naught literally.”¹²⁵

כאשר שיערה דעתו ית' לצמצם אורו ולהאיר בבחי' צמצום ... הנה באמת הי' כן ונתהוו מציאות הלז ... ומה שאמרנו שהצמצום יש לו מציאות לא קשה לענין המאמר דכולא קמי' כלא חשיב דמשמע שהוא כאין ואפס ממש וכמו שנת' בלק"א ח"ב (פ"ו) כי אין הכוונה בפ"י כלא שאין להם מציאות כלל דזהו לא ממש ולא כלא בכ"ף הדמיון ... ועוד דהא פי' כולא קמי' כלא חשיבי' קאי על עוה"ז הגשמי והרי אנו רואים שיש דומם צומח חי ומדבר אבנים ובתים ועפר כו' ואיך הוא לא ממש, אלא פי' כלא היינו שאינו עולה בשם בפ"ע כזיו השמש כשהוא בגוף הכדור השמש ... שם לא נראה רק כדור השמש מפני שהזיו בטל במציאות, ואין הכוונה שאינו נמצא שם כלל שזה אינו כי ודאי נמצא שם ... אלא שבטל וזהו פי' כלא, שכמ"כ הם ענין כל העולמות לאחר בריאתם שיש להם מציאות אלא שקמי' הוא כלא כביטול הזיו כנ"ל ולא לא ממש

This distinction between “like naught” and “naught literally” is not entirely new. As we have already noted, it was already explicated by Rashaz himself.¹²⁶ What is new is the fullness of the Şemaḥ Şedek’s elucidation and theorization, and its direct application to

¹²⁵ Ibid., 54b. See Schwartz, *Mahshevet ḥabad*, 182-4, where this outright rejection of acosmism is noted while its significance is downplayed as only representing “a particular Habad tradition.”

¹²⁶ Rashaz, *LT devarim*, 38d. Above, n13.

the fundamental questions of acosmism, divine immutability, and the ontological significance of *šimšum*. If there was any ambiguity before, this paragraph erases it. the Šemaḥ Šedek's express view is that Rashaz never intended the term *bateil bimeši'ut* to convey a hard acosmistic stance.

Especially noteworthy is the Šemaḥ Šedek's clear statement that "the *šimšum* has substance," meaning that *šimšum* is a real ontological event, and not simply an illusion or a mere metaphor. At the outset of this chapter we noted that Rashaz famously re-interpreted *šimšum* in a manner that rejects its "literal" implications, and yet for the Šemaḥ Šedek this re-interpretation absolutely does not empty *šimšum* of ontological significance.¹²⁷ To reiterate a point made above, here *šimšum* emerges clearly as a cosmological event wherein the illusion of absence is the substance out of which created reality is constructed.

The Šemaḥ Šedek's stance is thrown into sharper relief in a text which carries the direct imprint of all three of the early Habad leaders whose contributions have so far been discussed. This is a discourse delivered by Rashaz on the seventh day of Passover in the year 1804, as transcribed by his son—the aforementioned R. DovBer—and subsequently copied and annotated by our third protagonist, the Šemaḥ Šedek. It was first published from manuscript in 1967, as part of the multi volume compendium of the latter's discourses titled *Or hatorah*.¹²⁸

This discourse shares two notable themes with the discourse published in *Be'urei hazohar* that we discussed above (Part 4): First, it focuses on the mystical significance of the splitting of the sea as described in the book of Exodus. Second, it describes a form of mystical union during prayer in which the phenomenological distinction between the "separated" creation and the divine creator is overcome. Here, however, the description of this transformation is not quite so bold, and is more closely tied to the union of two

¹²⁷ For a roughly contemporaneous text, in which both the existence of the world and the non-literal interpretation of *šimšum* are affirmed, see R. Hillel Malisov, "Likutei be'urim" appended to R. DovBer Schneuri, *Ner mišvah vatorah or* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2010), 175d-176d [350-2]. R. Hillel Malisov of Paritch (1795-1864), was an important disciple of both R. DovBer and the Šemaḥ Šedek. In his text, however, the affirmation of the reality of created existence is appended in parenthesis to the main discussion wherein divine immutability is invoked as a substantiation of the non-literal interpretation of *šimšum*. The Šemaḥ Šedek, by contrast, offered a more sophisticated theorization according to which the principle of divine immutability is upheld even as it is declared that "the *šimšum* has substance."

¹²⁸ Šemaḥ Šedek, *Or hatorah - shemot II* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1967), 473-489. The editors note that this was published from a copyist's manuscript, rather than from the original autograph manuscript by the Šemaḥ Šedek. For more details on extant manuscript copies of this discourse, including a manuscript that was used and referred to by the Šemaḥ Šedek, see the relevant details in *MAHZ 5564* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1980), 348, notes 45-47. Regarding the attribution of these transcripts to R. DovBer, see *ibid.*, v. note 5.

particular stations in the cosmic hierarchy delineated in the Lurianic Kabbalistic tradition, namely the realms of *ašilut* (“emanation”) and *beri’ah* (“creation”):

Embodied in their union is a great transformation relative to how it was at first, for the curtain that divides between *ašilut* and *beri’ah* ... divides entirely, to the point that there is no relationship at all between *beri’ah* and *ašilut*, for the realm of *ašilut* is divine, and the realms of *beri’ah* are creations in the aspect of “something” and are verily separate [from the divine] ... and [yet] when one says “G-d, open my lips” [prior to beginning the *amidah* prayer] this signifies the ascent into the chamber of the holy-of-holies of *beri’ah*, and this holy-of-holies chamber is verily made into *ašilut*.¹²⁹

יש ביחודם שינוי גדול מכמו שהי' תחלה שהרי הפרסא המפסקת בין אצי' לבריאה ... היא מבדלת לגמרי עד שאין ערוך כלל וכלל בין בריאה לאצי' שהרי עולם האצי' הוא אלהות והבריאה הם נבראים בבחי' יש ונפרדים ממש ... ובאמרו ה' שפתי תפתח הו"ע עלייתם בהיכל ק"ק דבריאה וזה ההיכל קד"ק נעשה ממש אצי'

This certainly echoes the apotheosis of the created “something” as expressed by R. DovBer in *Be’urei hazohar* (“the separated something is made the true something”), but it is more aligned with the more conventional mode of divine union mentioned there (“in prayer, when one’s soul expires with desire, it is effaced from its being and from something it is made nothing, and is not separate [from G-d] at all”). Here, moreover, the description of this transformation is muted by the use of more normative Kabbalistic terminology, according to which the ascent into the divine realms reaches *ašilut* but no higher. This limitation is substantially underscored in an extensive gloss appended to the discourse by the Şemaḥ Şedek, who first queries the very possibility of such a transformation, and then provides a particular explanation of its nature whose contrast to the explanation given in *Be’urei hazohar* requires some unpacking.

The question posed is a simple one:

How is it possible that a created being can be transformed to become divine?¹³⁰

האיך יתכן שממהות נברא יתהפך להיות אלהות

While these are the Şemaḥ Şedek’s words, it is instructive to note that R. DovBer similarly acknowledged the incompatibility of “the existential effacement of the supernal sea” (broadly equated with *ašilut*) and “the aspect of something and separation” of the

¹²⁹ Şemaḥ Şedek, *ibid.*, 486. On the distinction between *ašilut* and *beri’ah*, see Jacobson, *Emet emunah ukedusha*, 241-249.

¹³⁰ Şemaḥ Şedek, *Or hatorah - shemot II*, 487.

“dry land” (broadly equated with *beri'ah*).¹³¹ But he resolves this incompatibility by clarifying that the phenomenological transformation of the “separated something” into the “true something” is not a simple transition across the binary divide between the “somethingness” of *beri'ah* to the “nothingness” of *ašilut*. Rather, this transition is synonymous with the introduction of the true being of G-d, which entirely transcends such binary oppositions and all the various stations of the cosmos. As R. DovBer puts it:

Rather the matter is that in them was the radiance of the true being, as mentioned above, which transcends the station of the effacement of the sea, and this is the aspect of the third perspective before which the “something” and the “nothing” are equal. That is, that in their passage “on dry land in the midst of sea” was revealed the Ancient of All (*atika dekola*) ... “who transcends the days of the world,” whether sea or dry land; and the devolution of the creations has no relationship to Him at all ...¹³²

אלא הענין הוא שהיה בהם בחי' הארת היש האמיתי כנ"ל שלמעלה מבחי' הביטול שבים והוא ענין דעה הג'
דשויין קמי' בחי' היש והאין כו' והיינו שנתגלה בהליכתם ביבשה בתוך הים הארת עתיקא דכולא ... שהוא
מתנשא מימות עולם בין דים בין דיבשה ואין השתלשלות הנבראים ערוך אליו כלל וכלל

This might be termed a true apotheosis, in which the created realm does not merely ascend into the divine realm that is its cosmic source, but is rather engulfed in the transcendent self of G-d, “the true being,” which is oblivious to the normative categories that govern relationships between one realm and another in the cosmic hierarchy. In a sense, R. DovBer actually affirms that the premise of the *Şemaḥ Şedek*'s question should be upheld; the created being cannot simply cross the binary divide into the divine realm of *ašilut*. Such are the reigning circumscriptions within the cosmic hierarchy; the boundary between the divine realms and the created realms is impermeable. According to R. DovBer, the hierarchy must be transcended, indeed disregarded, in order for apotheosis to transpire.

The approach taken by the *Şemaḥ Şedek*, however, is quite different. On the contrary, he reduces the distinction between *beri'ah* and *ašilut* to a mere question of epistemology, which can easily be overcome, while drawing an insurmountable ontological divide between all the realms of the cosmic hierarchy (*ašilut* included), on the one hand, and the

¹³¹ R. DovBer Schneuri, *Be'urei hazohar*, 96c [192] (43d).

אמנם כשהלכו בים הי' בהם ג"כ בחי' הביטול המציאות כנבראים שבים העליון ואעפ"כ הלכו ברגל בבחי' יש נפרד כו' א"כ לא הי'
יש זה נפרד שהרי הביטול והפרוד המה שני הפכים כידוע

¹³² *Ibid.*, 96c-d [192] (43d). The phrase “who transcends the days of the world” is from the daily prayer liturgy.

being and essence of G-d, on the other hand. This insurmountable ontological divide, the Şemaḥ Şedek tells us at the outset of his gloss, is synonymous with the primordial *şimşum*:

The realm of *aşilut*, though it is divine, is not the actual essence of the Creator ... As is written in the beginning of *Eş ḥayim* that initially the *or eyn sof* filled the place of the hollow, and afterwards contracted Himself (*şimşem et aşmo*), and then was created the station of Primordial Man (*adam kadmon*), and afterwards was created the realm of *aşilut* ... This being so, the fact that the realm of *aşilut* is called “divine” is not intended to assert that it is the essence of the Creator, for the being and essence of the Creator far transcends the realm of *aşilut* exactly as it does the realm of *asiyah* (“action,” the lowest of the four cosmic realms).¹³³

עולם האציל עם היותו אלהות אינו ממש עצמות הבורא ... וכמ"ש בע"ה מתחלתו שמתחלה ה' הא"ס ממלא
מקום החלל ואח"כ צמצם א"ע וזה נתהווה בחי' א"ק ואח"כ נתהווה האציל ... וכיון שכן מה שנק' עולם האציל
אלהות אין הכוונה ה"ו לומר שהם עצמות הבורא שהבורא ית' מהותו ועצמותו מרומם ונשגב מעולם האציל כמו
מעשי' ממש

This last clause, equating *aşilut* with *asiyah* relative to the transcendent essence of divine being, aligns strongly with R. DovBer's notion of “the third perspective before which the ‘something’ and the ‘nothing’ are equal.” Yet, the Şemaḥ Şedek does not invoke this to explain why the gap between creation and the true being of G-d can so easily be bridged, but on the contrary, to emphasize the insurmountable distinction between the divine realm of *aşilut* and “the being and essence of the Creator”; just as *asiyah* is certainly far removed from the essence and being of the Creator, so is *aşilut*. In the continuation of this gloss, the Şemaḥ Şedek explains that the fundamental distinction between the realms of creation (known by the acronym *BeY”A*, for *beri’ah*, *yeşirah*, and *asiyah*) and the divine realm of *aşilut* depends entirely on self-perception, and thus the boundary between them can easily be crossed so long as the right degree of phenomenological effacement is attained and granted during prayer:

The definition of the “creation” is that in its own perception it is separate, for it is something and an independent entity apart from the Creator. Yet, its somethingness and separation is only from its own perspective ... but from the Creator's perspective it is not so, for all before Him is verily considered like naught (*kelo*) ... However, the nature of the realm of *aşilut* is that even in their

¹³³ Şemaḥ Şedek, *Or hatorah - shemot II*, 487-8.

own perception they are not separate at all, rather they sense and see that they are like the radiance of the sun when it is within the globe of the sun itself, and it transpires that they are entirely effaced ... And for this reason the term “creations” does not apply to them, for they are not separate at all ... Now we can somewhat understand how a created entity can be transformed into divinity ... When there is within it such effacement it will not at all be in the aspect of separation and something in its own perception, and such is the aspect of divinity, as explained above that *ašilut* is that which has such effacement ... And of this I say that it has transformed from a created entity into a divine entity, but not, heaven forbid, into the being of the Creator, blessed-be-He ... On the contrary, when transformed into a divine entity it more strongly senses how it is in truth considered as nothing relative to the Creator.¹³⁴

וגדר הנברא הוא שהוא נפרד בעיניו שהרי הוא יש ודבר לעצמו זולתי הבורא ית' מיהו היותו יש ונפרד אינו אלא לגבי עצמו ... אבל לגבי הבורא ית' אינו כן שהרי כולא קמי' כל"ה ממש ... אולם עולם האצ"י ענינו שגם בעיניהם אינן בחי' נפרדים כלל אלא שמרגישים ורואים שהם כזיו השמש כשהוא בגוף כדור השמש, ונמצא הם בטלית' בתכלית ... ומש"ה אין נופל עליהם לקרותם נבראים כיון שאינן נפרדים כלל ... ומעכשיו יובן קצת איך יכול להיות התהפכות מהות הנברא לאלקות ... כשיהי' לו ביטול זה לא יהי' בחי' נפרד ויש כלל לעצמו וזהו בחי' אלהות כדלעיל שבחי' אצ"י הוא שיש בהם הביטול הזה ... והריני קורא בו שנתהפך ממהות נברא למהו' אלקות אבל לא חלילה למהות הבורא ית' ... ואדרבה כשנתהפך למהות אלקות ה"ז שמרגיש יותר איך שהוא באמת כלא חשיב לגבי הבורא ית'

This line of thinking, which so strongly walks back the more radical notion of the apotheosis of the created entity articulated by R. DovBer, might also be seen as leaning towards a fundamentally acosmistic position. The very “definition” that delineates the existence of a “created” entity—namely its sense of separation and independence from G-d—is subject to dissolution as soon as the created entity’s perception is adjusted to conform to that of the Creator, before whom all is considered like naught. Does that not mean that the creation never really existed to begin with, that its existence is nothing more than a fantasy or an illusion?

The opening for this question, however, is one that the Şemaḥ Şedek immediately closes. Lest one might make the mistake that he is endorsing a hard acosmic doctrine, he offers a fully articulated counterpoint that interrupts the flow of his larger argument about the narrowness of the distinction between *beri'ah* and *ašilut*. It is here that we find a second

¹³⁴ Şemaḥ Şedek, *Or hatorah - shemot II*, 488-9.

textual imprint wherein the Şemaḥ Şedek explicitly affirms the ontological reality of the created realms:

Certainly, even before Him all the creations exist, for the verse says, “In the beginning, G-d created etc” (Genesis 1:1) ... As of now, they exist, but are considered like naught (*kelo*), with the comparative *kaf*, since they are verily effaced relative to the source of their vitality—that is, the Creator, blessed-be-He, who sustains them in each moment—like the radiance of the sun when it is within the globe of the sun etc., as is explained in *Likutei amarim*, Part 2 [i.e. *Sha’ar hayiḥud veba’emunah*], see there.¹³⁵

בודאי גם קמ"י ית' נמצאו הנבראים שהרי הכתוב אומר בראשית ברא כו' ... עכשיו ישנם אלא דכלא חשיבי בכ"ף הדמיון כיון שבטילים ממש לגבי מקור החיות הוא הבורא ית' המקיימן בכל רגע כביטול זיו השמש כשהוא בתוך השמש כו' כמבואר באריכות בלק"א ה"ב עיי"ש.

Substantively, this is a reiteration of the exact point made in the above cited passages from *Derekh mišvotekha*; creation is not “naught literally” but “like naught.” The existence of all created worlds and beings is real, but that they do not exist as entities other than G-d. However, this second explication of this notion—which, as noted, appears as a gloss in *Or hatorah*—is made in harmony with a larger argument wherein the Şemaḥ Şedek loosens the specificity of the ontological term “creation,” expanding it to include all the cosmic realms that devolve in the aftermath of the primordial *šimšum*.

Accordingly, he writes, “even Primordial Man (*adam kadmon*),” which is hierarchically prior to *ašilut*, “is called ‘man of creation,’ for it is created as something out of nothing from the *eyn sof barukh hu*.”¹³⁶

This nuance serves to sharpen the intervention made by the Şemaḥ Şedek relative to the text inherited from his predecessors, Rashaz and R. DovBer. In the original transcription of the discourse to which the Şemaḥ Şedek appended this gloss it is written that:

The curtain that divides between *ašilut* and *beri’ah* ... divides entirely, to the point that there is no relationship at all between *beri’ah* and *ašilut*, for the realm of *ašilut* is divine, and the realms of *beri’ah* are creations.¹³⁷

הפרסא המפסקת בין אצי' לבריאה הנה היא ... מבדלת לגמרי עד שאין ערוך כלל וכלל בין בריאה לאצי' שהרי עולם האצי' הוא אלהות והבריאה הם נבראים

¹³⁵ Ibid., 488.

¹³⁶ Şemaḥ Şedek, *ibid.*, 488: לפי ב"ה לפי

¹³⁷ Ibid., 486.

According to the Şemaḥ Şedek, however, *aşilut* and *beri'ah* are both in the same general ontological category. Both belong to the hierarchy of the created realms. The narrower distinction between the “divine” realm of *aşilut* and the “created” realm of *beri'ah* is nevertheless upheld as a more subtle demarcation of the phenomenological border between those realms that are aware of their effacement and those that erroneously perceive themselves to exist separately, as entities other than G-d. Ontologically speaking, the Şemaḥ Şedek affirms the existence of *beri'ah* to be substantively the same as the existence of *aşilut* and even of *adam kadmon*. After all, the term *beri'ah* is applied to the latter as well.

Conclusion - Opening and Closing the Door on Acosmism

While we have only one clear record that Rashaz explicated an anti-acosmic stance, we have argued that a systematic and careful reading of his own words yields the unequivocal conclusion that he believed the world to be real. To the degree that the revelation of divinity is unfolded within the world, and to the degree to which the world is enfolded within the divine, the world is existentially effaced. But, this should not be mistaken for the effacement of the world's existence. *Şimşum*, likewise, is not illusory, but rather creates the illusion of divine transcendence or absence, which is itself the ontological basis for a world in which G-d's inherent presence is obscured.

It is likewise clear that his immediate disciples, R. DovBer and the Şemaḥ Şedek, did not interpret Rashaz's teachings in an acosmic vein. On the contrary, the former articulated a sharp apotheosis of the created entity, while the latter explicitly rejected acosmism and affirmed the ontological reality of *şimşum* and the created world.

The Şemaḥ Şedek's clear anti-acosmic stance can be seen as the first authoritative disambiguation of this question, and indeed disambiguation was part of his broader project to contextualize his grandfather's teachings and assess the ways in which they engage with broader questions raised by the Jewish thinkers and kabbalists who came before him. This project has already been discussed by Nochum Grunwald, and also by Dov Schwartz.¹³⁸ But here I want to point out a certain tension that arises from the Şemaḥ Şedek's distinctive methodological approach:

¹³⁸ Nochum Grunwald, “Hashitot vehashitaiyut bederushei rebenu hazaken: hagdarot vesivug shel shitot vede'ot bemeḥavei ketavav shel admor hazaken bemishnat haşemaḥ şedek,” in *Harav*, ed. Nochum Grunwald (Mechon Harav, 2015), 573-586; Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad*, 158-186. We should note, however, that for the most part Schwartz deals with the Şemaḥ Şedek's engagement with medieval Jewish

As we have already noted, the Şemaḥ Şedek displayed a concern to preserve Rashaz's teachings in a linguistic form that most accurately reflected Rashaz's original oral formulations.¹³⁹ Yet, in his glosses to Rashaz's discourses and in his own original writings, he sought to highlight the ways that these teachings pointed beyond what was explicated within them. He did this primarily by citing other relevant texts from the Rabbinic and Kabbalistic cannon, and also other texts by Rashaz himself, thereby contextualizing his grandfather's teachings and revealing the ways in which they addressed and illuminated broader questions, and intervened in broader discussions.¹⁴⁰

For example, in the text cited above (Part 4) from *Derekh mişvotekha* the Şemaḥ Şedek's discussion of divine immutability is principally shaped by citations from Maimonides and the Maharal of Prague, as well as classical Kabbalistic sources. Generic references to "the philosophers" also appear. In the above discussed gloss from *Or hatorah* he refers to an epistle by Rashaz that was published as an appendix to *Tanya*, and in both texts he refers to Part 2 of that work, *Sha'ar hayiḥud veva'emunah*.

The tension that arises from this methodology is that even as he highlights the ways in which Rashaz's teachings point beyond the circumscriptions of their original articulation, he remains constrained both by Rashaz's own language, and also by the terms of debate and conception that are inherited from the canonical sources to which he constantly refers. Even as he seeks to amplify his grandfather's conceptual innovations and broaden their resonance and implications, the framework within which the Şemaḥ Şedek works is inherently conservative. In the present case, this conservatism is reflected in the fact that there are only two extant texts in which the Şemaḥ Şedek unambiguously elucidates the anti-acosmic stance that otherwise remains implicit, obscured—and, for some readers, utterly indiscernible—in Rashaz's teachings. Likewise, he stops short of the radical apotheosis of the created entity, "the separate something," found in R. DovBer's *Be'urei hazohar*, and even walks it back quite considerably. While this need not be seen as a doctrinal parting of ways, the distinction in rehtroical emphasis is certainly significant.

philosophy, rather than with his intertextual approach to his grandfather's corpus, and to the wider corpus of Kabbalistic and Rabbinic literature. Cf. Ariel Roth, "Reshimu—maḥloket ḥasidut lubavitṣ vekopust," *Kabbalah* 30 (2013): 243n122.

¹³⁹ Above, note 89.

¹⁴⁰ See Eli Rubin, "The Pen Shall Be Your Friend': Intertextuality, Intersociality, and the Cosmos - Examples of the Tzemach Tzedek's Way in the Development of Chabad Chassidic Thought," *Chabad.org*, <chabad.org/3286179> (accessed Feb 2, 2020).

As we shall see in the next chapter, the Şemah Şedek's youngest son, Maharash, would boldly expand on his father's methodological approach without the constraint of such conservative tendencies.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

The Pre-*Šimšum* Primordially of the Finite and the Controversy Between Kopust and Lubavitch in the Fourth and Fifth Generations of Habad, 1865-1884

Introduction - Reassessing Research on Nineteenth-Century Habad

In 1866 Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn of Lubavitch—known as the *Šemaḥ Šedek*—passed away, after more than three decades as the leader of Habad, and as one of the most visible and influential rabbinic leaders in the Russian Empire.¹ His passing left both a vacuum and a surplus of leadership: a vacuum in that there was no longer a single figure to whom all Habad adherents deferred, and a surplus in that his six surviving sons had all been raised to be leaders, and in varying degrees had already been acting as proxies for their father, attracting admirers and disciples while he yet lived. This surplus soon resulted in the fragmentation of Habad into several distinct streams independently centered in different towns.²

Contemporary observers were quick to conclude that this marked the onset of Habad's twilight, which no doubt would be followed by utter darkness. An 1875 article by Pesah Ruderman, a Maskil of Habad background, described the *Šemaḥ Šedek* as “the last of the Habad *šadikim*.” “His sons,” he continued dismissively, “will yet live and increase ignobility. But their lives and deeds have no equity or comparison to the life and deeds of their father ... To innovate further is not within their capacity. They do not have the vitality to vitalize others. They are honored only because they are their father's sons.”³

Ilia Lurie has already noted that this conclusion was premature and erroneous. Yet Lurie and others have done little to critically re-assess developments within Habad in this period, thus exemplifying the continuing imprint of the Maskilic perspective in the academic study of Hasidism. On the one hand, scholars now tend to espouse a more critical attitude to the Maskilic characterization of the nineteenth-century as a period of

¹ Despite the length of his tenure and his visibility, the academic literature on R. Menachem Mendel remains quite sparse. See for now, Ilia Lurie, *Edah umedinah: ḥasidut ḥabad be'imperiyah harusit, 5588-5643* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2006); David Biale et. al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 298-301. Also see Shalom DovBer Levine, *Toldot ḥabad berusya hašarit* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2010), 102-158.

² See Lurie, *Edah*, 94-110; Biale et. al., *Hasidism*, 301-302; Ḥayim Meir Heilman, *Beit rabi* (Berdiczów, 1902), III, 11b-12a.

³ Pesah Ruderman, “Hashkafah klalit al ḥašadikim ve'al ḥaḥasidim,” *Hashaḥar* 6 (1875): 104. Cited by Ilia Lurie, *Milḥamot lyubaviš: Ḥasidut ḥabad berusya hašarit* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2018), 33: ר' מנחם מנדל היה אחרון בצדיקי חב"ד ... בניו ... עוד יחיו וירבו הרע. אבל חייהם ומעשיהם אין להם כל שווי ודמיון לחיי ומעשי אביהם ... הם עוד לחדש אין ביכולתם, אין להם חיים במה להחיות, יכבדו אותם אך על כי בני אביהם הם.

decline and ossification for Hasidism, following its initial emergence as a dynamic new religious movement.⁴ On the other hand, the Maskilic paradigm, which has sometimes been combined with the Weberian paradigm of “the routinisation of charisma,”⁵ continues to mark current research in three general ways:

1) Research continues to focus primarily on the origins of Hasidism in the eighteenth-century, and while there is now increasing interest in aspects of 20th century Hasidism, scholars are only just beginning to mine the wealth of materials available for the nineteenth-century.⁶ 2) Research of nineteenth-century Hasidism tends to focus much more on social and historical questions, including questions about the relationship between the Haskalah and Hasidism, and far less on internal intellectual and literary developments within the Hasidic movement itself.⁷ 3) Even where the task of researching nineteenth-century Hasidism is taken up, academic historiography nevertheless struggles to escape its own roots in the so-called “Science of Judaism” project, which was

⁴ See Biale et. al., *Hasidism*, 259. Also see the relevant comments in Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 221-223, and 243-244. Idel is critical of scholars who saw nineteenth-century Hasidism as inaugurating a trajectory of “cooling” or “retreat ... from extreme forms of mystical experience,” and the methodological points that he raises are well taken. In my view, however, this critique deserves to be extended. Idel rightly suggests that “an inspection ... of later Hasidic masters like R. Moshe Ḥayyim Ephraim of Sudylkov, R. Dov Baer, the middle Rebbe of Ḥabad, R. Aharon ha-Levi of Staroselye [et al] ... may lead to a different conclusion.” Yet, he upholds the assumption that “indeed, the later masters did not contribute new formulations.” The present chapter takes up the example of Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn to show that bold new formulations are not absent from nineteenth-century Hasidic literature, and moreover that this is not only true of crossover figures such as R. Dov Ber and R. Aharon Halevi (who bridged the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries) but also of at least one figure who belongs wholly to the nineteenth-century.

⁵ See Ada Rapoport-Albert, “The Problem of Succession in the Hasidic Leadership with Special Reference to the Circle of R. Nachman of Braslav” (PhD diss., University of London, 1974), 11-4, 20-7; Charles L. Bosk, “The Routinization of Charisma: The Case of the Zaddik,” *Sociological Inquiry* 49:2-3 (April 1979): 150-167; Stephen Sharot, “Hasidism and the Routinization of Charisma,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19:4 (Dec., 1980): 325-336.

⁶ One of the few monographs to focus on a Hasidic figure who belongs wholly to the nineteenth-century is David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, trans. David Louvish (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). Another important exception to this rule is the significant attention paid by several scholars to the school of Izbica, whose key figures do belong to the nineteenth-century. See Alan Brill, *Thinking G-d: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok HaKohen Of Lublin* (New York: Yeshiva University Press / Ktav 2002); Morris M. Faienstein, *All is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica* (New York: Ktav, 1989); Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). Other works that pay attention to the nineteenth-century within the scope of larger multigenerational studies of particular Hasidic streams include: Gadi Sagiv, *Hashoshelet: bet šernobil umekomo betoldot haḥasidut* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2014); Benjamin Brown, *Kesafinah mitaltelei: ḥasidut karlin ben aliyot lemishbarim* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2018); Dov Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad mereshit ve’ad akharit* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010). The latter work is most relevant to the present study and will be critically engaged below.

⁷ See the relevant remarks regarding the history of Hasidic ideas in Biale et. al., *Hasidism*, 260. On the overreliance on the Maskilic point of view in studies of the relationship between Hasidism and Haskalah see *ibid.*, 836.

fundamentally sympathetic to Maskilic ideologies, and which tends to romanticize early Hasidism and dismiss nineteenth-century Hasidism as degenerate.⁸

As an example, Benjamin Brown has recently argued that nineteenth-century Hasidism retreated from mysticism.⁹ “To avoid judgmental overtones,” he writes of this alleged retreat, “I refer to it ... as ‘the Heteronomous Turn,’” according to which any religious ideals formulated in this period “acted ... as ‘substitutes for mysticism.’”¹⁰ Despite Brown’s protestations to the contrary, this is a renewal of the old academic paradigm, inherited from Maskilic sources, according to which, in Brown’s words: “The big fire of early Hasidism, the fire of the mystical experience, could not keep burning.”¹¹ Turning to the case of Habad specifically, Brown attempts to chart a schism between the movement’s founder, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (Rashaz), and his nineteenth-century successors:

Joseph Weiss counted Habad as “faith-centered hasidism,” which he contrasted to “mystical hasidism,” while Lea Orent recently demonstrated that R. Shneur Zalman also embraced the mystical ideal, especially as part of prayer. This ideal, however, did not pass on to the later Habad.¹²

First, we should note Brown’s heavy reliance on secondary literature, the substance of which he does not always replicate correctly. Joseph Weiss indeed identified two general Hasidic typologies, one of “contemplative mysticism,” and one of “faith.” Contrary to Brown, however, Weiss did not count Habad as “faith-centered hasidism,” but, on the contrary, as “an extreme case” of “mystical contemplative Hasidism.”¹³

In noting the connection between mysticism and Habad prayer, Brown refers to the work of Leah Orent, but does not provide any citation. In a footnote, an article by Naftali

⁸ See Israel Bartal, “The Imprint of Haskalah Literature on the Historiography of Hasidism,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), 367-375; Marcin Wodziński, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict*, trans. Sarah Cozens (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2005), 235-241; Biale et. al., *Hasidism*, 499-500.

⁹ Benjamin Brown, “Substitutes for Mysticism: A General Model for the Theological Development of Hasidism in the Nineteenth Century,” *History of Religions* 56:3 (February 2017): 247-288.

¹⁰ Brown, “Substitutes for Mysticism,” 248-9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹² *Ibid.*, 259.

¹³ Joseph Weiss, “Contemplative Mysticism and “Faith” in Hasidic Piety” in *idem.*, *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, ed. David Goldstein (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 44. For a critical discussion of the merits of this bifurcation of two forms of Hasidism see Eli Rubin, “Questions of Love and Truth: New Perspectives on the Controversy between R. Avraham of Kalisk and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 38:3, (Winter 2020): 243-7.

Loewenthal is cited instead.¹⁴ The bulk of Loewenthal’s discussion is devoted to the second and third decades of the nineteenth-century, focusing on the respective approaches of Rabbi Aaron Halevi Horowitz of Staroselye and Rabbi DovBer Schneuri of Lubavitch, but then turns to the fifth rebbe of Habad-Lubavitch, Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneerson of Lubavitch (“Rashab”), who distributed a work titled *Tract on Prayer* in 1899.¹⁵ While paying close attention to the differences between these figures, Loewenthal shows that “later leaders of Habad continued the attempt to introduce deep and lengthy contemplation to the members of the fraternity,” and notes that “this phenomenon seems to defy the principle of *yeridat hadorot* (decline through the generations) that is assumed by scholars and—perhaps to an even greater extent—by hasidim themselves.”¹⁶ Neither the substance of Loewenthal’s paper nor its conclusions are echoed by Brown, who writes that “the contemplative prayer of the first generations declined ... and gave way to the ordinary mode of prayer.”¹⁷ Making no mention of *Tract on Prayer*, he argues that its author replaced prayer with study, and makes do with a single quote to conclusively settle the case:

When the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Sholem Dobber Schneerssohn [sic], was asked to summarize “the essence of Hasidism” (actually meaning the Habad Hasidism), he responded that Hasidism “is the Torah of G-d ... which gives us knowledge and grasp of G-dhead.” When we learn it—and it is all about learning—“we feel an elevation and endearing of Deity, which, in turn, attracts our soul to Him up to cleaving unto Him, so that all our will and desire will be directed to Him alone.” In other words, the learning of hasidic theology is supposed to attain goals similar to those that the *devekut* attained in early Hasidism.¹⁸

The quote discussed here is actually quite similar to the only other Habad text quoted by Brown, from Rashab’s *Tanya*: “One who is wise and understanding of the greatness of the

¹⁴ Naftali Loewenthal, “Habad Approaches to Contemplative Prayer, 1790-1920,” in Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised*, 288-300. Brown may have had the following article in mind: Leah Orent, “Mystical Union in the Writings of the Hasidic Master, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady,” *Studies in Spirituality* 18 (2008): 61-92, which contextualizes prayer within a wider discussion of mystical union.

¹⁵ For the history of its distribution in manuscript copies and its subsequent publication in print, see the preface (*hakdamah*) to Rashab, *Kuntras hatefilah* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2016). Since the appearance of Loewenthal’s article there have been several additional discussions of Habad contemplative prayer in the earlier part of the nineteenth-century. For a recent contribution that includes a broad survey of relevant work see Jonathan Garb, “Contemplation, Meditation, and Metaphysics in Second-Generation Habad,” in *Jewish Spirituality and Social Transformation: Hasidism and Society*, ed. Philip Wexler (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 2019), 185-201.

¹⁶ Loewenthal., *ibid.*, 288-9.

¹⁷ Brown, “Substitutes for Mysticism,” 259.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

blessed *En Sof*, will not—unless he binds his knowledge and fixes his thought with firmness and perseverance—produce in his soul true love and fear [of G-d], but only vain fancies.”¹⁹ It is hard to see how an abandonment of the mystical ideal of *deveikut* can be adduced from a comparison of these two passages. On the contrary, in the passage by Rashaz no conjugate of the word *deveikut* appears, whereas Rashab explicitly writes that the purpose of study is to “attract our souls to Him, blessed be He, to cleave unto Him,” in Hebrew: *ledavkah bo*.²⁰ Moreover, Brown’s assertion that “it is all about learning,” as opposed to contemplative prayer, is directly contradicted by the very text that he cites, in which the author clearly stipulates that “study” (*limud*, characterized as הרגש השכלי “sentience of the concept”) is merely a preparatory step to “contemplation” (*hitbonanut*, characterized as הרגש האלקי “sentience of the divine”), and explicitly refers to his *Tract on Prayer* for greater elaboration of the relationship between study and contemplative prayer.²¹ Rashab’s intention is not that study is a “substitute” for *deveikut*, as Brown claims, but rather that study is a preliminary accessory to *deveikut*.

Finally, while Brown cites this text as evidence for what he calls “a general model for the theological development of Hasidism in the nineteenth-century,” it actually dates from the second decade of the twentieth century. The following passage, from a text written in 1877 by the fourth leader of Habad-Lubavitch—Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn (“Maharash”)—would have been a more appropriate choice, though the point is much the same.

The whole purpose of intellection and lengthy contemplation is only a preface ... that through this preparation one shall attain the bond of intimate knowing (*hitkashrut hada'at*), which is the main thing, as it is written, “and you who cleave to G-d,” etc. (Deuteronomy 4:4) and it is written, “and to Him shall you cleave” (Deuteronomy 13:5) ...²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 259; Rashaz, T1:3, 7b:

מי שהוא חכם ונבון בגדולת א"ס ב"ה הנה אם לא יקשר דעתו ויתקע מחשבתו בחוזק ובהתמדה לא יוליד בנפשו יראה ואהבה אמיתית כי אם דמיונות שוא

²⁰ Rashab, *Igerot kodesh*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1986), 755:

[מה שעלינו להשתדל בלימוד הזה (שתכלית הלימוד צ"ל ע"מ לעשות כו') הוא לפעול ישועות בנפשינו בידיעה והשגה זאת, כאשר נתבונן בזה ... נרגיש עליו ויוקר אלקות אשר זה] תמשיך נפשינו אליו ית' לדבקה בו

²¹ *Ibid.* Regarding *Tract on Prayer*, see the brief discussion in Biale et. al., *Hasidism*, 302. There a similar point is made: “Shalom Dov Ber recommended contemplating Hasidic teachings independently of prayer. Such contemplation should actually serve as an exercise *prior to* the intensive meditation during prayer.” (Emphasis added.)

²² Maharash, *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, shaar teshah asar, sefer 5637, II, ve'kakkah—5637* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2013), 610. This text belongs to a wider discussion of the nature of *da'at* as a form of union that is marked more by intimacy than by cerebral mediation. This notion of *da'at* has a long history in Habad discourse, beginning with the very passage from *Tanya* cited in Brown’s paper: Rashaz, T1:3. There,

שכל ענין ההשכלה ואריכות ההתבוננות ה"ז רק הקדמה ... שע"י הקדמה זו יבואו לבחי' התקשרות הדעת
שזהו העיקר כמ"ש ואתם הדביקי' בה' כו' וכת'י ובו תדבקון

Maharash cites two Biblical conjugates of *devekut* to emphasize that the highest ideal is neither study nor intellection, but rather mystical union with G-d.

Brown's discussion is invoked here to demonstrate that even recent attempts to look anew at nineteenth-century Hasidism have not always been successful in their bid to escape old biases. Existing assumptions are too heavily relied upon, thorough reading and new research of relevant sources is insufficiently undertaken, and the findings of other scholars that have already gone some way to undermining the reigning paradigm are overlooked or misconstrued.

This chapter offers a corrective to the trends described above by bringing the neglected figure of Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn (Maharash) into sharp focus. Below I will engage and move beyond recent contributions from Ilia Lurie, Samuel Heilman, Naftali Loewenthal, Dov Schwartz, Ariel Roth, and Elliot Wolfson to take a closer look at his life and thought. Particular attention will be given to the internal Habad split that marked the beginning of his tenure as rebbe in Lubavitch, and to his novel and controversial contributions to Habad's continuing discourse on the meaning of *šimšum*.

Notably, Maharash was the only one of the seven leaders of the Habad-Lubavitch dynasty whose entire life span lay within the confines of the nineteenth-century. Born in 1834, he was the youngest son of the Şemaḥ Şedek, and filled his father's seat in Lubavitch from 1866 until his own passing in 1882. He was also the father of the aforementioned Rashab. In light of the discussion of acosmism in the previous chapter, it is especially significant that Maharash developed and elaborated an explicit argument against acosmism. As demonstrated below, his discourses introduce a new rhetorical style, which serves to accentuate his bold affirmation of the pre-*šimšum* primordially of the finite. By means of these interventions, I will argue, Maharash inaugurated a pivotal recalibration of Habad's theological emphasis that would seminally shape the thought and activism of his successors.

Methodologically, this chapter will advance understanding of the centrality of *šimšum* in Habad thought, literature and history through embedding Maharash's discourse on *šimšum* within a broader study of Maharash and his context.

reference is made to the Biblical use of a conjugate of *da'at* to describe the sexual union of Adam with Eve (Genesis 4:1).

Below I will discuss 1) the context and controversy surrounding the onset of Maharash's leadership, 2) his personality and the nature of his charisma, 3) his methodological approach to the teachings and texts that he inherited from his predecessors, 4) the place of *šimšum* in his theological and rhetorical recalibration of Habad thought, 5) his argument against acosmism and his use of the post-Lurianic notion of the *reshimah*—the “trace” that remained in the void in the aftermath of the primal *šimšum*—to establish a fundamental ontological continuity between divine being and material reality, and 6) the theological controversy between Kopust and Lubavitch aroused by Maharash's posthumous publication in 1884.

Part 1 - Maharash's Context and the Succession Controversy of 1865-6

In 1843 the Šemaḥ Šedek was one of two leading rabbis called to St. Petersburg by the Tsar's minister of National Enlightenment for deliberations related to the so-called Jewish question.²³ Accompanying him on that trip was his second son, R. Yehudah Leib (“Maharil,” 1808-1866), who henceforth became an increasingly visible proxy for his father in matters both communal and spiritual.²⁴

By 1845 Maharil was joined in his communal duties by his brothers Rabbi Ḥayim Shneur Zalman (1814-1880) and Rabbi Yisrael Noah (1815-1883).²⁵ In 1859, when their brother Rabbi Yosef Yitšhak (1822-1876) took up the contested rabbinic post of Ovruch (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine), the Šemaḥ Šedek urged him to return to Lubavitch and “alleviate my burden of people who seek advice.”²⁶ In the later decades of his life, in other words, the Šemaḥ Šedek increasingly delegated the traditional duties of a hasidic rebbe to his sons. According to the following passage—by the authoritative Habad chronicler, Ḥayim Meir Heilman—this trend came to its culmination with the passing of the Šemaḥ Šedek's wife, circa 1860:

He was ill for more than six successive years till his passing ... His wife, the rebbetzin, passed away [circa 1860], peace upon her, and from then on he was secluded in his room and no longer wanted them to travel to him for private

²³ See Lurie, *Edah*, 65-78.

²⁴ Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 5a; Shalom DovBer Levine, *Toldot ḥabad berusya ḥašarit* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2010), 148.

²⁵ See Šemaḥ Šedek, *Igerot kodesh*, ed. Shalom Dovber Levine (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2013), 197-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 148. Thus far, five of the Šemaḥ Šedek's sons have been named. He was also survived by his eldest Rabbi Shalom Baruch (1805-1869). As will be discussed below, he was less active in communal leadership, both during his father's lifetime and thereafter.

audiences, for he said “now I am left without counsel.” Very few would enter his room for private audiences. For the most part they would present their questions in the form of notes (*šetlekh*) via the attendants, and through them he would answer briefly, either orally or in writing ... Afterwards his illness became very severe, to the point that it was very difficult for him to move his hands and feet. This continued till 1866, the 13th of Nissan, when ... the sun went dark for us and the light departed to its root ...²⁷

ה' חולה יותר משהשנה שנים רצופים עד פטירתו ... מתה עליו אשתו הרבנית ע"ה. ומאז ה' סגור ומסוגר ולא ה' רוצה שיסעו אליו על יחידות כי אמר עתה שרוי אני בלא עצה כו'. ומעט מזעיר ה' שה' מכניסם לחדרו על יחידות. ורובם ככולם היו מגישים שאלותיהם בצעטליך ע"י המשרתים ועל ידם ה' משיב להם בקצרה בע"פ או בכתב ... אח"כ גברה עליו המחלה ביותר עד שממש ה' קשה לו לזוז ידיו ורגליו. ונמשך הדבר כן עד שנת תרכ"ו, י"ג ניסן שאז ... חשך לנו השמש והאור נסתלק לשרשו

Below we will show that the Şemaḥ Şedek's method of communication, as described here, is reflected in the fragmented nature of his will, in its ambiguities, and in the controversy that marked its reception. Moreover, the Şemaḥ Şedek's illness and his seclusion between 1860 and 1866 already opened up a leadership vacuum during his lifetime. Though he continued to deliver Hasidic discourses each Shabbat, his voice was too weak to be audible to all who came to listen and he would read from a written text that had been distributed before Shabbat.²⁸ Pinḥas Dov (Pinye Ber) Goldstein visited Lubavitch in the autumn of 1865, and described the ways in which the sons of the Şemaḥ Şedek were already then acting as proxies for their father:

Each of them had a study-hall of his own and the Hasidim would pray with them. They [the sons] too all came after the [Shabbat morning] prayer to the Rebbe ... [for] the recital of his Hasidic homily [*torah*]... After the Shabbat meal the Hasidim would go to the sons of the Rebbe, each to another son: To R. Yisrael Noaḥ or R. Leib [Maharil], to R. Zalman or R. Baruch Shalom or R. Shmuel'ke [Maharash]. There they would hear how the homily was repeated... All of the sons would say *torah* throughout the week (in addition to Shabbat) if a group of Hasidim came to them and requested it. The last repetition of the *torah* was

²⁷ Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 11b-12a.

²⁸ Ibid.

always held by R. Leib, after *kabbalat shabbat* [the prayer service to greet the Shabbat] and before *ma'ariv* [the evening service].²⁹

היה לכל אחד מהם בית מדרש משלו והחסידים היו מתפללים במחיצתם. גם הם באו כולם אחר התפלה אל הרבי ... [ל]אמירת התורה ... אחרי שסעדו את לבם היו החסידים הולכים לבני הרבי כל אחד לבן אחר: לר' ישראל נח או לר' לייב, לר' זלמן או לר' ברוך שלום ולר' שמואל'קע. שם היו שומעים כיצד חוזרים שוב את התורה ... כל הבנים היו אומרים תורה במשך השבוע (חוץ משבתות), באם היתה באה אליהם קבוצת חסידים ומבקשת זאת. חזרת התורה בפעם האחרונה היתה מתקיימת תמיד אצל ר' לייב — אחר קבלת שבת וקודם תפלת מעריב.

The Şemaḥ Şedek, in other words, was only seen in public once a week, and the court in Lubavitch functioned not so much as a single court with a single rebbe, but more as a constellation of satellite courts that coalesced around the five sons who lived in Lubavitch. The sons were likewise dispatched to visit other Habad communities as their father's representative, and various sources attest that he empowered all of them to accept notes of supplication (known as *pidyon* or *kvitl*) and bestow blessings in his stead.³⁰

By 1865, it seems, these five sons shared jointly in the leadership. Yet some differences are discernable: While R. Shalom Baruch was the oldest, Goldstein testifies that Maharil always delivered the final repetition of the previous week's homily at the onset of the following Shabbat, accentuating his status as his father's foremost proxy. According to a late Lubavitch account, by contrast, "R. Baruch Shalom did not generally repeat, but only discussed the homily with the young men who would come to him."³¹

The same source includes conflicting accounts about the youngest son, Maharash. In one instance Goldstein's testimony (that Maharash held court alongside his brothers) is corroborated.³² Elsewhere it is stated he conducted himself differently and did not repeat

²⁹ Pinḥas Dov Goldstein, "Eḥad be'eḥad yigashu," *Kerem ḥabad* 1 (1986): 61. Cf. Ramash, *Reshimot hayoman* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2009), 284.

³⁰ See Amram Blau, "Tei'ur ḥaşar ḥaşemaḥ şedek uvanav beḥayav ve'aḥarei histalkuto" *Heikhal habesht* 15 (2006): 118-119; Lurie, *Edah*, 21-26.

³¹ Schneerson, *Reshimot hayoman*, 283. Cf. Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 12b: "R. Baruch Shalom ... was a humble person ... and did not conduct himself as a rebbe even the passing of our master."

ר' ברוך שלום נ"ע ... הי' עניו ושפל ... וברבנות לא התנהג גם לאחר פטירת רבינו

Here it is pertinent to clarify that these two sources are respectively representative of the two main branches of Habad that derived from the succession controversy of 1866: While *Reshimot hayoman* was penned by the seventh rebbe in the Habad-Lubavitch line (heir to Maharash), *Beit rabi* was composed by a hasid with close personal ties to several rebbes of the Habad-Kopust line (heirs to Maharil). See Yehoshua Mondshine, "Beit rabi" *Kfar Chabad Magazine*, No. 1020, via *Shturem.net*,

<http://shturem.net/index.php?section=blog_new&article_id=271&lang=hebrew>, accessed May 19, 2021.

³² Schneerson, *Reshimot hayoman*, 233

hasidic teachings.³³ The manuscript record attests that Maharash did begin writing and delivering original hasidic homilies around the time of Goldstein's visit to Lubavitch, and that during the winter prior to his father's passing he developed a discourse arguing against an acosmic interpretation of Habad doctrine. As we will see below, there is reason to believe this discourse played a role in the controversy surrounding the question of succession, and it is noteworthy that Maharash repeated iterations of this discourse more than ten times during his tenure as rebbe.³⁴ Intellectual and doctrinal questions aside, the very fact that several of the Şemaḥ Şedek's sons were serving as leadership proxies for their father would have been sufficient to create the fault lines along which the movement would soon split.

Controversy was further exacerbated by the fact that, as Yehoshua Mondshine has already pointed out, the Şemaḥ Şedek never issued a single and complete “will” in the conventional sense. Rather, he declared his will via a fragmented series of notes (*şetlekh*), along the lines described by Ḥayim Meir Heilman.³⁵ Two such fragments survive in the Şemaḥ Şedek's own hand. Others survive in various manuscript copies. Some fragments appear to be components of a formal legal will, while others seem to respond to specific questions and developments. I consulted the following manuscript and text sources in the course of my research: (1) The *Kfar ḥabad* manuscript.³⁶ (2) The Maharash fragments.³⁷ (3) The *Migdal oz* manuscript.³⁸ (4) The Petersburg manuscript.³⁹ (5) The Moscow manuscript.⁴⁰ (6) The New York manuscript.⁴¹ (7) The Jerusalem manuscript.⁴²

³³ *Ibid.*, 209. See also further citations in Lurie, *Edah*, 96n10.

³⁴ Mss. 1011, in the Library Of Agudas Chassidei Chabad - Ohel Yosef Yitzchak Lubavitch, New York, contains eleven discourses penned during this period. See Yehoshua Mondshine's description of the manuscript and its contents, as well as a list of subsequent iterations of this discourse, in his notes to “Mafte'aḥ mamarei 5626” in Shmuel Schneersohn, *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5626* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1989), ix.

³⁵ Yehoshua Mondshine, “Şava'ato shel admor ha'şemaḥ şedek',” *Kfar Chabad Magazine* No. 1041, via *Shturem.net*, <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?section=blog_new&article_id=34&lang=hebrew>, accessed Sept. 27th, 2017. See Heilman, as cited above, note 28.

³⁶ A fragment of the Şemaḥ Şedek's legal will published by Yehoshua Mondshine in *Kfar ḥabad*, *ibid.*

³⁷ Clauses of the Şemaḥ Şedek's legal will as excerpted in documents authored by Maharash and published in his *Igerot kodesh* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2016), 39-40.

³⁸ Yehoshua Mondshine, *Migdal 'oz* (Kfar Chabad, 1980), 603. Mondshine described it as “possibly” the handwriting of the Şemaḥ Şedek (אולי גוכתי"ק). It was subsequently published by Levine in Şemaḥ Şedek, IG, 164, where it is described as “a facsimile of his handwriting” (תצלום כתי"ק), thus expunging Mondshine's hesitation. Comparing it with other samples of the Şemaḥ Şedek's handwriting I identified many replications of specific letter and word forms, and therefore concur with Levine's conclusion. Mondshine likely hesitated in his attribution because in this example the Şemaḥ Şedek's hand is shakier than in other examples, which coheres with Heilman's report that towards the end of the Şemaḥ Şedek's life he was so ill that he could only move his hands with extreme difficulty. Versions of this fragment appear in the Moscow and Petersburg manuscripts as well.

³⁹ The National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Russia, Ms. EVR IV 172. This manuscript has been digitized and made available online by the National Library of Israel,

Ilia Lurie has examined and discussed the Petersburg manuscript, which includes a curated collection of *setlekh*. He concluded that towards the end of his life the Şemah Şedek was aware that the question of succession was cause for controversy, and wrote these short missives to clarify his vision for the future and make his will known to particular individuals and to the community at large.⁴³ One of the most notable of these fragments, not least because it survives in the Şemah Şedek's own hand, reads:

To my beloved and excellent son Shmuel [Maharash], may his light shine,
My wish is that you should take it upon yourself to hear from people each day about their concerns, to deliberate these matters properly with them, to give them advice, and you should also review with them the hasidic teachings that are delivered. This is my true will, which you should fulfill as said above without change.⁴⁴

לאה' בני המופלג מ' שמואל נ"י.

רצוני שתקבל על עצמך לשמוע בכל יום מאנשים ענינים, ולהתיישב היטב עמהם, ולהגיד להם עצה, וגם תחזור עמהם הדברי חסידות הנאמרים, וזהו רצוני באמת, לכן לקיים כאמור למעלה בל ישונה.

https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH000089399/NLI. A facsimile of this manuscript also appears in Lurie, *Edah*, 133–35. For Lurie's discussion of this manuscript see *ibid.*, 98–102. My references to the number of distinct *setlekh* follows Lurie's divisions, *ibid.*, 130–32. This manuscript is without doubt of Lubavitch provenance; the "will" is followed by a talk delivered by Maharash's son and successor in Lubavitch, R. Shalom DovBer, dated Simḥat Torah, 1906, and transcribed in the same hand.

⁴⁰ The Russian State Library, Moscow, Russia, Fond 182, no. 284. This manuscript has been digitized and made available online by the Russian State Library, <https://dlib.rsl.ru/01006568170>, and the National Library of Israel, https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH000140691/NLI. On folio 126b [677] a note states that one of these *setlekh* addressed "by the Şemah Şedek to his son the *admor* of Lubavitch [i.e., Maharash], found in the writing of the *admor* of Lubavitch after his passing in 1882." Most of the *setlekh*, however, appear on folio 117b [660]. It is therefore unclear whether they too are to be associated with this note.

⁴¹ MS 2045 in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York. This manuscript has been digitized by the National Library of Israel:

https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH000104579/NLI. It includes a copy of the damaged and partially illegible will of Maharash himself (folio 435a). This is immediately followed by a single *setl*, as described here, which does not appear in the other manuscripts, but does appear in an independent print source and in other manuscripts. See Şvi Har-Shefer, "Lubavitch: 'Ir moshav admorei ḥabad bimei ha-'admor Rabbi Shmuel," *He'avar: Revu'on ledivrei yemei hayehudim vehayahadut berusya* (1954): 87. Har-Shefer also notes that this *setl* was said to have been found following Maharash's passing. For references to other manuscripts that contain iterations of this *setl*, but which I have not seen myself, see Şemah Şedek, IG, 163. There are minor variations between Levine's text and the New York manuscript. Also see the relevant discussion in Lurie, *Edah*, 97 and 102.

⁴² The National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel, Ms. Heb. 3547=28, folios 371a-373a. This manuscript will be described below, and has recently been digitized by the National Library of Israel:

https://www.nli.org.il/en/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH000045871/NLI.

⁴³ Lurie, *Edah*, 98–102 and 133–35.

⁴⁴ The *Migdal oz* manuscript.

According to Lurie, this suggests that Maharash may have expressed reluctance to serve as a proxy alongside his brothers, and that the Şemah Şedek insisted that he nevertheless accept and continue to fulfill these duties “without change.” This conclusion is supported by the fact that several extant *şetlekh* express the Şemah Şedek’s request to his hasidim that “all my sons shall be equal in everything...” and that “all my sons shall be equal before you in everything...”⁴⁵

We should note, however, that the manuscript discussed by Lurie is clearly of Lubavitch provenance, and his account relies heavily on this document, which he not only considers to be authentic but also treats more or less uncritically. One way to consider it with more critical perspective is to compare it with the Moscow manuscript, brought to my attention by Elly Moseson. This manuscript includes versions of many *şetlekh* contained in the Petersburg manuscript, but distinguishes itself by its omissions: The first *şetl* in the Petersburg manuscript, which censures Maharil, is missing. Likewise missing are the *şetlekh* that similarly censure the latter’s son, R. Shlomo Zalman, with the implication that he encouraged Hasidim to rally around his father, rather than see equal reverence extended to Maharash. There are at least two possible explanations for these discrepancies: The sharp censure of Maharil and R. Shlomo Zalman may have been omitted by copyists in order to protect them, or it may have been fabricated by copyists who wished to undermine them.⁴⁶

Another manuscript, found in the Israel National Library in Jerusalem, contains three items of relevance to the succession crisis, though none of them are presented as direct

⁴⁵ The Petersburg manuscript, *şetlekh* I (כל בני יהיו בשוה בכל) and II (כל בני יהיו אצליכם בשוה בכל). An iteration of *şetl* II appears on folio 117b of the Moscow Manuscript described below, note 42. *Şetl* I does not appear there.

⁴⁶ Historiographers of both Kopust and Lubavitch affiliation explicitly state that they wish to withhold the precise details of the controversy, which is one of the reasons why only some fragments of the relevant material have appeared in print. See Hayim Meir Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 13b: “I do not wish to speak of this, for it was but the work of Satan who confuses the world, and who contrived divisiveness between the brothers.”

אין רצוננו לדבר מזה כי זה הי' רק מעשה שטן המבלבל העולם ובין אחים הפריא

Likewise see Shalom DovBer Levine, *Mibeit hagnazim* (New York: Kehot, 2009), 242n20: “The specific differences of opinion that were between them, and which are mentioned in the continuation of the letter, have been omitted here.”

פרטי חילוקי הדיעות שהיו בינם, ושזכרו בהמשך האגרת, נשמטו כאן.

These statements are expressions of the sentiment shared by Kopust and Lubavitch loyalists in regard to the sons of the Şemah Şedek that “all of them are beloved, all of them are mighty, and all of them are holy.”

כולם אהובים, כולם גיבורים, כולם קדושים

The latter phrase is from the daily prayer liturgy and is said to have been applied to the sons of the Şemah Şedek by R. Shmuel DovBer Lipkin of Borisov (“Rashdam”), one of the senior Hasidim who supported Maharash. See Raphael Nachman Kahn, *Shemu'ot vesipurim miraboteinu hakedoshim I* (New York: Yitzhak Gansburg, 1990), 69. More reference to Rashdam will be made below.

fragments from the Şemaḥ Şedek's will.⁴⁷ Crucially, while other sources are mainly of Lubavitch provenance, this manuscript provides us with an alternate Kopust viewpoint. The most substantive item is a copy of a letter apparently written by Maharil in the midst of the controversy that ensued upon the Şemaḥ Şedek's passing. It has previously received a single cursory reference in scholarly literature, and has otherwise been entirely overlooked.⁴⁸

In the present context, the following details are especially noteworthy:

First, Maharil describes the “great pain” (עגמ”ג) he suffers each day since returning to Lubavitch where the “proprietors of the hostels” (בעלי האכסניא) hold the *şetlekh* “to show them to all the guests who are coming, and also [tell them] far more than is written in the *şetlekh*.”⁴⁹ Second, he notes that “after much pleading and effort they agreed to show me the original manuscript from which they are copying ... and it is a fallacy and a brazen forgery,” adding that “now that they have acted and sent forged wills ... it is requisite that I make known the truth of the matter.”⁵⁰ Third, he writes, “I know well the true intention of my father ... that is to the contrary, as he said to me many times face to face ... and I also have many *şetlekh* that he sent to me about this, some of them in his own handwriting ...”⁵¹ Finally, he emphasizes that in Kremenchug, upon receiving the news of his father's passing, when “they asked me to accept [the leadership] upon myself, I responded to all of them that I do not want any change of title or any new departure at all from how it was before. Rather, I shall conduct myself as it was when he was still alive, [continuing] to repeat Hasidic teachings etc.”⁵²

⁴⁷ The Jerusalem manuscript, 371a-373a.

⁴⁸ One page of this letter has been published in Raya Haran, “Shivḥei harav: leshe'alat aminutan shel igerot haḥasidim mi'ereş-yisra'eil,” *Katedrah* 55 (1990): 55-56, but its contents are almost entirely peripheral to her discussion. See the treatment of Haran's argument in Yehoshua Mondshine, “Aminutan shel igerot haḥasidim mi'ereş-yisra'eil, ḥelek sheini,” *Katedrah* 64 (1992): 86. For more on the provenance of this letter, see below, notes 49 and 50.

⁴⁹ The Jerusalem manuscript, 271b.

להראות לכל האורחים הבאים ועוד הרבה יותר ממ"ש בהצעתליך

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 272a-273a.

אחרי ריבוי ההפצרות והשתדלות עד שפעלו אצלם להראות לי גוף הכתב שמשם מעתיקים ... והוא שקר וזיוף מופלא ... עתה שעשו ושלחו צוואת כוזבות ... ההכרח להודיע אמיתית הענין

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 272b.

אני יודע היטיב כוונת אאדמו"ר נבג"מ שנהפוך הוא כפי שדיבר עמי פא"פ פעמים הרבה ... וגם כמה וכמה צעטליך שלה אלי ע"ו ומהם שהם בעין כת"י

⁵² *Ibid.*, 273a.

דברו עמי לקבל ע"ע השבתי לכולם שאיני רוצה בשינוי שם חדש כלל מכמו שהוא מקודם רק אתנהג כמו שהי' בחיים חיותו לחזור דא"ח כו'

Cf. Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 13b, where the following words closely follow this language: “On the way back to his home [in Lubavitch], in all the places he passed through, when they came to ask him to deliver Hasidic teachings and to be the rabbi in the place of his holy father, **he said to everyone that he did not**

Without reference to its polemical contents, Maharil's letter is independently attested in Heilman's *Beit rabi*, which is sufficient grounds to assume its probable authenticity.⁵³ Considering the inherently polemical nature of much of the material related to the Şemaḥ Şedek's will, the introduction of a Kopust source puts us on firmer methodological ground; when we check sources of Kopust and Lubavitch provenance against one another a clearer historiographical picture can emerge. Maharil's letter does not uphold the Lubavitch narrative. On the contrary, it sharply contests it. Yet Lubavitch and Kopust sources mutually corroborate three important points about the circumstances under which their respective perspectives were constructed:

1) If we accept the authenticity of Maharil's letter we must also accept that *şetlekh* of the type found in the Petersburg and Moscow manuscripts were already being circulated in the immediate aftermath of the Şemaḥ Şedek's passing. This forecloses the conclusion that they were only fabricated later. Accordingly, most of the documents relating to the Şemaḥ Şedek's will should not be dismissed out of hand as polemical and historiographically irrelevant, but should rather be seen as the products of a socio-political episode that was far more complicated than the impression captured in any single one of them.

2) In disputing the authenticity of the aforementioned *şetlekh*, Maharil also made it known that he had authentic *şetlekh* of his own that would uphold "the truth." Nowhere is there a clear statement of what precisely is meant by this, but the implication is that he alone has the right to assume his father's seat, as the Şemaḥ Şedek's sole or foremost successor. Yet, in expressing the desire that there should be no "new departure at all from how it was before," Maharil echoes the will of the Şemaḥ Şedek as represented in the Petersburg and Moscow manuscripts, to the effect that all the brothers should continue to lead the community and disseminate Hasidic teachings as they did in the period before his passing.

want any change of title or any new departure at all from how it was before, but rather to repeat Hasidic teachings as he did during the lifetime of our rabbi whose soul is in eden."

בדרך נסיעתו לביתו בכל מקום בואו כשבאו אליו לבקשו לומר ד"ח ושיהי' לרב במקום אביו רבינו הק' אמר לכל שאינו רוצה בשינוי שם חדש כלל מכמו שהי' כ"א לחזור דא"ח כמו שהי' בחיים חיותו של רבינו נ"ע

(Emphasis added.)

⁵³ See Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 20b-21a, where explicit note of this letter is made—albeit without divulging its polemical content—in a brief portrait of its recipient, Rabbi Zalman of Krāslava. Two other items related to the Şemaḥ Şedek's will (described below, note 52, and included in the Jerusalem Manuscript) seem more likely to have been fabricated, but this cannot be settled with certainty. Be this as it may, all three items were clearly preserved in order to support Maharil's legitimacy as the sole arbiter of the authenticity of *şetlekh* attributed to the Şemaḥ Şedek.

3) Maharil's letter does not name any one of his brothers specifically, but two accompanying items do single out Maharash for special mention.⁵⁴ Some *setlekh* of Lubavitch provenance conversely single out Maharil.⁵⁵ Similarly, Maharash attested that “afterward one of the two aforementioned brothers went to another town, and by default the study-hall was left for the second.”⁵⁶ This clearly references Maharil's departure from Lubavitch to Kopust in the summer of 1866. Taken together, these sources all cement the impression that the key locus of tension lay between Maharil and Maharash specifically—respectively the second oldest and the youngest of the Şemaḥ Şedek's six surviving sons.

While the competing narratives of Lubavitch and Kopust were constructed in opposition to one another, they nevertheless provide corroboratory testimony to a complicated set of events experienced and interpreted from multiple perspectives. In order to interpret these documents properly it must be recognized that they were preserved and curated, and in some cases possibly fabricated, in order to buttress and express partisan narratives that are themselves part and parcel of the succession crisis and its fallout. By looking at all of the material together, paying close attention to similarities and differences, it is possible to recover a more complete and textured historiographical account.

⁵⁴ The Jerusalem manuscript, 371a-b. The first item is described as “that which was found in the prayer book” of the Şemaḥ Şedek (מה שנמצא בסידור של אדמו"ר מ"מ נבג"מ זל"ה). Purporting to be a personal prayer in his voice, it entreats “healing of the soul, that our hearts shall cleave to your Torah and your commandments all the days of our life ... and healing of the body, to heal ourselves and to send complete healing to my son R. Shmuel ... and that after the exceeding length of my life, my son shall lead *anash*, my son Yehudah Leib ... and that he shall see to the livelihood of my son Shmuel ... that he shall have livelihood in plentitude etc.”

רפואות הנפש שיהי' ליבינו דבוק בתורתך ובמצותיך כל ימי חיינו ... ורפואת הגוף לרפואות אותנו ולשלוח רפואה שלמה לבני ר"ש ... ושאר אריכות ימי לרוב ינהג בני אנ"ש בני יהודא ליב ... ושיראה בפרנסת בני שמואל ... שיהי' פרנסה בריוח ... While all the other documents take the form of communiquées addressed to particular individuals, or to the Habad community, this one is addressed to G-d. In the former case it is understandable that the central protagonists of the succession controversy would be singled out for special mention. In the latter case, however, one would expect the Şemaḥ Şedek's personal prayer for physical and spiritual healing to mention all of his sons or none of them.

The second item is described as having been found in the Şemaḥ Şedek's “pouch.” It reads: “My *setlekh*, which are in the abovementioned closet, should be read only by my son Yehudah Leib, and they shall be burnt, except for the requests to my son that are required regarding my son R. Shmuel, and the rest, those that could cause offense or error, shall be burnt.”

הצעטליך שלי שבאלמער הנ"ל יקרא אותם רק בני יהודא ליב שיהי' וישרוף אותם רק הבקשות לבני שיהי' הנצרכים נידון בני ר"ש שיהי' והשאר אותן שיוכל להיות מהן קפידא או תעווא ישרוף

This item too is different from the other documents discussed in that its content does not purport to inform us of the Şemaḥ Şedek's will, but rather expresses his desire for the suppression of *setlekh* that express his will. The only one who may read these *setlekh*, apparently, is Maharil, which would render him the only person with the authority to testify regarding their content. Both of these items were clearly copied, curated, and likely fabricated, in order to bolster Maharil's claim as rightful heir to his father, and to bolster Maharil's authority as the sole arbiter of his will.

⁵⁵ See the discussion of the differences between the St. Petersburg and Moscow manuscripts, above, notes 41-43.

⁵⁶ The Maharash fragments: אח"כ נסע את א' משני האחיי הנ"ל לעיר אחרת, ממילא נשאר הבה"מ לפני השני

With this approach, the following scenario can be proposed: It seems likely that early on, before his younger sons came of age, the Şemaḥ Şedek did indeed consider Maharil his sole natural successor. But as time went on a model of shared leadership emerged and became established, and the Şemaḥ Şedek consequently hoped that this model would continue after his passing. Maharash expressly attested that the Şemaḥ Şedek “left it written in his will that his study-hall belonged to two of his sons equally,” and that “none of his children or grandchildren should dwell in his home,” adding that “the intention was that the one should not dominate the other.”⁵⁷ The suggestion that the Şemaḥ Şedek had a change of heart is explicated in a *şetl* found in the Petersburg manuscript:

As to what I wrote regarding my son R. Yehudah Leib [Maharil], I hereby withdraw from this entirely, for he acted toward me with trickery and cunning, promising me assuredly that he would act for the best interests of my son R. Shmuel [Maharash], and afterwards I understood all his trickery. I therefore withdraw from this entirely and my request from *anash* is that all my sons shall be equal.⁵⁸

מה שכתבתי בנידון בני ריל הנני חוזר מזה לגמרי כי הלך עמי בתחבולות ובערמה להבטיח לי מאוד לעשות כל טוב עם בני ר"ש שי' ואח"כ הבינתי כל תחבולותיו לכן הנני חוזר לגמרי ובקשתי מאנ"ש שכל בני יהיו בשוה

Ada Rapoport-Albert has shown that the centralist dynastic institution of the Hasidic court, with a single ṣadik serving exclusively as its head, was not the leadership model with which Hasidism first emerged. Rather, it was only one out of several other solutions to the new problem of perpetuating the movement despite the passing of a charismatic leader, which gradually became common as Hasidism became increasingly institutionalized at the onset of the 19th century. In the pre-dynastic period, however, “the Besht, the Maggid of Mezeritch and his disciples who became leaders of Hasidic circles all exercised, independently of each other, strong personal charisma to which their followers responded by treating them as their leaders.”⁵⁹ The Şemaḥ Şedek was old enough to have recalled this more horizontal model of leadership, and was apparently not committed to the normative solution.

⁵⁷ The Maharash fragments:

הניח צוואה לבניו שלא ידורו בביתו שום אחד מבניו ונכדיו ... הטעם ה' אצלו בכדי שלא יהי קנאה בין האח' ...
הניח כתוב בצואה שהבה"מ [שהבית המדרש] שייך לשני בניו בשוה, והכוונה ה' למען לא ישתרר הא' על זולתו ...

⁵⁸ The Petersburg manuscript, I.

⁵⁹ Rapoport-Albert, “The Problem of Succession,” 73. Also see *idem.*, “Hasidism After 1772” in *eadem.*, *Hasidic Studies*, 23-123.

A further possibility alluded to in these *setlekh* is that towards the end of his life, the Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek came to see his youngest son, Maharash, as his primary successor and not merely the equal of his other sons. This is suggested by a *setl* that addresses Maharash alone, ordaining him with “great authority” (סמיכה רבה) and invoking the transfer of leadership from Moses to Joshua and from David to Solomon. Encouraging R. Shmuel to increase his “fortitude in Torah and worship,” it even implies that the Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek will speak through him: “open your mouth and *my* words shall shine forth.” This *setl* also suggests that Maharash was under attack for his innovative elaborations of Hasidic doctrine, and needed encouragement.⁶⁰ As will be shown below, this suggestion can be corroborated through an examination of Maharash’s contemporaneous teachings, which survive in his own hand and have been published.

It seems likely that if not for Maharash’s ascendance, Maharil would have retained his status as the first among equals, and a model with scarce parallels in the history of Hasidism may have emerged. While Gadi Sagiv has noted that split succession was the norm in Chernobyl Hasidism and in other groups as well, the success of that model largely depended on the ability of each ṣadik to find a community and a locality in which an independent court could be established and maintained.⁶¹ What is unusual here is the hope that a constellation of courts could be maintained within a single geographic center, with the brothers leading their respective sub-constituencies harmoniously despite the passing of their father, the uber-ṣadik to whom they all deferred. The only comparable case is the brief period of shared leadership between the sons of R. Yisrael of Ruzhin; each led his own court while the oldest son ascended his father’s throne unopposed, and for a while they all lived alongside one another in Potik.⁶²

In the case of Habad the situation was reversed: Maharil left Lubavitch and established his court in Kopust, leaving Maharash, the youngest son, to fill his father’s seat. Three other brothers also remained in Lubavitch, at least for a few years, but conducted themselves independently, much as they had in their father’s lifetime. The oldest son, R. Baruch Shalom, passed away there in 1869. In the same year R. Ḥayim Shneur Zalman

⁶⁰ The New York manuscript, folio 435a. The full text of the *setl* reads as follows:

לבני ידידי וחביבי הר"ש שיח' ראיתי דא"ה שלך והוטבו בעיני מאוד השי"ת יחזק לבך לטוב לך להוסיף אומץ בתורתו ועבודתו וחזקת והיית לאיש, פתח פיך ויאירו דברי ואני מבטיח לך מה שאמרת לך בע"פ וכאשר א"מ (?) מה ששמעתי מפי אא"ז מו"ר הגאון ז"ל רק חזק ואמץ לכתוב ולהגיד ואני סומך אותך בסמיכה רבה לא תשאה משו"א השי"ת יצלה לך ברו"ג וללמוד וללמד לשמור ולעשות אביך הדוש"ט טובת אנ"ש

The phrase והיית לאיש is from Kings I 2:2, wherein David transfers leadership to Solomon. The phrase חזק ואמץ is from Joshua 1:7, wherein G-d exhorts Joshua to lead in the place of Moses.

⁶¹ Gadi Sagiv, *Hashoshelet*, 41.

⁶² David Asaf, *Regal Way*, 171-2.

established a court in Liady, and soon R. Yisrael Noah likewise established a court in Nezhin. Maharil passed away in Kopust within a few months of settling there, in 1866, and was succeeded by his son, R. Shlomo Zalman.⁶³

Part 2 - Maharash and Maharil: A Study of Contrasts

Without leaving the controversial context entirely behind us, we now turn to questions of charisma and personality. Samuel Heilman, in his recent study of leadership and succession in Hasidism, has given some attention to Maharash and his ascent to leadership. But he does not consider any of the available manuscript material, and overlooks primary sources available in print. He does not discuss methodological issues, and for the most part homogenizes various later accounts and secondary sources through a distinctly Maskilic prism. Here we will suffice with one example that demonstrates the pitfalls of such an approach, and which brings us beyond the succession controversy and into the period of Maharash's leadership. Heilman writes:

As a reflection of his charismatic limitations, Shmuel established the role of *mashpi'a*, or spiritual guide, as an appointed official in his Hasidic court, separate from the role of the rebbe. The task of the *mashpi'a* was to offer Hasidic discourses, mentor individual Hasidim, and, it seems, to conduct Hasidic gatherings, complete with stories and melodies. This new position freed the rebbe to do other things, while getting help in matters spiritual. Shmuel effectively outsourced some of the essential characteristics expected of a rebbe.⁶⁴

Heilman asserts that Maharash simply did not have the charisma or spiritual resources to fill the essential roles of a Habad rebbe, all but abdicating the position to an in-house *mashpi'a*. As his source for this claim he points to a *YIVO Encyclopedia* article by Naftali

⁶³ Here I follow Heilman's account in *Beit rabi* III: Regarding R. Baruch Shalom, see folio 12b; for R. Hayim Shneur Zalman, see folio 14a; for R. Yisrael Noah, see folio 14b. During this early period these brothers remained in Lubavitch, but they did not attract large followings, and Heilman notes that they were sometimes forced to travel to other communities to raise funds. Of Maharash, by contrast, Heilman writes: "After the passing of our master a large contingent of *anash* attached themselves to him to receive teachings from his mouth and to seek spiritual and physical advice from him" לאחר פטירת רבינו נ"ע גלוו אליו חלק גדול מאנ"ש לקבל לקה מפיו ולדרוש ממנו עצות רי"ג (folio 16a), which implies that his court in Lubavitch immediately became well established on a firm basis. Maharash's authority as the primary *admor* in Lubavitch, despite the presence of three older brothers, is also affirmed in a letter by R. Shlomo Zalman (published in Yehoshua Mondshine, *Migdal oz*, 612) wherein he considers the opinion of Maharash, but not that of the other brothers, as to whether he should serve as *admor* in Kopust in place of his father or return instead to Lubavitch.

⁶⁴ Samuel C. Heilman, *Who Will Lead Us? The Story of Five Hasidic Dynasties in America* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 219-20.

Loewenthal. Indeed, several sentences there closely parallel Heilman's account, but the discrepancies are not inconsequential:

Shemu'el established the role of *mashpi'a*, or spiritual guide, as a paid official in the community, parallel to the role of the rabbi. The task of the *mashpi'a* was to teach Hasidic discourses and, it seems, to conduct Hasidic gatherings, complete with stories and melodies. Maharash himself taught Hasidic nigunim (wordless melodies) and was credited with the ability to read music.⁶⁵

In Heilman's reproduction of Loewenthal's account he misconstrues "the community" as "the Hasidic court" and "the rabbi" as "the rebbe." All Jewish communities have a rabbi, but a Hasidic court is an extraordinary kind of institution. Its central figure is the Hasidic rebbe, and both court and rebbe operate with a large degree of independence from normative communal and rabbinic authorities.⁶⁶ Once Heilman's confusion of these terms is undone, his deduction that Maharash's "charismatic limitations" led him to "outsource" some of "the essential characteristics expected of a rebbe" is shown to be utterly unfounded.

Loewenthal is in fact referring to Maharash's 1868 appointment of R. Shmuel DovBer Lipkin (Rashdam) as *mashpi'a* in the town of Borisov, near Minsk. Loewenthal's source is a published letter addressed by Maharash from the spa town of Marienbad to the leading members of Borisov's Habad community, in which he exhorts them that Hasidic householders need a local teacher "who will repeat Hasidic discourses and will explain them to the public and to individuals, to fire up the hearts ... that one shall serve his creator with fear and love, each one according to their measure," and accordingly charges them to ensure that community funds and private donations be allocated to cover his salary, as well as that of the local rabbi.⁶⁷

Properly construed, this letter testifies not to the "charismatic limitations" of Maharash, as Heilman concludes, but to his vision for the perpetuation of the Habad way of life and worship, and to the confidence with which he asserted his authority, even beyond the immediate local of his own court in Lubavitch.

⁶⁵ Naftali Loewenthal, "Lubavitch Hasidism," in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed July 1, 2018, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lubavitch_Hasidism>.

⁶⁶ On the particular case of the Lubavitch court during the time of the *Şemaḥ Şedek* see Lurie, *Edah*, 1-61.

On Hasidic courts during the nineteenth-century more generally see, Biale et. al., *Hasidism*, 403-428.

⁶⁷ Maharash, IG, 3-5:

אשר יאמר דא"ח ולהסביר ברבים וביחיד להלהיב הלבבות ... בכדי שיעבוד לבוראו בדחילו ורחימו כו' כל חד לפום שיעורא דילי'

Given that Maharash's main rival as heir to his father's legacy was his older brother, Maharil, a comparison of how they are each portrayed across the various available sources can shed further light on the schism that emerged between them:

Kopust and Lubavitch sources agree that Maharil was renowned for his passionate prayer and piety. As Hayim Meir Heilman, who was an adherent of the Kopust branch of Habad, wrote:

The form of his worship was very awe-inspiring, and from this-worldly affairs he was entirely removed, such that everyone who saw him said, 'this one is beyond human.' He would repeat hasidic teachings with a flaming face and with great clarity...⁶⁸

אופן עבודתו הי' מבהיל מאוד ומהווית העולם הי' מופשט לגמרי עד שכל רואיו אמרו לית דין בר נש. חזרתו
הד"ח הי' נפלא בפנים לזהבות ומסבירות

Similarly, the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Brooklyn, NY), recorded the remark of his predecessor that "when Maharil would pray the welcoming prayer of the Shabbat, and he was wearing slippers, the slippers would fly till the ceiling."⁶⁹

Maharash, on the other hand, is never described in such terms, and is instead noted for his humor, worldliness and wealth. For example, Svi Har-Shefer, who grew up in Lubavitch during the period of Maharash's leadership, noted his reputation as a great prankster in childhood and a wit in adulthood.⁷⁰ Hayim Tchernowitz, whose grandfather had contemporaneously served as the non-hasidic rabbi of a town with a substantial Habad community, likewise wrote of Maharash that he "was wise and witty, sharp in worldly

⁶⁸ Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III,13a

⁶⁹ Ramash, *Reshimot hayoman* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2009.), 283:

כשהי' מתפלל מהרי"ל קבלת שבת והוא הי' לבוש פאנטאפעל פלעגן די פאנטאפעל פליען ביז דער סטעליע

⁷⁰ Svi Har-Shefer, "Lubavitch: ir moshav admorei habad beyemei ha'admor rabi shmuel," *Ha'avar: revu'an ledivrei yemei hayehudim vehayahadut berusya 2* (Tel Aviv, 1954): 87 and 89.

affairs, and also something of a prankster.”⁷¹ One source explicitly juxtaposes the apparently pedestrian character of his prayer with Maharil’s overt ecstasy.⁷²

Har-Shefer reports that Maharash maintained an interest in modern medicine and current events, subscribing to newspapers in various languages and to a journal issued by Şvi Rabinowitz, a pioneer of modern scientific writing in Hebrew.⁷³ Government reports cited by Ilia Lurie, along with Lubavitch sources, indicate that R. Shmuel became wealthy by investing in stock-exchanges and other businesses, and that he kept a wine cellar.⁷⁴ With the advent of trans-European rail he traveled as far as Paris, and was the first Habad rebbe to wear clothing cut in the European style with a collar and lapels.⁷⁵

As has been noted, Maharil had been his father’s foremost proxy since 1843. At that time Maharash was not yet ten years old, and he would not take any public role until the very end of his father’s life. According to an anecdote recorded by the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Maharash’s ambivalence to the expectations of his father’s hasidim was sometimes manifest as a form of self-deprecating parody: Before privately repeating his father’s discourses to the Hasid R. Shmuel Beşalel Sheftil he would line up his collection of tobacco pipes, as though they were an audience of listeners, and jokingly assign each of them the diminutive name of a renowned Hasid (Izel, Yosske and so forth).⁷⁶

⁷¹ Hayim Tchernowitz (Rav Şa’ir), *Pirkei hayim: autobiographia* (New York: Bitzaron, 1954), 105:

היה חכם ופיקח, "חרף במילי דעלמא" וגם היה קצת קונדס

See also Ramash, *Reshimot hayoman*, 209: “R. Shmuel was a cheerful personality, but mischievous...” (מהר"ש ... ה' איש שמח - א פרייליכער - אבל שטיפעריש) Several other sources similarly attest that R. Shmuel did not abandon his sense of humor and sharp wit with his assumption of the leadership. See Yehoshua Mondshine, “Bederekh halaşah,” Shturem.net, Av 30th, 5766, accessed Feb. 15, 2018, <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?section=artdays&id=748>. One source cited therein records R. Shmuel’s wryly self-conscious affirmation of his humorous inclination in the form of an ironic denial: “A witticism?! With me there are no witticisms!” (א! גלייך ווערטל?! בא מיר איז ניטא קיין גלייך ווערטלעך)

⁷² Yehudah Chitrik, *Reshimot devarim* (Mishpaḥat Hameḥaber, 2009), 149. Tchernowitz, as cited in the previous notes, likewise records that Maharash was not known for lengthy contemplative prayer (לא היה ידוע (כעבוד). On different modes of prayer within the Habad tradition, and in particular the contrast of “wild enthusiasm” with “silence, immobility, and abnegation,” see Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 109-117. For a broader discussion of prayer and trance in Hasidism see Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), esp. Chapter 4 and 5.

⁷³ Har-Shefer, “Lubavitch,” 87. On Rabinowitz see Eliyahu Stern, *Jewish Materialism: The Intellectual Revolution of the 1870s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), esp. 85-95 and 107-113.

⁷⁴ Ramash, *Reshimot hayoman*, 245; Ilia Lurie, “Lyubaviş umilḥamotehah: ḥasidut ḥabad bema’avak al demutah shel haḥevrah hayehudit berusya haşarit” (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2009), 19.

⁷⁵ For some details of his travels see Maharash, IG, 17-21. On his sartorial style see Chitrik, *Reshimot devarim*, 157. On the Şemaḥ Şedek’s permissive attitude to modern or “non-Jewish” dress see Amram Blau, “Gedolei haḥasidut ugezeirat hamalbushim,” in *Heikhal habesht* 12 (2005), 107-108; Glenn Dynner, “The Garment of Torah: Clothing Decrees and the Warsaw Career of the First Gerer Rebbe,” in *Warsaw: The Jewish Metropolis*, ed. Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 112.

⁷⁶ Ramash, *Reshimot hayoman*, 188.

Another anecdote is especially noteworthy for its prominence in Habad's internal discourse. It originates with the aforementioned R. Shmuel DovBer Lipkin of Borisov ("Rashdam"):

Struggling with a discrepancy between a discourse of the Şemaḥ Şedek and a passage in the Lurianic work *Eṣ ḥayim*, Rashdam did not initially think to consult with the youngest and most reticent of the Rebbe's sons. Unsatisfied with the solutions offered by others, and noticing the light burning in Maharash's house at an unusually late hour, his curiosity was aroused. "Maharash's house ... was built like those of the wealthy, with high windows ... What did I do? I grabbed with my hand and foot, and hoisted myself up to the window, and I peered inside and saw that Maharash was sitting and studying *Eṣ ḥayim*."⁷⁷ Rashdam knocked on the door, but Maharash did not open it until he had hidden the *Eṣ ḥayim* and spread his table with French and German newspapers. Rashdam informed Maharash that moments earlier he had looked through the window and seen exactly what he was studying, threatening to make Maharash's hidden ways known to "all of Lubavitch" unless he agreed to consider Rashdam's question. Hearing this, Maharash dropped his jocular guard. Rashdam concluded his anecdote with the report that: "We sat together all night, till dawn, and I left his home filled with excitement" (ונשב כל הלילה) (עד אור הבוקר ואצא ממנו מלא התפעלות).⁷⁸

Stories such as these were transmitted by Lubavitch loyalists and it is impossible to independently verify their authenticity. Yet, as we have already seen, independent testimonies do uphold the underlying claim that Maharash boldly embraced the economic and technological innovations of his time, engaged the world beyond Lubavitch, and carried his charisma and wit lightly. More conservatively inclined hasidim likely saw these characteristics as a threat to the prestigious legacy of Habad, and as an affront to the established authority of Maharil. Rashdam and other Lubavitch loyalists understood these aspects of Maharash's persona as a device that helped him conceal his piety and divert attention away from his impressive engagement with Kabbalistic texts and Habad

⁷⁷ Raphael Nachman Kahn, *Shemu'ot, I*, 69:

ביתו של המהר"ש ... היה בנוי כפי שבנויים בתי העשירים, הלונותיו היו גבוהים ... מה עשיתי? נאחזתי בידי וברגלי וטפסתי על החלון, ואתבונן פנימה ואראה את המהר"ש יושב ומעיין בספר עץ היים

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-70. For other iterations of this story, all of which are recorded by students of R. Shmuel Gronem Estherman, who was later an extremely influential mentor and teacher in the Tomkhei Temimim Yeshiva in Lubavitch, see Yehudah Chitrik, *Reshimot devarim*, 147-148, and further citations there, n. 11. According to Kahn's iteration, Rashdam related this anecdote when Estherman asked him which of the Zemaḥ Zedek's sons to attach himself to. This detail, however, does not appear in other iterations of this story, and is further thrown into doubt by the possibility that Estherman was no more than six years old when the Şemaḥ Şedek passed away. On the question of his birthdate, see "Sekirah kešarah metoldot hameḥaber" in Shmuel Gronem Estherman, *Be'ur al hatanya* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2016), 345n2; 350n13.

thought, and also as a sign that he had the intellectual boldness and worldly acumen to ensure the future vitality of Habad. Tchernowitz, who was not a Habad devotee of any persuasion, recorded that many younger and more intellectually inclined Hasidim were drawn to Maharash while their more conservative elders rallied around Maharil.⁷⁹

Given the supporting attestations already noted, and given that examples of Maharash's intellectual work are extant, the Lubavitch perspective cannot be dismissed as mere hagiography without first assessing whether or not Maharash made any significant methodological or theological contributions to Habad's intellectual legacy.

Part 3 - Maharash's Methodological Interventions and Genre Innovations

Few scholars have taken up Maharash's intellectual work as a topic of study in its own right, but he has nevertheless received some attention. Dov Schwartz, in a 2010 book billed as a comprehensive study of Habad thought "from beginning to end," wrote:

The *admor* R. Shmuel ... often excerpted the words of his predecessors ... and for the most part did not aspire for innovation ... Therefore the central questions in the research of R. Shmuel's thought are not what he innovated and added, but why he selected the specific sections that he excerpted from the writings of the *admorim* who preceded him.⁸⁰

In a talk devoted to the "conceptual renaissance" undertaken by Maharash's son and successor, Rashab, Nochum Grunwald similarly played down the intellectual contributions of the former. In his view, none of the Şemaḥ Şedek's sons emphasised the conceptual dimension of the Habad literary tradition, and instead made do with an exegetical hermeneutics (*derush*) that contributed little or nothing that is intellectually innovative.⁸¹ In a more recent article, Grunwald significantly revised his view, expressing

⁷⁹ Cf. Tchernowitz, *Pirkei ḥayim*, 105.

⁸⁰ Dov Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad*, 187.

⁸¹ Nochum Grunwald, "'Ayin Beis' as the Culmination of a Conceptual Renaissance: The Mystical Thought of the Rebbe Rashab," *Chabad.org*, <chabad.org/1931533> (accessed August 11, 2021). Grunwald is not only a scholar of Habad Hasidism, but also a member of the Habad community. (It is tangentially noteworthy that he was born and raised in a Hasidic family that was not affiliated with Habad, and joined Habad in his late teens.) Accordingly, his claim raises the question of how biases within the secular academy may sometimes influence internal perceptions of Hasidic history within segments of the Hasidic community. This can occur through numerous modes of cultural interchange, both direct and indirect. Indeed, the complication of the dichotomy between "academic" and "partisan" historiography on Habad has already been noted. See Wojciech Tworek, "Beyond Hagiography with Footnotes: Writing Biographies of the Chabad Rebbe in the Post-Schneerson Era," *AJS Review* 43:2 (2019): 409-435. There is, however, an entirely independent reason that Maharash's teachings remain understudied, and therefore underrated, even within the Habad community; namely that he was eclipsed by his son, Rashab. The latter built on his father's innovations in a distinctly educational context, which makes his discourses especially accessible to

surprise at discovering that many innovations he had previously associated with Rashab were in fact anticipated by Maharash.⁸²

The prevailing consensus, heretofore, echoes in a brief comment in the recently published *Hasidism: A New History*, a collaborative work billed as a “comprehensive” synthesis of current research:

Chabad historiography tends to paper over the impression that Shmuel was the least prominent leader in terms of political and literary activity. For example, the fact that his teachings are less sophisticated than those of other Chabad leaders is explained as his way of reaching lay people.⁸³

This overlooks a rather obvious innovation of Maharash: as Loewenthal has briefly noted, Maharash was the inventor of an entirely new genre of Hasidic exposition, namely the *hemshekh*, the serialization of Hasidic discourses over many weeks and even months.⁸⁴

Loewenthal aside, historiographers of Hasidism have tended to paper over the dearth of research on Maharash by falling back on the Maskilic axiom that no nineteenth-century Hasidic master is likely to be impressive. Rather than making use of the primary sources that are available, the authors of *Hasidism: A New History* provide another example in which a secondary source is misread to uphold the reigning assumption. No direct citation is provided, but the above verdict appears to rely on a 1945 article in which Shmuel Zalmanov, a prominent Habad-Lubavitch hasid, took note of the recent publication of several volumes of Maharash’s discourses, whose literary distinctiveness he characterized thus:

Most of the discourses of the Rebbe Maharash—which are written in clear and clean language—are, relatively speaking, neither long nor difficult, and are therefore accessible to all Torah scholars, even those who do not have a broad knowledge of Habad literature ... Among the Rebbe Maharash’s hasidim were

young Yeshiva students, and which also ties them very closely to the legacy and self image of the successor institutions of the Yeshiva that he founded, Tomchei Temimim Lubavitch, which have formed the backbone of Habad’s education network over the course of the last century. See Naftali Loewenthal, “‘The Thickening of the Light’: The Kabbalistic-Hasidic Teachings of Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneerson in Their Social Context,” in *Habad Hasidism: History, Thought, Image*, eds. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2016), 7*-43*.

⁸² Nochum Grunwald, “Av ubeno shera`u et haḥidush,” *Heikhal habesht* 40 (Summer 5780): 134-156.

⁸³ David Biale et al, *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2018), 302

⁸⁴ Loewenthal, “Lubavitch Hasidism”; idem., “The Thickening of the Light,” 10*-11*. Also see the relevant discussion in Ariel Roth, *Keṣad likro et safrut habad* (Ramat Gan: Bar Bar-Ilan University Press, 2017), 94-7. Roth is to be commended for his attentiveness to questions relating to Habad’s literary corpus, and to the various genres that it encompasses. However, the usefulness of his work is sometimes hampered by an over-reliance on secondary sources, which sheds more light on the reception of the corpus than on the corpus itself.

great scholars, contemplatives and pietists of hasidism and of worship ... who would “count” each word uttered by their Rebbe, and would engage in lengthy debate over each omission and addition in the Rebbe Maharash’s discourses ... But among the Rebbe Maharash’s hasidim were [also] many thousands of so-called householders, who were permeated with hasidic spirit and bound to the rebbe with an essential bond, and for their sake the Rebbe Maharash would deliver the discourses in a lighter form—relatively speaking—quantitatively compact and qualitatively ample, in which the deepest perceptions and subtlest concepts were expressed concisely, and in language that—when studied only superficially—is easily understood.⁸⁵

די מעהרסטע מאמרים פון רבין מוהר"ש נ"ע — געשריבען אין א קלאהרע ריינע שפראך — זיינען לפי ערך ניט קיין גרויסע און ניט קיין שווערע און זיינען דעריבער צוגענגליך פאר אלע יודעי תורה, אפילו אזעלכע וועלכע האבען ניט קיין ברייטע ידיעה אין ספרי חב"ד ... צווישען רבין מוהר"ש'ס חסידים זיינען געווען אזעלכע גרויסע גאונים, משכילים און עובדים אין חסידות ועבודת ה' ... וועלכע פלעגען "צעהלען" יעדען ווארט פון זייער רבי'ן, און שעה'ן לאנג זיך מתוכה זיין און "דינגען" זיך איבער א חסר ויתיר אין רבינ'ס מוהר"ש תורות ... זיינען אבער ביים רבי'ן מוהר"ש געווען פיעל טויזענדער חסידים א. ג. באלי בתים, וועלכע זיינען געווען דורכגענומען דורך און דורך מיט'ן חסידישען גייסט און צוגעבונדען צו זייער רבין מיט א התקשרות עצמי און צוליב זיי פלעגט דאס דער רבי מוהר"ש נ"ע זאגען זיינע מאמרים אין א לייכטערען — לפי"ע — פארם, מעט הכמות ורב האיכות, וואו די טיפסטע השגות און איידעלסטע השכלות זיינען ארויסגעזאגט געווארען בקיצור'דיג און מיט — לערנענדיג בשטחיות — א זעהר פארשטענדליכע שפראך.

Should this be read as a hagiographic “papering over” of Maharash’s lack of sophistication? Or might this be an accurate appraisal of his deft ability to address a single discourse to two different audiences?

For answers, we now turn to the primary sources, reading Maharash’s discourses in comparison with those of his predecessors and successors, and beginning with his best known and most influential contribution, *Hemshekh vekakhah hagadol* (henceforth *Vekakhah*).⁸⁶

Vekakhah is a serialization of Hasidic discourses whose initial instalment was delivered in the spring of 1877, on the festival of Passover, and which would not conclude until the following winter, totaling forty-six discourses in all. Broadly speaking, it is an

⁸⁵ Shmuel Zalmanov, “Torat shmuel,” *Koveš lubavitch* 2:3 (1945): 45-46.

⁸⁶ First circulated in manuscript, it was later published as *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, shaar revi'ei, vekakhah—5637* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1945); *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, shaar teshah asar, sefer 5637, II, vekakhah—5637* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2013). The newer addition includes the pagination of the original format, and it is the original pagination that is referred to throughout.

exploration of the mystical journey that leads from the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the ultimate redemption to be achieved in the messianic future. At its core is a phenomenological reconceptualization of the Kabbalistic *sefirah* of *ḥokhmah*, and of the path of Torah and *mišvot* as the means by which all of existence is rendered transparent to the transcendent revelation of divinity embodied by *ḥokhmah*. Along the way, many other topics are explored—including the difference between Shabbat and festivals, the Torah as an antidote to unholy folly, the distinction between “existence” (*meši’ut*) and “being” (*mahut*), and various *mišvot* associated with Passover and Sukkot. These topics are not discussed tangentially, but rather as part of a systematic project to weave the strands of Habad’s literary corpus into a synthesized philosophy of Judaism.⁸⁷

The nature of Maharash’s methodological and conceptual intervention can best be illustrated with the preface of a brief review of Rashaz’s classical characterisation of *ḥokhmah*, found in *Tanya*, Chapter 18:

Ḥokhmah transcends understanding and comprehension and is their source... It is that which is not grasped and understood, and not yet grasped in comprehension, and therefore the infinite light (*or eyn sof barukh hu*) is vested in it, which no thought can grasp at all.⁸⁸

החכמה היא למעלה מההבנה וההשגה והיא מקור להן ... שהוא מה שאינו מושג ומובן ואינו נתפס בהשגה עדיין ולכן מתלבש בה אור א"ס ב"ה דלית מחשבה תפיסה ביה כלל

Elsewhere, in a more phenomenological vein, he describes *ḥokhmah* as “nothing more than a drop and a point... a lightning flash in the mind, which has not yet developed graspable dimensions [by which] to understand and comprehend all its implications, generally and specifically...”⁸⁹

Ḥokhmah, as described in the above sources, is the medium through which divine infinitude enters and illuminates the finite realms of the cosmos, including the human mind.

A key discourse in *Vekakhah* appropriates and reshapes a passage by Rabbi DovBer Schneuri—the son of Rashaz, and the second rebbe in the Habad-Lubavitch dynasty—

⁸⁷ For a fuller overview of the main themes of *Vekakhah*, see Eli Rubin, “Hemshekh Vekakhah Ha-gadol: Treading the Path of Redemption, Unveiling the Face of Effacement,” *Chabad.org*, <chabad.org/3646985>.

⁸⁸ Rashaz, T1:18, 24a. Cf. T1:35, 44a, where a very similar characterisation of *ḥokhmah* is attributed to “my teacher,” i.e. Rabbi DovBer of Mezritch.

⁸⁹ Rashaz, *TO*, 6c:

אינה אלא בחי' טפה ונקודה ... בחי' ברק המבריק במוחו שעדיין לא באה לידי אורך ורוחב ההשגה להבין ולהשיג כל דרכי החכמה בכלל ובפרט

Also see *idem.*, *LT bamidbar*, 44d and 87c.

thereby bringing to the fore a fundamental conceptual difficulty with *ḥokhmah*'s classical characterization. A close comparative reading reveals the power of Maharash's intervention. As penned by Rabbi DovBer, the first sentence of this passage equates *ḥokhmah* with the "something" (*yesh*) that is found, or created from "nothing" (*ayin*). The second sentence somewhat revises that interpretation by casting *ḥokhmah* as an intermediate "point," suspended between the nothingness "which is not existence at all," on the one hand, and the fully developed expansiveness of *binah*, on the other hand. We are left with a simple hierarchy: from nothing (*ayin*) a point (*ḥokhmah*) emerges and is subsequently disseminated, acquiring dimension and form that may be comprehended and grasped (*binah*).⁹⁰ Maharash's rewriting of this passage excises the initial association of *ḥokhmah* with the *yesh*, and deliberately problematizes the manner and function of *ḥokhmah*'s emergence from the transcendent *ayin*. His embellishments to the text go even further, unambiguously equating *ḥokhmah* with the *ayin* from which it is found, and depicting it as a revelation that reveals "nothing," as a disclosure of the undisclosable.⁹¹ This intervention is especially significant given that *ayin* had long been the term used to mark *keter*'s distinction from the more particularized instantiations of the divine in *ḥokhmah* and subsequent *sefirot*.⁹²

The following overlays R. DovBer's original text with Maharash's rewrite.

Strikethroughs indicate deletions; additions are in bold:

It is written "and *ḥokhmah* is found from nothing" (Job 28:12), ~~from nothing to something it is found, and, as it is known,~~ **the meaning of "nothing" (*ayin*) is that it refers to that which is not grasped at all, and it [i.e. *ḥokhmah*] far transcends the comprehension of *binah*; and it is that the infinite light reveals itself (*shemitgaleh behinat or eyn sof barukh hu*), which no thought can grasp it at all; and permission is not granted to reap benefit from it for there is no grasp or comprehension etc. And apparently this requires explanation: Since permission is not granted to reap benefit from it, what is the achievement gained from this revelation? Further explanation is required, for is it not so that *ḥokhmah* is called the beginning of the revelation of light in the chain of creation. For, the import of which is that it comes in the form of revelation that can be benefited from? However the explanation of the matter is that**

⁹⁰ Rabbi DovBer Schneuri, *Torat ḥayim—shemot II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2003), Pikudei, 453d-454d.

⁹¹ *Vekakhah*, sections 23-25, pages 27-30.

⁹² See Daniel C. Matt, "Ayin: The concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121-159.

beyond *hokhmah* the revelation of light is not yet in existence at all, and *hokhmah* is the beginning of the revelation, that ~~it~~ is, the point of the letter *yod* that yet ~~also~~ remains beyond dissemination in the comprehension and grasp of *binah* ...⁹³

הנה כתיב והחכ' מאין תמצא פ' מאין ליש תמצא, וכידוע דאין נק' מה שאינו מושג כלל, והוא למעלה מעלה מבחי' השגת הבינה, והיינו שמתגלה בחי' אוא"ס ב"ה מה דלית מח' תפיסה בי' כלל, ולא ניתן להנות בו מאחר שאין שום תפיסה והשגה כו'. ולכאן צ"ל מאחר שלו ניתן להנות בו מהו הפועלה מהגילוי. וגם צ"ל הלא החכ' נק' ראשית הגילוי, נושא הענין הוא שבא בדרך גילוי להנות בו. אך הענין הוא דהנה אור בהשתל-כי למעלה מן החכ' עדיין אין גילוי אור במציאות כלל, והחכמה הוא ראשית הגילוי, והיינו ~~הוא~~ בחי' הנקודה דיו"ד דשם הוי' שהוא בהתהוות האור דחכ' מבחי' ההעלם ואין דכת"ר שנק' עה"ע כו', ובחי' נקודה ד]יו"ד עדיין גם הוא למעלה מן בחי' ההתפשטות בהשגה ותפיסה דבינה

Reading Maharash against the passage cited above from *Tanya*, we are forced to acknowledge the implicit paradox at the heart of the classical characterization: *Hokhmah* is said to be “the source of intellection and understanding” precisely because “therein is revealed [G-d’s] infinite light, which no thought can grasp at all.” But if *hokhmah* is equated with the disclosure of ungraspable infinitude, Maharash asks, how can it meaningfully function as “the beginning of revelation” or as the “source” of comprehensible understanding? The hierarchical procession from *ayin* to the intermediate point of *hokhmah*, and on to the broad somethingness of *binah*, depends on a placid logic that Maharash boldly deconstructs. In its place a new characterization of *hokhmah* crystallises that it is not primarily defined by its revelatory relationship with *binah*, but rather by its generally continuous relationship with the infinite divine nothingness that transcends revelation.

This crystallisation is partly achieved through the insertion of a passage that appears in a discourse by Rashaz: “*Hokhmah* is found from nothing ... that is, the infinite light reveals itself, which no thought can grasp etc; and permission is not granted to reap benefit from it for there is no grasp or comprehension.”⁹⁴ The significance of Maharash’s use of this particular passage will be understood in light of the further discussion of the relationship between his methodology and that of his father below. For the moment, however, it is important to highlight the way in which Maharash interleaves these texts to disrupt more conventional modes of thinking and to bring a more complex conception of *hokhmah* to the fore.

⁹³ *Vekakhah*, section 23, page 27.

⁹⁴ Rashaz, *LT vayikra*, 11d. This source is not cited by Maharash himself, nor was it cited in the annotated edition of *Vekakhah*, published in 2013.

Maharash goes on to explain that *hokhmah* is fundamentally constituted as the barest reflection that remains in the aftermath of the primal *šimšum*, the utter removal of the infinite light of G-d, upon which the possibility of creation depends. What then does *hokhmah* reveal? *Hokhmah* reveals the utter concealment of divine transcendence. As Maharash expresses it:

The *yod* of *hokhmah* comes only after the *šimšum* of the principal of the essential light, as stated above, nevertheless some revelation remains from the essential light of the diadem (*keter*), only that it doesn't come within the category of apprehension and grasp ... But it rather comes by way of the concealment of *hokhmah* ... One grasps that the matter has not been grasped.⁹⁵

ש"ד דחכ' בא רק אחר הצמצום דעיקר אור העצמיות כנ"ל מ"מ קצת גילוי יש גם מעצמיות דאור הכתר רק שאינו בא בכלל השגה ותפיסא ... אלא הוא בא בדרך העלם דחכמה ... שמשגיג איך הדבר אינו מושג

It is noteworthy that while *šimšum* is usually understood as utter removal, or total concealment, Maharash chose to appropriate language that limits the impact of *šimšum* to “the principal of the essential light,” and which allows that “nevertheless some revelation remains from the essential light ... by way of the concealment of *hokhmah*.”⁹⁶ More will be said about the intersection of *hokhmah* and *šimšum* in Maharash's recalibration of Habad thought below (Part 4), and it will become clear that this nuance is not insignificant. For now, however, our purpose is to take note of Maharash's methodological engagement with the textual corpus he inherited from his predecessors. Schwartz was correct to note that Maharash makes heavy use of this corpus, and he was likewise correct to note the importance of asking “why he selected the specific sections that he excerpted from the writings of the *admorim* who preceded him.” Such questions,

⁹⁵ *Vekakhah*, section 25, page 29. It should be noted that this discussion of *hokhmah* and *šimšum* also appears in Schneuri, *Torat hayim—shemot II*, as cited above, n90. In addition to the interventions mentioned above, here Maharash further sharpens the theorization by crystallising the distinction between the higher and lower aspects of *hokhmah*, referred to as *mah* and *ko'akh* respectively, and emphasizing that it is the higher aspect that is referred to here. Maharash further elaborates on this point in various different ways throughout the *hemshekh*. This interpolation is drawn from a classical work by the sixteenth century kabbalist, Rabbi Moses ben Jacob Cordevero. Cf. Cordevero, *Pardas rimonim*, Gate 23 (*Shaar erkhei hakinuyim*), Chapter 8, Erekh *hokhmah*.

⁹⁶ Compare Rashaz of Liady, *TO*, 14b: “This concealment is the absence of light to the point that it can't be called by any name at all, that it should be referred to by the appellation *hokhmah* ... till after many descents and concatenations of stations ... then the capacity is made for the creation of a certain station that will be a source of a source for the station of *hokhmah*.”

התעלמות זו היא העדר האור עד שאינו עולה בשם כלל להיות נק' בשם חכמה ... עד אחר כמה ירידות והשתלשלות המדרגות ... אז נעשה בחי' כח התהוות איזו בחי' להיות מקור דמקור לבחי' חכמה

This text, which is a locus classicus for Rashaz's conception of *šimšum*, asserts the utter absence of light and the utter impossibility of the direct emergence of *hokhmah* in the aftermath of *šimšum*. Maharash, by contrast, construes “the concealment of *hokhmah*” as instantiating at least “some revelation” that “remains from the essential light.”

however, cannot be answered without undertaking a thorough comparative survey of the relevant corpus of texts. We have shown, moreover, that Maharash does not simply reiterate received teachings, but substantially reconfigures them in three significant ways:

1) Maharash reshapes and sculpts existing texts, sometimes simply by cutting a few words or sentences and by adding pithy embellishments and elaborations at key points, resulting in substantial shifts in emphasis and argument. This may be what Zalmanov was referring to when he wrote of the elite hasidim who “would engage in lengthy debate over each omission and addition in the Rebbe Maharash’s discourses.”⁹⁷ In cases like this, a comparative reading makes it possible to pinpoint where Maharash diverges from the received text, and to discern the sharp pithiness that distinguishes his interventions.

2) The comparative reading above demonstrates the way that Maharash lifts a substantial section out of a lengthy discourse by R. DovBer, and uses it to create an entirely new discourse. Not only is the original argument honed and transformed, as discussed above, but it is also set in a new literary context; in this case, a swift and sharply detailed hermeneutical commentary on the verse “You shall observe My Sabbaths and revere My Sanctuary; I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:30), according to which shabbat itself is identified with *hokhmah*.⁹⁸ Thereby Maharash’s conceptual intervention is applied to renew and deepen his audience’s appreciation of the weekly observance of shabbat, one of the most central features of traditional Jewish life. This recalls Zalmanov’s contention that “among the Rebbe Maharash’s hasidim were many thousands of so-called householders ... and for their sake the Rebbe Maharash would deliver the discourses in a lighter form—relatively speaking—quantitatively compact and qualitatively ample.”⁹⁹ Moreover, a comparison of Maharash’s written discourse with a transcript that his son (Rashab) made on the basis of its oral delivery suggests that Maharash’s speaking style was similarly concise, but also more free, focusing more on his own hermeneutical and conceptual contribution, and not hewing so closely to the teaching by R. DovBer that forms the textual basis of the discourse’s written version.¹⁰⁰

3) Through the new genre of the *hemshekh*, these individual discourses, and the large matrix of earlier texts they draw on, are all incorporated within a wider and more systematic reinvestigation, in which old ideas are rescrutinized and recontextualized,

⁹⁷ Zalmanov, “Torat Shmuel,” 3:45-46.

⁹⁸ *Vekakhah*, sections 23-25, pages 27-30.

⁹⁹ Zalmanov, “Torat Shmuel,” 3:45-46.

¹⁰⁰ For Rashab’s transcript, see *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, shaar teshah asar, sefer 5637, II, vekakhah—5637, 785-789*.

discovering new momentum in the service of new arguments, and in the service of a broader and more systematic project. A greater degree of synthesis is thereby developed between an array of ostensibly different topics, together with a sustained and more complex exploration of a single central theme.

Extending this comparative analysis further, the *hemshekh* emerges as an innovative continuation of the intertextual approach pioneered by the Şemaḥ Şedek. The latter was especially concerned to preserve the integrity and linguistic form of Rashaz's oral teachings, and his main intellectual contribution was via the addition of glosses (*hagahot* plural, *hagahah* singular) that contextualize individual ideas and interpretations within the broader corpus of Rashaz's teachings and within the classical canons of Kabbalah and rabbinic literature. More subtly, the Şemaḥ Şedek also anthologized, curated and published two influential compendia of Rashaz's discourses; *Torah or* (Kopust, 1836) and *Likutei torah* (Zhytomyr, 1848). By both of these means, the Şemaḥ Şedek placed existing texts in dialogue with one another, creating a web of intertextual associations that enriches, problematizes and illuminates.¹⁰¹

Our earlier case study of how Maharash sculpts existing texts to reconceptualize *ḥokhmah* provides a specific illustration of his further development of the Şemaḥ Şedek's intertextual method. More broadly, however, *Vekakhah*'s intertextual and conceptual arc is skeletally prefigured in a discourse by Rashaz as published and glossed in *Likutei torah*:

In *Vekakhah*'s second discourse the discussion of *ḥokhmah* is introduced via the appropriation of a passage from *Likutei torah* that juxtaposes the Sabbath's spiritual phenomenology with that of the festivals (*yamim tovim*); the former being associated with *ḥokhmah* and the latter with *binah*.¹⁰² Notably, Maharash diverges from the source text a couple of lines before it moves from a detailed discussion of *binah* into a contrasting discussion of *ḥokhmah*. At this point Maharash takes up Rashaz's association of *binah*

¹⁰¹ See, for now, Nochum Grunwald, "Hashitot vehashitativut bederushei rabeinu hazaken: hagdarot vesivug shel shitot vede'ot bemeḥavei ketavav shel admor hazaken bemishnat ḥasemaḥ şedek," in *Harav*, ed. Nochum Grunwald (Mechon Harav, 2015), 573-586; Eli Rubin, "The Pen Shall Be Your Friend': Intertextuality, Intersociality, and the Cosmos - Examples of the Tzemach Tzedek's Way in the Development of Chabad Chassidic Thought," *Chabad.org*, (chabad.org/3286179, accessed July 4th, 2018); idem., "Traveling and Traversing Chabad's Literary Paths: From *Likutei torah* to *Khayim gravitser* and Beyond," *In geveb* (October 2018), <https://ingeveb.org/articles/traveling-and-traversing-chabads-literary-paths-from-likutei-torah-to-khayim-gravitser-and-beyond>, accessed Sep 23, 2019. Also see Ariel Roth, "Reshimu—mahloket ḥasidut lubaviş vekopust," *Kabbalah* 30 (2013): 243, n. 122; Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad*, 158-186. On the distinction between *Torah or* and *Likutei torah*, see below at the beginning of Part 6.

¹⁰² Rashaz, *LT vayikra*, 11d; *Vekakhah*, Section 5, pages 6-7.

with the satisfaction enjoyed by the soul in the world-to-come, segueing into an elaborate analysis of *binah* and its eschatological significance that extends over the course of several discourses.¹⁰³ Thereby, he paves the way to throw the subsequent contrast of *binah* with *hokhmah* into much sharper relief, constructing it within a larger conceptual frame. Yet, even as he sets out on this more elaborate expansion of the theme, Maharash does not leave the source text in *Likutei torah* entirely behind. Indeed, as discussed above, he later used a passage from this very discourse to reshape R. DovBer Schneuri's discussion of *hokhmah*.

The first fourteen discourses of *Vekakhah* center on precisely the same themes that are at the forefront of the *Likutei torah* discourse; the Exodus, Passover, and the mystical association of *hokhmah* with the commandment to eat *maṣah*. The last section of the fourteenth discourse is an almost word-by-word replication of a passage in the *Likutei torah* discourse, at the end of which the Şemaḥ Şedek inserted a *hagahah*.¹⁰⁴ Maharash does not include the text of this *hagahah* in his excerpt, but he was clearly attentive to its content. Here, the Şemaḥ Şedek refers the reader to several other discourses in *Likutei torah* wherein *hokhmah* and *binah* are discussed within the contexts of various other thematic associations. His concluding references are 1) to a discussion of the verse “a spring shall issue from the house of the Lord” (Joel 4:8) where *hokhmah* is associated with the spring, and 2) to a discussion of the verse “you shall draw water with joy” (Isaiah 12:3), rabbinically associated with the Temple era embellishment of the usual wine libations with a water libation on the Sukkot festival; *hokhmah* is associated with water and *binah* with wine. In *Vekakhah*, discourses 15 through 19 take up the verse “a spring shall issue from the house of the Lord.”¹⁰⁵ Discourses 31 through 37 take up the mystical and devotional significance of the festival of sukkot, with particular attention given to precisely the associations indicated by the Şemaḥ Şedek.¹⁰⁶

It transpires that significant elements of this *hemshekh*'s arc follow the Şemaḥ Şedek's indications with a symmetry which cannot be merely incidental. Whether constructed consciously or unconsciously, the textual and conceptual patterns of Maharash's work reveals the deep imprint of his father's influence. His ambitious and magisterial reconsideration of *hokhmah*'s significance is built on the textual and methodological

¹⁰³ *Vekakhah*, sections 5-22, pages 7-27.

¹⁰⁴ *Vekakhah*, section 38, page 52; Rashaz, *LT vayikra*, 11d-12a.

¹⁰⁵ *Vekakhah*, sections 39-51, pages 52-76. Cf. Rashaz, *LT shir hashirim*, 39a-c. Maharash refers to this discourse directly in *Vekakhah*, Section 98, page 157.

¹⁰⁶ *Vekakhah*, sections 84-107, pages 137-172. Cf. Rashaz, *LT devarim (sukkot)*, 79d-80d. See also Maharash's direct reference to this discourse and its glosses in *Vekakhah*, Section 69, page 109.

foundation laid by his father. At the same time, both textually and conceptually, the new edifice that emerges far surpasses the constrained indications of his father's *hagahot*.

Thus contextualized, Maharash's move from the *hagahot* to the *hemshekh* can be seen as a move from the micro to the macro. The Şemaḥ Şedek applied the intertextual method on a point-by-point basis, providing something akin to a running commentary that draws an intertextual web of enriching literary and conceptual associations. But, for the most part, he left it to the reader to look up the sources he cited and arrive at further inference independently. In the *hemshekh*, Maharash brings the method of intertextual editorial curation from the realm of succinct reference and inference into the realm of explicit argumentation and elaboration. Instead of a skeletal associative web, he constructs a new narrative that endows the individual texts utilized with the kind of conceptual momentum that can compellingly advance a new theoretical project.¹⁰⁷ In the case of *Vekakhah*, the new project is a phenomenological reexploration of the central place of *ḥokhmah* in Judaism's spiritual and religious trajectory—as it is manifest in the broad history of the nation, and more specifically in the annual holiday cycle from Passover through Sukkot.¹⁰⁸

Part 4 - Theological Innovation and Recalibration in Maharash's Discussions of *Şimşum*

In addition to Maharash's innovative development of his father's intertextual approach, his discourses are notable for the bold theological recalibration that they initiated and advanced. In redeveloping and rescutinizing the corpus he inherited, his teachings divulge a subtle yet robust shift in their underlying preoccupation. His predecessors were chiefly concerned to articulate a coherent vision of the oneness of G-d, and they concentrated their theorizations on questions of how that oneness enfolds the cosmos and is unfolded therein. Maharash's theorizations, by contrast, focus more centrally on the ultimate significance of human actions in the physical realm. Underpinning much of his corpus is the concern to excavate a fundamental ontological continuity between infinitude and finitude, between transcendence and immanence, between divine reality and the physical reality of the created world. This concern is especially evident in his discussions

¹⁰⁷ For a discussion of the wider literary context and resonance of this move from the micro to the macro see Rubin, "Traveling and Traversing."

¹⁰⁸ See Rubin, "Hemshekh Vekakhah Ha-gadol," esp. Part One, <chabad.org/3646993>.

of *šimšum*, which emerged as the central locus of his boldest theorizations, and consequently as the central locus of the intra-Habad controversy that they initiated.

In the sixth discourse of *Vekakhah*, for example, Maharash argues that the primal *šimšum* is actually caused by man's practice of the ritual *mišvot*:

Man encompasses the upper and lower, meaning all the cosmic realms... and the intention of man's creation is for the sake of Torah and *mišvot*... In truth, the entire will for Torah and *mišvot* is synonymous with *šimšum*, for on the part of the essence of the infinite light (*ašmiyut or eyn sof*) there is no possibility at all for the desire for Torah and *mišvot*. As our sages say in the *Midrash rabbah* to *parashat shemini*, "What does it matter to the Holy One if you slaughter [an animal] from the nape or from the throat?" ... Accordingly, the meaning of "My will is made" is that we make and draw forth the infinite light, which transcends such will, that He, blessed be He, shall have a will for Torah and *mišvot* ... Accordingly we can understand the power of physical *mišvah* performance specifically... that through the compelling force of the action we cause the primal *šimšum*, that the infinite revelation should be contracted to enter the specific desires expressed in Torah and *mišvot*.¹⁰⁹

האדם כלול מכל העולמות ... ומכוון מבריאת האדם הוא בשביל תומ"צ ... באמת כל הרצון דתומ"צ ה"ז בחי' צמצום שהרי מצד עצמיות אוא"ם ב"ה אינו שייך כלל הרצון דתומ"צ כלל וכמארז"ל במד"ר פ' שמיני וכי מה איכפת לי להקב"ה אם שוחט מן העורף או שוחט מן הצואר ... ונמצא פ"ו ונעשה רצוני שעושי וממשיכי את בחי' אוא"ם שלמעלה מבחי' הרצון שיהי' לו ית' רצון בתומ"צ ... וא"כ יובן כח מעשה המצות בגשמיות דוקא ... שע"י הכפי' וההכרח דבחי' המעשה גורמי' בחי' צמצום הראשון שיצמצם אוא"ם לבוא בפרטיות הרצונות דתומ"צ

This argument weaves together classical rabbinic texts and builds on interpretations applied to them by earlier Hasidic masters, but it also goes a whole lot further. In *Sifrei*, an early rabbinic commentary to the biblical book of Numbers, G-d is said to express pleasure that "My will was done" (נעשה רצוני).¹¹⁰ But Maharash reads this hyper-literally as "My will was made." This provides the foundation for a dramatic recasting of human activity as the earliest cause that "makes," or creates, the divine will for Torah and *mišvot*, which Maharash declares to be "synonymous with *šimšum*." The ultimate stimulus of the entire cosmic project, in other words, lies in the compelling power of somatic activity in the here and now.

¹⁰⁹ *Vekakhah*, sections 14-15, pages 16-18.

¹¹⁰ *Sifrei*, Numbers 28:8.

Swiftly and elegantly, this passage executes a complete reversal of the normative significance of *šimšum*. Rather than signifying the immense gap between *ašmiyut or eyn sof* and the finite strictures of human life and activity, *šimšum* has been recast to illustrate the immense theurgical consequence, and the far reaching cosmic power, of human activity. Normatively, the primal *šimšum* is deployed as the central linchpin that upholds the cosmic hierarchy and unequivocally bisects the realm of infinite divinity from the finite order of cosmological unfolding and creation.¹¹¹ Yet, Maharash seizes that very linchpin and wields it as a lever by which to upend this rigid hierarchy; rather than seeing *mišvah* observance as something that occurs at the end of the cosmological process of creation, it is seen as the most primal and compelling of all cosmic causes, reaching beyond time and cosmos to the transcendent core of divine being, from whence it compels the initial emergence of the supernal will. From this perspective, the actual performance of the divine commandment precedes—and elicits—the command.

In this vein, Maharash also gives new meaning to the well known aphorism—enshrined in the mystical liturgical hymn, *lekhah dodi*, and already mentioned in the previous chapter—“the last in action is the first in thought” (סוף מעשה במחשבה תחילה).¹¹²

Conventionally, this is understood to merely link the end of the cosmic hierarchy with its beginning. It is not actual action that is first in thought, but rather the thought of action.

But Maharash insists that:

The last in action, in literal actuality, arose [first] in thought, and not the spiritual action ... the principal is the action in literal actuality, and upon this the entire Torah is founded.¹¹³

סוף מעשה בפועל ממש עלה במחשבה ולא המעשה הרוחנית ... העיקר הוא המעשה בפו"מ וע"ז הוסד כל התורה

Maharash’s rewriting of this aphorism chiefly intends to emphasize that it is specifically the somatic action, rather than the spiritual activity of the embodied soul, that is first in thought. His earlier argument, however, that “through the compelling force of the action we cause the primal *šimšum*,” suggests an even more radical reading, namely that the last in action is not simply first in thought as a mere thought, but is rather primordially present as a literal action.

¹¹¹ This is exemplified in the text by the *Šemaḥ Šedek* discussed above, 1:5 - *Šemaḥ Šedek, Or hatorah - shemot, II, 487-9.*

¹¹² See above, 1:4, n100.

¹¹³ *Vekakhah*, Section 19, pages 22.

The dramatic counterintuitiveness of Maharash's account is only accentuated by the fact that he does not at all attempt to cushion the blow it inflicts on the normative patterns of rational thought; he eschews understatement and incrementalism in equal measure. He confronts the reader with the raw power of the *mišvah*, unhesitatingly rending asunder the placid chronological and cosmological conventions that usually govern such discussions in Kabbalistic and Hasidic literature.¹¹⁴

The important role of rhetoric in Maharash's theological recalibration of Habad thought is evident when we note that his reading of "doing the will of G-d" as "making the will of G-d" is not entirely new. There are several passages in *Likutei torah* that, together, seem to have formed the basis for his argument. Yet none of them throw our ordinary hierarchical conceptions of cosmos and chronology to the wind in the way that Maharash does. On the contrary, in *Likutei torah* it is explained that the will to create the world was initially issued autonomously by G-d, for, at the start of creation, "there was no man to work" (Genesis 2:5). Only now that the world is already in existence "there must be an arousal from below to inspire this elicitation ... that He should desire to, as it were, put His luminance aside, and descend and contract Himself." Moreover, while this is said to be achieved "primarily" via Torah and *mišvot* in the physical world, the "mighty angels" are also mentioned as playing a role in this "arousal from below."¹¹⁵ Most significantly, Maharash replaces *Likutei torah*'s more generic reference to divine self-contraction with an unambiguous focus on the primal contraction that initiates the cosmological process—*šimšum harishon*. In some of the closest textual antecedents in *Likutei torah* there is no mention of *šimšum* at all.¹¹⁶

While the general spirit of Maharash's words can be traced to older texts, his rhetoric is such that an entirely new argument is articulated and the theological paradigm is radically reconstrued. Just as there is no direct precedent for Maharash's forceful recalibration of

¹¹⁴ For Wolfson's related notion of "linear circularity" see below.

¹¹⁵ *LT vayikra*, 32d-33a:

פי עושי רצונו היינו שעושים אצלו ית' בחי' רצון שירצה להשפיל עצמו להתהוות העולמות שמצד עצמו אין שייך בו בחי' רצון שירצה להתהוות העולמות שהוא א"צ להם ... אך הנה המשכת רצון זה היה תחלה מצד עצמו בחסד חנם וכמ"ש ותורת חסד והיינו לפי כי ואדם אין לעבוד כו' אבל עכשיו צ"ל אתערותא דלתתא לעורר המשכה זו וזהו מלאכיו גבורי כח באתעדל"ת ועי"ז מעוררים כביכול למעלה המשכת הרצון וזהו עושי רצונו שעושים לו רצון שירצה להניח את אורו כביכול על הצד ולירד לצמצם א"ע כו' והנה עיקר המשכה זו הוא ע"י תורה ומצות שע"ז עושים לו רצון כביכול שירצה להיות מלך העולם

¹¹⁶ Cf., for example, *ibid.*, Pinchas, 76a. Also cf. *ibid.*, Brakhah, 99c, where "making the will of G-d" is linked specifically to the negative commandments; Maharash develops this association too, but embellishes it by explicitly wedding his theorization to the discourse on *šimšum*. For a brief discussion of an antecedent to this sort of reading of "doing" or "making" the will of G-d in a teaching attributed to the Maggid of Mezritch see Ariel E. Mayse, *Speaking Infinities: G-d and Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 180. For a discussion of subsequent iterations on this theme in later Habad teachings, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 168-9.

the dynamic between divine and human activity, so there is no subsequent text that dares to repeat so bold an explication. To my knowledge, this statement—“through the compelling force of the action we cause the primal *šimšum*”—is unique.

The distinction of Maharash’s style can be further highlighted when contrasted with that of his son, Rashab. In the latter’s important and substantive *hemshekh*, *Yom tov shel rosh hashanah taf reish samekh vav*, considerable attention is devoted to the theological meaning of “doing” or “making” the will of G-d.¹¹⁷ This topic is raised within the broader frame of a discussion of *šimšum* and its purpose. This *hemshekh* and its important contributions to Habad’s discourse on *šimšum* will be discussed below, in Chapter 3, but what is notable in the current context is the immense distinction between the respective rhetorical styles of the father and the son: Rashab finesses the more innovative and radical elements of his thinking by enfolding them in an incremental build-up of carefully layered and exquisitely elaborated arguments. Maharash, by contrast, formulates his most radical insights sharply and swiftly. Often, they are liable to slip by the casual reader unnoticed. But on this occasion, the drama of Maharash’s reconceptualization of *šimšum* strikes with the unmistakable force of a surging wave. At the same time, the full Kabbalistic theorization of his broader recalibration of Habad theology gradually attained greater explication and coherence over the span of his leadership and beyond. Before widening the scope of our analysis, however, it is important to take further note of Maharash’s innovative theorization of *šimšum* in *Vekakhah*.

As discussed above, in this *hemshekh* Maharash does not describe *hokhmah* as something entirely new—merely as the first of the ten *sefirot* and the beginning of revelation within the cosmological hierarchy—but rather as the barest reflection that remains in the aftermath of the primal *šimšum*. While the primal *šimšum* is conventionally understood as a rupture, as an utter clearing away of the primal revelation of divine infinitude, Maharash appropriated a text by R. DovBer Schneuri that limits the impact of *šimšum* to “the principal of the essential light,” such that “some revelation remains from the essential light ... by way of the concealment of *hokhmah*.”¹¹⁸ Accordingly, *hokhmah* is construed as preserving a finite testimony to the fundamental ineffability of pre-*šimšum* infinitude. Maharash subsequently relates this concept of *hokhmah* to the *reshimah* (sometimes written as *reshimu*), the “trace” of infinitude which, according to some Lurianic

¹¹⁷ See Rashab, *Yom tov shel rosh hashanah taf reish samekh vav* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1971), esp. 29-36 and 61-63. Henceforth this work will be referred to as *Samekh vav*.

¹¹⁸ *Vekakhah*, section 25, page 29. Above, n95-6.

commentators, remained in the void in the aftermath of the primal *šimšum*.¹¹⁹ In this context he boldly explicates the claim of a fundamental continuity between infinitude and finitude, irrespective of the discontinuous rupture of *šimšum*:

As it is written in the *Avodat hakodesh*, “the infinite light is the ultimate completion, and if you say that it has the capacity for infinitude but not for finitude you are detracting from its completion; and the limitation that is first brought into existence therefrom is the containers (*keilim*) of the ten *sefirot* in the realm of emanation (*ašilut*).”¹²⁰ Accordingly, there is the [divine] nothing that reveals the concealment, and the finitude that arises from it [i.e. the containers of the ten *sefirot*], which is the root of the finitude that is below etc. And also according to what is explained elsewhere that the root of the containers (*keilim*) is from the trace (*reshimah*) etc., it follows that the radiance of the trace is the nothingness from which the containers derive. And being that the trace comes via the *šimšum*, therefore they [i.e. the containers] are in the aspect of finite enumeration [ten *sefirot*] specifically. And **because the luminance of the trace (or *hareshimah*) is that which was not reached by the *šimšum***, therefore the containers are literally divine ... From this it is accordingly understood that ... the nothingness of *ḥokhmah*, which is “found from nothing,” is itself nothingness ... like one who finds a find which is the very same object that was lost.¹²¹

כמ"ש בעה"ק שאוא"ס הוא שלימותא דכולא, וא"ת שהוא כה בבע"ג ואין לו כה בגבול אתה מחסר שלימותו והגבול הנמצא ממנו תחלה זהו בחי' הכלים דע"ס דאצי' א"כ יש בחי' אין המגלה בחי' העלם הגבול הנמצא ממנו שהם מקור הגבול שלמטה כו' וגם ע"פ מה שנת' במ"א ששרש הכלים הם מחרשימה כו' א"כ הארת הרשימה זהו האין של הכלים ולהיות שהרשימה זהו ע"י צמצום לכן הם בבחי' מספר דוקא ומפני כי אור הרשימה הוא מה שלא הגיע בו הצמצום לכן גם הכלים הם אלקות ממש ... ונמצא לפ"ז מובן אשר ... האין דחכ' שמאין תמצא, שהוא עצמו אין ... ע"ד המוצא מציאה שהוא אותו החפץ ממש שנאבד

¹¹⁹ On the motif of the trace in Habad thought see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu—The Trace of Transcendence and the Transcendence of the Trace: The Paradox of *Šimšum* in the RaShaB’s Hemshekh Ayin-Beit,” *Kabbalah* 30 (2013): 75-120; Ariel Roth, “Reshimu”; Eli Rubin, “Absent Presence: The revelatory trace (*reshimu*) of divine withdrawal,” *Chabad.org*, <chabad.org/3004920> (accessed August 11, 2021). Roths’s article is of particular relevance to our current discussion of Maharash’s approach and the controversy it provoked. On this score also see Wolfson, *ibid.*: 110n147. Also see Esther Liebes, “Simani kehōtem al libekha’: ha’reshimu’bereishit haḥasidut,” in Maren R. Niehoff, Ronit Meroz and Jonathan Garb, ed., *Vezot liyehuda* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2012), 381–400.

¹²⁰ See R. Meir ibn Gabbai, *Avodat hakodesh*, 1:8, quoting Rabbi Azriel of Gerona. For a textual antecedent in which this passage may be alluded to by Rashaz see below, note 127. On the significance of Azriel’s teaching on its own terms see the relevant remarks by Sandra Valabregue-Perry, cited below, note 126. On Meir ibn Gabbai see Roland Goetschel, *Meir ibn Gabbay: Le Discours de la Kabbale Espagnole* (Leuven: Peters, 1981). See also the discussion and further citations in Jonathan Garb, *Hofa’atav shel hako’ah bemistikah hayehudit* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), 232-246.

¹²¹ *Vekakhah*, section 47, page 69. Emphasis added. See the relevant discussion and citations in Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 109-110, esp. note 147.

This is a rich and complex passage, and it introduces Kabbalistic terminology that has not yet been discussed in this study. The central issue here is the paradoxical status of the ten *sefirot* in the divine realm of *ašilut* (“emanation”); they are subject to finite enumeration and are nevertheless divine. Moreover, the divine status of *ašilut* is generally understood to extend not only to the ray of infinite light (*or*) that saturates the *sefirot*, but also to the finite contours—the containers (*keilim*)—that delineate the individual *sefirot* themselves. This is a paradox that has been much discussed in Kabbalistic literature, and which was the subject of a mini treatise by the Şemaḥ Şedek.¹²²

Here Maharash addresses the problem by invoking a foundational teachings of Rabbi Azriel of Gerona (1160-1238) as recorded in *Avodat hakodesh* by Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai (1480-1540), the significance of which has been eloquently articulated by Sandra Valabregue-Perry:

In Azriel’s thought, the emanation [i.e. the *sefirot* of *ašilut*] is the limit emanating from Eyn-sof; it is the infinite essence that expands in the limited ... G-d as Infinite represents a distinct alternative to the philosophical concept of the One, of a simple and separated ontology; Eyn-sof offers a concept of unity that permits a dynamic, integrative multiplicity.¹²³

In light of these comments, it is easy to understand why the formulation preserved in *Avodat hakodesh* is so often invoked in Habad literature, which is deeply marked by the quest to attain a robust account of divine unity, monism, or singularity, without letting go of the integrative multiplicity described so extensively by the kabbalists.¹²⁴ As will be

¹²² Known as “Derush shalosh shitot” this treatise can be found in Şemaḥ Şedek, *Or hatorah - inyanim* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1983), 258-384. As noted by the editors, this treatise was widely circulated in manuscript and was first published in idem., *Derekh mišvotekha ḥelek sheini* (Poltava, 1912), 304b-315b. For a discussion of this text, see Israel Sandman, “Three Understandings of the Sefirot,” *Chabad.org*, <chabad.org/3300053> (accessed August 9, 2021). For an overview of divergent approaches to the status of the *sefirot* see Moshe Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 159-165. Also see Hava Tirosh-Rothschild “Sefirot as the Essence of G-d in the Writings of David Messer Leon,” *AJS Review* 7-8 (1982-1983): 409-425; Moshe Idel, “Hasefirot shemei’al hasaphirot,” *Tarbiz* 51:2 (1982): 239-280.

¹²³ Sandra Valabregue-Perry, “The Concept of Infinity (*Eyn-sof*) and the Rise of Theosophical Kabbalah,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 102:3 (Summer 2012): 428-429. Also see the relevant discussion in Elliot Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiēsis* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indian University Press, 2019), 210.

¹²⁴ To the best of my knowledge *Avodat hakodesh* is not directly cited by R. Shneur of Liady himself, but some of his discourses do use similar language. This is not surprising when we consider that his discourses were not composed as written texts, but were originally delivered orally, and that they do not generally excerpt specific texts directly, outside of the main pillars of the biblical and rabbinic canon. See for example, Rashaz, *MAHZ 5567* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2012), 25. There “the finite faculty” (כה גבולי) that is elicited in the aftermath of *šimšum* is explicitly associated with the “*reshimu*.” Also see idem., *MAHZ 5566 I* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2012), 130—where it is emphasized that “the capacity for finitude ... is not ... separate from His self” (נפרד ח"ו מעצמותו) ... אין זה ... (כה הגבול ... —and 140. A noteworthy philological distinction is that while *Avodat hakodesh* links the capacity for infinitude to divine completion (שלימות), in

shown below, Maharash went further than any of his predecessors in explicitly rejecting the acosmistic solution to this conundrum. For him, accordingly, divine oneness certainly cannot be upheld by denying the ontological reality of the finite realms. Rabbi Azriel's principle (via *Avodat hakodesh*) is therefore especially crucial. Moreover, this principle is not only relevant to the question of divine unity, but more specifically to the question of how divine finitude—"which is the root of the finitude that is below"—is a continuous expression of G-d's essential self.

There are several additional points that make Maharash's invocation of Rabbi Azriel's teaching especially noteworthy: Firstly, he enmeshes this medieval conception of the continuity between infinitude and finitude—or, in Valabregue-Perry's terminology, of the integrative capaciousness of divine infinitude—with the later Lurianic concept of *šimšum*. Secondly, this provides the grounds for the novel claim that the residual luminance of the *reshimah*, which lingers imperceptibly in the void left by the *šimšum*, was in fact "not reached by *šimšum*." That is, it does not originate as a trace of infinitude left in the aftermath of *šimšum*, but is rather a continuous manifestation of the divine capacity for finitude that was primordially present within the pre-*šimšum* manifestation of infinite light. Thirdly, this leads to the further conclusion that the first of the ten subsequently emanated *sefirot*—*ḥokhmah*—is not a new form of divine revelation, but a reinstantiation of the premordial nothingness that is its source.

This synthesis between pre-Lurianic kabbalah and post-Lurianic kabbalah, rereading *šimšum* through the prism of R. Azriel of Gerona, underpins Maharash's emphasis of the fundamental continuity between infinite divinity and finite creation. *Šimšum* is not understood straightforwardly as a limitation of the infinite, but is rather a finite form of infinite delimitation. Elsewhere in *Vekakhah*, Maharash makes it quite clear that he is fully aware of the synthetic nature of this theorization, writing that:

This matter of *šimšum* was explained by the Arizal, yet it is not an innovation, for the earlier sages of the kabbalah explained this matter itself in a different lexicon, and as is written in the book *Avodat hakodesh* in the name of the early authorities

...¹²⁵

והנה ענין צמצום זה ביאר האריז"ל אמנם לא דבר חדש הוא כי חכמי הקבלה שמקודם ביארו זה גופא בלשון אחר וכמ"ש בספר עה"ק ח"א פ"ח בשם הראשונים

all the examples cited here Rashaz links it to divine omnipotence as a corollary of infinitude (מאחר שנק') (אוא"ס הרי הוא כל יכול). Additional antecedents will be discussed below.

¹²⁵ *Vekakhah*, section 101, page 163.

The equation of these two concepts is by no means self-evident, and it indeed crystallises the paradoxical profundity inherent to Habad’s recalibration of the significance of *šimšum*, such that it is understood to represent discontinuity and continuity, creation and emanation, simultaneously.¹²⁶ This synthesis was succinctly encapsulated in a gloss by the Šemaḥ Šedek to a discourse by Rashaz, but Maharash developed it much more thoroughly.¹²⁷ The latter’s contribution can be thrown in sharper relief when compared with another antecedent found in *Likutei torah*:

The aspect of supernal will that transcends all worlds is that He radiates infinitely. And there is the aspect of *šimšum* and the empty space, which is the departure of the infinite aspect, that it should be in the aspect of concealment ... and this is the initial revelation in *ḥokhmah* ... And so it is written in the book *Avodat hakodesh*, 1:4, in the name of the early authorities, thus: “The infinite is complete without lack, and if you say that it has capacity for infinitude but not for finitude you are detracting from its completion etc., and the limitation that first comes into existence therefrom are the *sefirot* etc.”¹²⁸

בחי' רצון עליון הסוכ"ע זהו מה שהוא ית' מאיר בבחי' א"ס ויש בחי' צמצום ומקום פנוי שהוא הסתלקות בחי' א"ס להיות בחי' זו בבחי' העלם ... והיא ראשית הגילוי בחכמה ... וכ"ה בספר עה"ק ח"א רפ"ח בשם הראשונים וז"ל אין סוף הוא שלמות מבלי חסרון ואם תאמר שיש לו כח בלי גבול ואין לו כח בגבול אתה מחסר שלמותו כו' והגבול הנמצא ממנו תחלה הם הספירות כו' עכ"ד

This passage, which was likely inserted into Rashaz’s text by the Šemaḥ Šedek, certainly foreshadows the synthesis that Maharash would nurture into a fully explicated theorization of *šimšum* as a medium of continuity, rather than rupture, between divine infinitude and finite creation. Maharash’s crucial statement—that “the luminance of the trace (*or hareshimah*) is that which was not reached by the *šimšum*”—has no explicit antecedent in earlier Habad literature. Elsewhere, in fact, the Šemaḥ Šedek unambiguously casts the trace as marking a clean break with the pre-*šimšum* infinite revelation, according to which the finitude of the containers (*keilim*) is seen as being created *ex nihilo*, rather than as a continuous revelation of pre-*šimšum* primordality:

¹²⁶ On the integration of concepts of creation and emanation in pre-lurancic theosophical kabbalah see Sandra Valabregue, “Philosophy, Heresy, and Kabbalah’s Counter-Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109:2 (April 2016): 249.

¹²⁷ See Rashaz, *MAHZ 5563 I* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2012), 412: והנה ענין צמצום זה ביאר האריז"ל אמנם לא דבר חדש הוא כי חכמי הקבלה שמקודם ביארו זה גופא בלשון אחר וכמ"ש בספר עה"ק ח"א פ"ח בשם הראשונים

¹²⁸ Rashaz, *LT devarim*, 16a.

The containers are also literal emanations, only that their emanation is not from the *or eyn sof* but rather from the *reshimu* that is left after the *šimšum*, and is not related to the *or* at all ... Therefore, relative to the actual *or eyn sof* it is right to term them ... creation *ex nihilo* ...¹²⁹

הכלים הם ג"כ אצ"י ממש אלא אצילותם אינו מהאור א"ס כ"א מהרשימו שנשאר אחר הצמצום שאינו נוגע
להאור כלל ... לכך לגבי א"ס ממש שייך לקרוthem ... בריאה יש מאין

On this score, only the ray (*kav*) of infinite light that saturates the *sefirot* is understood to be “light resembling the luminary” (אור מעין המאור). In stark contrast, the *keilim* are framed as having no resemblance to any pre-*šimšum* antecedent.¹³⁰ The *Šemaḥ Šedek* goes on to affirm the traditional understanding of *ḥokhmah* as the first “something” that emerges out of nothing (*ex nihilo*):

The container of *ḥokhmah* ... is called creation *ex nihilo* relative to the *or eyn sof*, and this is [the meaning of] “*ḥokhmah* is found from nothing” etc. ...¹³¹

כלי החכמה ... נק' בריאה יש מאין לגבי א"ס והיינו והחכ' מאין תמצא כו'

It is important to note that this text is counterbalanced by a discourse published by the *Šemaḥ Šedek* in 1851 as an independent addendum to *Likutei torah*, titled “Lehavin mah shekatuv be’ošrot ḥayim” and laden both with extensive *hagahot* and with briefer interpolations.¹³² His *hagahot* draw a thick web of intertextual support for the implication that the *reshimah* is somehow continuous with the *or eyn sof*. It is aptly “termed a trace of the infinite light,” he writes, “because also the capacity of manifestation that there shall be limitation is elicited via the capacity of omnipotence that has no limitation.”¹³³ At the very outset of the discourse, the *Šemaḥ Šedek* had cited the Lurianic work *Emek hamelekh* to the effect that “the *reshimu* ... is the aspect of letters.”¹³⁴ This paves the way to infer the pre-*šimšum* primordially of the trace from Rashaz’s later statement that the

¹²⁹ *Šemaḥ Šedek, Or hatorah - inyanim*, 259.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹³² *Idem., Hosafot lelikutei torah* (Zhytomyr, 1851). This addendum, published three years after the first edition of *Likutei torah* in 1848, includes approbations and also synopses of some discourses that appeared in the first edition. It only includes one completely new discourse, which is the one under discussion here. It begins with the words *להבין מ"ש באצ"ה בתחילתו*. In the standard Kehot editions this discourse appears in *LT vayikra*, 51b-54d.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 54a:

נק' רשימו מהאור א"ס. כי גם כח ההשפעה להיות גבול נמשך ע"י כח הכל יכול הבלתי גבול

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51b:

הרשימו ... היא בחי' אותיות

On the invocation of *Emek hamelekh* in Habad literature see Ariel Roth, “Hashpa’at ‘emek hamelekh’ al ḥasidut ḥabad,” in *Habad: historiyah, hagut vedimoy*, eds. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2016), 97-111.

pre-*šimšum* manifestation of the *or eyn sof* is akin to the conscious articulation of thoughts, which emerge from the supra-conscious recesses of the mind through becoming vested in the “letters of thought” (אותיות המחשבה) without which one’s thoughts have neither definition nor expression.¹³⁵ The suggestion implicitly emerges that these primordial letters are the pre-*šimšum* instantiation of the *reshimu*. In notes appended to a discourse delivered in 1838 but not published till the second half of the 20th century, the Šemaḥ Šedek similarly wrote that in the aftermath of the *šimšum* “although the light is in the aspect of concealment, nevertheless it shines esoterically via this *reshimu* that remains of the being of the light that encircles all realms.”¹³⁶ In other words, the substance of the *reshimu* is an esoteric instantiation of pre-*šimšum* luminosity.

While these texts provide precedent for Maharash’s later articulations, they also show that the Šemaḥ Šedek approached the topic with an abundance of caution, and even ambivalence. In the very same breath that he affirmed that the *reshimu* is in some sense a continuous expression of pre-*šimšum* divinity he also insisted that the relationship of the finite trace to its source in G-d’s infinite capacity “is not even like the relationship of a single drop to the oceanic sea.”¹³⁷ On the same score, it does not seem incidental that his

¹³⁵ Rashaz’s discussion of “letters,” as transcribed in this discourse, is introduced on folio 52d and continues through to 54d. For a fuller elaboration of this discussion and its context in Rashaz’s theorization of *šimšum* see Eli Rubin, “Absent Presence: The revelatory trace (*reshimu*) of divine withdrawal,” *Chabad.org*, (Chabad.org/3004920, accessed July 27, 2020). Also see Ariel Roth, “Reshimu,” 229-236. For a discussion of another aspect of the Šemaḥ Šedek’s intertextual intervention on the relationship between the notion of “letters” and Rashaz’s interpretation of *šimšum*, see Eli Rubin, “The Pen Shall Be Your Friend,” Part 1. For an antecedent to the association of notions of *šimšum* with the transition from supra-consciousness (or “pre-cognizance”) to thought in the teachings of R. DovBer of Mezritch, see Mayse, *Speaking Infinities*, esp. P. 176. See also *ibid.*, 100-101 for the association of “letters” with the dynamic of *šimšum*. More generally, Mayse brings to the fore the centrality of conceptions of language in early Hasidic theology. For the broader context see Milka Rubin, “The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49:2 (Autumn 1998): 306–333.

¹³⁶ Šemaḥ Šedek, *Or hatorah - beresihit, VII* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1983), 1394a [2387]:

אעפ"י שהאור הוא בבחי' העלם מ"מ מאיר בבחי' מקיף ע"י רשימו זו ששרה מעצמיות אור הסוכ"ע

See the related discussion in Roth, “Reshimu,” 244-245. For the date of the discourse that these notes were appended to see Yosef Yitzchok Keller, *Reshimat ma'amarei dah shel khak admor hašemaḥ šedek* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1994), 43. It is not clear when these notes were added. It is also notable that the Šemaḥ Šedek connects this conception of the *reshimu*—as an esoteric radiance of the pre-*šimšum* light that encircles all worlds—with the central theme of the discourse “Yavi’u levush malkhut” in *Torah or*, which was discussed above, 1:3. The formulation in this passage, indexing the *reshimu* as being ... בבחי' העלם מעצמיות אור הסוכ"ע, is similar to the formulation found in R. DovBer Schneuri’s edited compendium of discourses transcribed from the mouth of Rashaz, *Seder tephilot mikol hashanah im perush hamilot al pi da”h* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2001), 166b: נחשב מבחי' העלם עצמיות הא"ס. The Šemaḥ Šedek directly cited this particular formulation in one of his own discussions of the *reshimu*, published from manuscript in *Or hatorah - bereishit, V* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1971), 876a [1751].

¹³⁷ *LT vayikra*, 54a:

[ההארה שבבחי' גבול לגבי אור שבלי גבול] אינו אפילו כערך טפה אחת לגבי ים אוקיינוס

more explicit remarks on the topic remained so long in manuscript and were not included in the *hagahot* he published during his own lifetime.¹³⁸

By contrast, Maharash's innovative formulation unhesitatingly and explicitly casts the *reshimah* as a residual trace of the primordial *or eyn sof*—a trace that “was not impacted,” nor concealed or disrupted, “by the *šimšum*”—a point that is emphasized by the term *or hareshima* (“the luminance of the trace”). Maharash does not understand the *reshimah* merely as a trace of the primordial light, but rather as a luminous trace of pristine primordiality.¹³⁹ In the same spirit Maharash goes on to reaffirm his reconceptualization of *hokhmah* as a continuous iteration of primordial nothingness, rather than as a “new” entity created—discontinuously—out of nothing. Even more strikingly, elsewhere he is explicit that the *keilim* too are accordingly to be understood as “light resembling the luminary”:

The root of the *keilim* ... is from the *reshimu* which is a trace of the infinite, as [it is] prior to the *šimšum* and the empty space; in truth they are **light resembling the luminary** that is prior to the *šimšum* etc.¹⁴⁰

שרש הכלים ... מהרשימו שהוא רושם הא"ס כמו קודם הצומ"פ [צמצום ומקום פנוי] שבאמת הם אור מעין
המאור שלפני הצמצום כו'

Since the *keilim* are rooted in “the trace of the infinite” they themselves trace and communicate something of the essential infinitude whence they derive. Precisely by dint of their finitude, they embody an eloquent clue to the completeness of divine infinitude. Precisely by dint of the concealment of *šimšum* the finite facet of pre-*šimšum* infinitude is revealed. Maharash's declaration here stands in stark contrast to the above cited distinction made by the Šemaḥ Šedek according to which only the ray (*kav*) of infinite light that saturates the *sefirot* is understood to be “light resembling the luminary” (אור מעין), to the exclusion of the *keilim*.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ See also Roth, *ibid.*, for a similar distinction between the Šemaḥ Šedek's earlier and later writings. Unfortunately, however, the dating for specific texts is often unclear, and Roth does not always articulate what led him to determine that one text is earlier and another later.

¹³⁹ *Vekakhah*, section 47, page 69. See above, n121. I thank Elliot Wolfson for bringing this philological nuance to my attention. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the formulation אור הרשימה is all but unique to Maharash. On occasion it appears in discourses by Rashab as well. See for example, Rashab, *Sefer hamamarim* 5655-6 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1991), 52. But Rashab would ultimately settle on the preferred formulation נקודת הרשימו as discussed by Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu.”

¹⁴⁰ Maharash, *Likutei torah torat shmuel* 5640, II (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2004), 556 (emphasis added). On the following page he continues to write that, on this score at least, it is accordingly “impossible to differentiate” (אינו שייך לחלק) between the *keilim* and the *or* that saturates them. Also see *ibid.*, 939.

¹⁴¹ Šemaḥ Šedek, *Or hatorah - inyanim*, 259. Above, note 130.

One of Maharash's fullest iterations of his theorization of the pre-*šimšum* primordially of the trace was posthumously published in 1884, by his sons. In short order this publication would raise the ire of his nephew and chief rival, the aforementioned R. Shlomo Zalman of Kopust, who would take particular issue with his bold assertion that the trace is "untouched" by *šimšum*. Some aspects of this posthumous debate have already been surveyed in an important article by Ariel Roth.¹⁴² Yet, the roots of this theological parting of ways can already be discerned in a discourse Maharash first composed in the last months of his father's life, and which he revisited more than a dozen times during his own tenure. It is to this discourse that we now turn.

Part 5 - Maharash's Argument Against Acosmism

An extant manuscript in Maharash's handwriting dates from the latter part of 1865, precisely the period during which the fissures between him and Maharil would have been becoming increasingly contentious. Our earlier examination of documents relating to the controversy exposed the implication that, even at this early stage, Maharash may already have been under attack for his innovative engagement with Habad thought.¹⁴³ This manuscript, however, has not previously been discussed in the context of the succession controversy for the simple reason that it contains theological discourses, rather than the sort of material that would normally be understood to relate directly to the socio-historical events that they are contemporaneous to.¹⁴⁴

This reflects the problematic methodological bifurcation of the study of Hasidic history and the study of Hasidic thought.¹⁴⁵ In truth, however, the development of Hasidic history is as much a story about ideas as it is a story about events and institutions. Likewise, the emergence and development of Hasidic ideas should rightly be seen as a seminal factor, certainly in the history of Hasidism itself, and also in the shaping of modern Jewish history more broadly. This manuscript was not produced in a vacuum, outside of history. On the contrary, the crystallisation and communication of ideas that it testifies to may

¹⁴² Ariel Roth, "Reshimu."

¹⁴³ See above, n60.

¹⁴⁴ Mss. 1011, in the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad - Ohel Yosef Yitzchak Lubavitch, New York. See Yehoshua Mondshine's description of the manuscript and its contents in his notes to "'Maft'e aḥ mamarei 5626" in Shmuel Schneersohn, *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5626*, IX. Mondshine's notes also include a partial listing of some of the later iterations of this discourse, several of which do not begin with the words *mi kemokhah*, as the earliest version does, but with words from other verses.

¹⁴⁵ For an earlier critique of this bifurcation that makes particular reference to Ilia Lurie's work on 19th century Habad, see Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, "Ḥasidei De'ar'a and Ḥasidei Dekokhvaya': Two Trends in Modern Jewish Historiography," *AJS Review*, 32:1 (Apr., 2008): 141-167.

well provide a deeper understanding of the ideological subtext of the succession controversy. Moreover, this manuscript allows us to trace the development of Maharash's thinking from what may be the earliest stages of its formal textual composition.

As is usual in Habad, the most notable discourse in this manuscript is known by the first words of the biblical verse with which it begins—*Mi kemokhah*—from the Song of the Sea, “Who is like You, G-d, among the mighty?” (Exodus 15:11.) What seems to capture Maharash's attention in this verse is the comparative “like,” which implies that there are other beings who might mistakenly be compared to G-d. This prompts him to argue that:

We must perforce say that the appearance of the world as existing and as something, is in fact reality¹⁴⁶

עכצ"ל [על כרחך צריך לומר] שמה שנראה העולם ליש ודבר זהו כן

To many this will probably not seem like a radical argument at all, but in the Habad context it is certainly a bold claim. In the entire Habad corpus up to 1865 I have only found a few instances in which the existence of the physical world is expressly and unambiguously affirmed. Indeed, as discussed at some length above, in chapter one, the question of whether or not earlier Habad masters subscribed to acosmism has been hotly debated by scholars. Irrespective of how that question should be answered, the very fact that such a debate is possible is telling enough. This discourse by Maharash, however, is devoted entirely to a sustained argument against acosmism, and sharply forecloses the possibility of debating his view.¹⁴⁷

He proves his point, in part, by drawing on the Mishnaic legal distinction between illusion and real magic (Sanhedrin 7:11). Such a distinction is meaningless, Maharash argues, unless the world itself is understood to be real and not an illusion.¹⁴⁸ This argument is also extended to the entire notion of “reward and punishment” (שכר ועונש), traditionally understood to be one of the axiomatic principles of Jewish faith, which is rendered entirely arbitrary unless one's actions and their consequences are real.¹⁴⁹ In a later iteration of the discourse, the full magnitude of an acosmistic stance is articulated; ultimately it renders even the Torah and the *mišvot*—all the doctrines and precepts that

¹⁴⁶ R. Shmuel Schneersohn, *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5626*, 17.

¹⁴⁷ To be clear, this assertion holds true so long as the terms of the debate are restricted by a simple binary conception of acosmism. At the same time, Elliot Wolfson's much more sophisticated notion of “acosmic naturalism,” is certainly capacious enough to encompass Maharash's view as well. See the relevant discussion in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 46-48 and 87-103, and above, 1:2-3.

¹⁴⁸ R. Shmuel Schneersohn, *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5626*, 17.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

dictate the embodied practices of Jewish religious life—empty of any real value and meaning. “This,” he concludes, “is not possible at all.”¹⁵⁰

Signaling his awareness that the tenor of his argument runs against the rhetorical tendency of Habad texts to empty the material realm of real significance, Maharash specifically cites a counter-text from a discourse by Rashaz, according to which:

Although the world appears to us as something, it is utter falsehood.¹⁵¹

אף שנראה לנו העולמות ליש הוא שקר גמור

Whether or not this should actually be read as an acosmic statement, Maharash uses this citation as a deliberate foil to highlight a pivotal recalibration of Habad’s theological emphasis. Henceforth the rhetoric of acosmism would be increasingly displaced by an ever deeper theorization of the apotheosis of the physical.

To be clear, Maharash’s argument against acosmism should not be understood as an outright break with the fundamental theological and cosmological orientation of early Habad teachings, but rather as a shift in rhetorical and theoretical emphasis. Indeed, Naftali Loewenthal has already shown that early Habad teachings emphasized both contemplative mysticism and the apotheosis of action.¹⁵² At the same time, we should distinguish between the apotheosis of ritual action, as prescribed by the biblical commandments, and the more general apotheosis of the physical realm in its entirety, which comes to the fore in the aftermath of what we describe here as Maharash’s recalibration of Habad theology. Loewenthal cites *Tanya*, Chapter 35, to the effect that it is specifically “the texts and practical teachings of the Torah” that manifest “a flow of Divine radiance which has not been veiled by the *Tzimtzum*.”¹⁵³ But we have already demonstrated that Maharash advanced a theorization of the pre-*šimšum* primordially of the elemental building blocks of all finite phenomena, identified in the Kabbalistic idiom as the “containers” (*keilim*). According to Maharash they are rooted in the primordial “luminance of the trace ... which was not reached by the *šimšum*.” Maharash’s innovative

¹⁵⁰ R. Shmuel Schneersohn, “Mi kemokhah” in *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5629* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1992), 162 [old pagination 148]:

נמצא שלא יש שכר ועונש ולא יש תומ"צ [ש] זה א"א כלל

¹⁵¹ Rashaz, *TO*, 86c. In the 1865 iteration of this discourse Maharash merely cites *Torah or*, without specifying which page or discourse he is referring to. But the precise citation is explicated in the following later iterations of this discourse: “Bitkhu bo,” in *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5632, I* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1999), 275, and “Vehayah she’eirit yaakov” in *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5634* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1988), 361.

¹⁵² See Naftali Loewenthal, “The Apotheosis of Action in Early Habad,” *Daat* 18 (1987): v-xix.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, ix.

metaphysics of materiality thus grows out of, and expands on, the theological and cosmological foundations laid by his predecessors.

Loewenthal has separately noted that the apotheosis of the physical in later Habad thought is deeply connected with an increasingly intense theoretical interest in the most transcendent supra-structures of the cosmos, such as *keter*, the realms of infinitude, the realms of pre-*šimšum* primordially, and the essence of divine being (*ašmut*).¹⁵⁴ It is no accident that, as shown above, Maharash's significant recalibration of Habad thought is given dramatic expression in his 1877 argument that the primal *šimšum* is actually caused by man's practice of the ritual *mišvot*. But the foundation upon which this recalibration is built is found in "Mi kemokhah," as first written and delivered in 1865. After all, ritual practice in the physical realm cannot be cast as the most primal of all cosmic causes unless the unequivocal ontological reality of the physical realm is first established.

Given the rhetoric of acosmism that imbued Habad teachings prior to Maharash's debut, it is clear that the argument in "Mi kemokhah" against acosmism would have been sufficiently innovative to be controversial. Indeed, when this discourse is read alongside the *šetlekh* that document the contemporaneous opening of the split between Kopust and Lubavitch it becomes clear that the personal and political factors were commensurate to an ideological parting of ways. Maharash's own character—his worldliness and his estchewel of overt displays of ecstasy—as described earlier in this chapter, is distinctly aligned with his theological affirmation of the physical realm. Maharil's ecstatic enthusiasm, by contrast, bespeaks a longing to transcend the constraints of the physical and suggests that the phenomenological orientation of his devotion was closer to the acosmistic tenor foregrounded in the first three generations of Habad.¹⁵⁵ This can be compared to the contrast between the respective theological and devotional orientations of R. DovBer Schneuri and R. Aharon Halevi Horowitz of Staroselye. While the relationship of their rivalry to the question of acosmism has been mentioned in a previous chapter, here we add that their differences were also said to be expressed in their devotional conduct. As Loewenthal has put it: "R. Aaron stood for open tumultuous expression of emotion, while R. Dov Ber gave an example of stillness and silence."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Idem., "The Apotheosis of Physicality in the Thought of the RaShaB," *Chabad.org*, <chabad.org/1931473> (accessed August 11, 2021). Note that this discussion focuses primarily on Maharash's son.

¹⁵⁵ This was discussed in detail above, Chapter 1.

¹⁵⁶ Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 110.

As noted, between 1865 and 1882 Maharash repeated “Mi kemokhah” about a dozen times, often embellishing and expanding on its original argument. An iteration of this discourse dating from 1869 has been translated and published in English under the title *True Existence*, and of all Maharash’s discourses it may well be the most oft studied in contemporary Habad.¹⁵⁷

Though Dov Schwartz has discussed this discourse, he seems oblivious both to the socio-historical context in which it was first composed and to the theological recalibration that it heralds.¹⁵⁸ Schwartz correctly notes that, for Maharash, “the potential nullification of physical entities are a fundamental condition of their creation.”¹⁵⁹ He goes on to argue, however, that Maharash is not really introducing anything new, but is simply emphasizing the “dialectical paradox” of creation that is already familiar from earlier Habad texts: On the one hand, “the being [of creation] is, on its own terms, in the category of a concrete reality.” On the other hand, “when its divine source is disclosed that [created] being is in the category of utter nothingness.”¹⁶⁰

Schwartz fails to apprehend Maharash’s broader argument, namely that creation is not illusory but real, and is even stamped with the reality of divine being. The necessary corrective to Schwartz’s reading is twofold: a) The nullification of creation is “potential” rather than actual, and b) this “potential nullification” derives from the divine presence that is inherent to the very being of every created entity. A more nuanced reading would go beyond this binary mode of thinking altogether. Following Wolfson’s theorization of Habad’s ontological stance as one of “acosmic naturalism,” which was more fully discussed in the previous chapter, the discourse on nullification, or effacement, should better be understood in a phenomenological sense that relates to the deep structure of being.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Maharash, *Mi Chamocha 5629 - True Existence: A Chasidic Discourse by Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn of Lubavitch*, translated by Yosef Marcus (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2002). For the context of this publication see Baila Olidort, “A First in English: A Chasidic Discourse Composed in 1869,” *Lubavitch.com*, August 21, 2002 <<http://www4.lubavitch.com/news/article/2014620/A-First-in-English-A-Chasidic-Discourse-Composed-in-1869.html>>. This discourse owes its relative popularity to its mention in one of the most important texts in the contemporary Habad movement, namely *Hayom yom* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1943), a calendrical compendium of Habad lore and custom compiled by Ramash, largely from the writings of the sixth Habad Rebbe. In the *Hayom yom* entry for the 28th of Tammuz we read that each of the Habad rebbes had specific discourses that they would repeat “once in two or three years” (פעם בשתיים או בשלש שנים), with this named as Maharash’s discourse of choice. See *Sidrat hamayanot - ma’amarei hasidut admor maharash* (Jerusalem: Torat Habad Lebenei Hayeshivot, 2015) for a recent anthology of Maharash’s discourses in which this discourse appears as the first selection.

¹⁵⁸ See Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad*, 187-192.

¹⁵⁹ Schwartz, *Maḥshevet ḥabad*, 187.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁶¹ Above, 1:2.

Even allowing for a less sophisticated approach, however, Schwartz seems to miss the central argument of this text. For the first time in Habad history a discourse is devoted entirely to an argument that the concreteness of physical reality cannot be dismissed as illusory. But Schwartz does not remark on this at all. Instead, he reductively characterizes Maharash's conception of the relationship between "being" and "nothingness" as a "dialectical paradox," and erases the much more sophisticated concepts of "being" and "nothingness" that Maharash develops.

In *Vekakhah*, as noted above, Maharash probed and elaborated the notion that "nothing" can be "revealed."¹⁶² It is clear, in that context, that the meaning of "nothing" is not the reverse of "being." The term "nothingness" is rather used to describe a particular manifestation of being; the nothingness of *hokhmah* reveals the ineffable nothingness of divine primordially. In "Mi kemokhah" we find something similar but different; Maharash erases the simple binary according to which things either exist or are nothing, and replaces it with a spectrum of being according to which some things exist more robustly, or more truly, than other things.

In both of these texts, Maharash's rethinking of the meanings of "being" and "nothingness" is part of his broader project to excavate an ontological continuity not only between divine being and created being, but also between the primordial infinitude of G-d and the finite circumscriptions of the created cosmos. Maharash's earliest argument against acosmism, in the 1865 version of "Mi kemokhah," implicitly heralds the notion articulated in *Vekakhah* that "the root of the finitude that is below" is to be found in the primordial nothingness of divine infinitude. This trajectory becomes explicit in the 1869 iteration of "Mi kemokhah." Here, R. Azriel's teaching (via *Avodat hakodesh*) is not only quoted and linked to the *reshimah*—as it is in *Vekakhah*—but is also embellished with a few words that, thus contextualized, intimate another significant innovation:

The capacity for concealment and the capacity for limitation are divine just like the capacity that is uninhibited by any limitation, and as it is written in *Avodat hakodesh*, "if you say that it has the capacity for infinitude but not for finitude you are detracting from its completion," **and in truth the root of finitude is loftier than the infinite capacity** as is written elsewhere regarding the *reshimah*, and see elsewhere regarding tracing, engraving, hewing, acting¹⁶³

¹⁶² Above, 2:3.

¹⁶³ "Mi kemokhah" in *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5629*, 163 [old pagination 150]. Emphasis added. See also the discussion and citations in Wolfson, "Nequddat ha-Reshimu," 111-112.

כח ההסתר וכח המגביל הם אלקות כמו כח הבלתי בע"ג וכמ"ש בעה"ק שא"ת שאלקות הוא כח בבע"ג ואין לו כח בגבול אתה מחסר שלימותו, ובאמת שרש הגבול הוא נעלה יותר מכח הבבע"ג כמ"ש במ"א מענין הרשימה, וע' במ"א בענין רשימה חקיקה חציבה עשי'

The phrase emphasized here, “and in truth the root of finitude is loftier than the infinite capacity,” is not presented as an innovation. Indeed, one might even think that the phrase directly following it, “as is written elsewhere regarding the *reshimah*,” provides attribution to an earlier iteration of this assertion. In fact, the two references given refer to two related concepts that provide a framework within which Maharash’s innovation can be supported and contextualized. Yet, neither of these references provide a direct precedent. Let’s examine each reference in turn:

1) The first is to the notion that the *reshimah* (the “trace” of infinitude that remained in the void in the aftermath of the primal *šimšum*) is loftier than the *kav* (the “ray” of pre-*šimšum* infinitude that is subsequently drawn into the void), and hence the root of the *keilim* (“containers”) is loftier than the root of the *or* (“light”). This idea has a long history in earlier Habad texts, including in the Šemaḥ Šedek’s discussion of the *reshimah* in his *hagahot* to “Lehavin mah shekatuv be’ošrot ḥayim,” as well as in other texts mentioned above.¹⁶⁴ But what is important in the current context is that these earlier Habad texts all pertain specifically to the relationship between the capacities of infinitude and of finitude as they emerge in the **aftermath** of the *šimšum*.¹⁶⁵ In the 1869 iteration of “Mi kemokhah,” by contrast, Maharash seems to be extending this notion to the pre-*šimšum* roots of finitude and infinitude as they are encompassed within the unbifurcated completeness of the *eyn sof*. This distinction is not given much emphasis, but emerges implicitly from his conceptual enmeshment of post-Lurianic discourse on *šimšum* with R. Azriel of Gerona’s earlier discussion of the completeness of the *eyn sof*. While one might expect that such unbifurcated completeness would be commensurate to an unbifurcated equanimity, Maharash declares the emergence of finitude to reveal a more intimate facet of divine completeness than the infinite capacity of the *eyn sof* exhibits; “the root of

¹⁶⁴ See esp. *LT vayikra*, 43b-c, and 51b-54b. Some of the less explicit inferences that might be drawn from the latter text in particular were discussed above, notes 134-7. Also see below, notes 195-6.

¹⁶⁵ Also see Shneur Zalman of Liady, *MAHZ 5566 II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2005), 534. The same formulations are replicated and elaborated in iterations of this discourse by R. DovBer Schneuri and the Šemaḥ Šedek as cited by the editors to this volume, *ibid.*, 533n1. The connection to the *reshimah* is explicated in R. DovBer’s more developed iteration of the discourse. But all three versions connect the notion that the concealment of *šimšum* is cosmologically prior to the emergence of the revelatory *kav* with the general principle regarding “the ascendance of discipline [equated with concealment and finitude] over kindness [equated with revelation and infinitude]” (מעלת הגבורות על החסדים). This seems to be the closest antecedent to Maharash’s statement that “the root of finitude is loftier than the infinite capacity.”

finitude is loftier than the infinite capacity.”¹⁶⁶ Despite the conceptual novelty of this statement and the linguistic novelty of its formulation, Maharash expresses it with such concise understatement that even an attentive and informed reader might not notice it.

2) Maharash’s second reference is to the notion that the *reshimah* is the most “ethereal” or “sublime” root of finitude, relating not only to the revelatory instantiation of *ḥokhmah* (as we find in *Vekakhah*), but to the primordial cognition (*kadmut hasekhel*) that lies beyond divine consciousness, and beyond the realm of the *sefirot*. This too is found in the the *Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek*’s *hagahot* to “Lehavin mah shekatuv be’oṣrot ḥayim,” and is based on a characteristic intertextual interpretation of a passage from R. Moshe Cordevera’s *Pardas rimonim*.¹⁶⁷ Here, however, Maharash seems to be explicating the further suggestion that the *reshimah* is not merely cosmologically prior to *ḥokhmah*, the realm of the *sefirot*, and the *kav*, but that it ultimately reaches even beyond the pre-*ṣimṣum* assertion of infinite divine capacity. The root of the *reshimah*, in other words, is even more transcendent than the primordial radiance of the *or eyn sof*. Retroactively, the seeds of this idea can be discerned in another *hagahah* to “Lehavin mah shekatuv be’oṣrot ḥayim.” As mentioned above, at the very outset of the discourse the *Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek* equates the *reshimu* with the “letters” that provide definition and expression to any conscious revelation or articulation.¹⁶⁸ In the main body of the discourse Rashaz later compares the pre-*ṣimṣum* revelation of *or eyn sof* to the saturation of “letters of thought” with such luminous intellectual brilliance that the defining constraints of the letters themselves are utterly indiscernible. The primordial *ṣimṣum* that occurs in the *or eyn sof*, he says, is that the light becomes, as it were, “encompassed in the essence of wisdom that transcends the aspect of letters” (ונכלל בעצם החכמה שלמעלה מבהי' אותיות) such that the *or eyn sof* is no longer articulated via the letters of thought but is rather concealed in the supra-conscious realm of essential knowledge.¹⁶⁹ To this the *Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek* adds that “when encompassed in its source in the aspect of concealment this is like the encompassment of the light in the luminary, and the letters too are effaced [i.e. ‘encompassed’] there.”¹⁷⁰ Here we have the

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Rashab, *Samekh vav*, 179, where Maharash’s son Rashab’s formulation is linguistically closer to that cited in the previous note, while echoing Maharash’s extension of the conception to the pre-*ṣimṣum* roots of finitude and infinitude: “The roots of the disciplines, in their source, is loftier than the kindnesses” (שרש (הגבורות במקורן למעלה מההסדים). I thank my friend Rachmi Aron, of Melbourne, Australia, for bringing the relevance of this passage to my attention.

¹⁶⁷ *LT vayikra*, 54a. Also see Rashaz, “Lehavin inyan reshimah,” in *MAHZ inyanim II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2015), 557-561 [old pagination 388-391]. See *Pardas rimonim*, Shaar aby”a, Chapter 9 and Shaar ha’otiyot, Chapter 27. See the relevant discussion in Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 112, esp. notes 155 and 156.

¹⁶⁸ *LT vayikra*, 51b.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 52d.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*:

barest intimation that the containing letters of the *reshimu*—which primordially trace the limiting facet of divine omnipotence—are already extant prior to their saturation with the luminous radiance of the infinite facet of divine omnipotence, that is, the *or eyn sof*. This intimation is somewhat counterbalanced in another *hagahah* later in the same discourse where the Şemaḥ Şedek adduces that “the letters are the last aspect within the *or eyn sof*.”¹⁷¹ This does not necessarily refute the earlier intimations, but it certainly adds a layer of ambivalence.

Maharash only offers the briefest reference to these earlier texts. But, as we have seen, these references do not point to direct precedents for Maharash’s statement. They rather indicate the conceptual and textual basis upon which his novel contribution stands. Going a step further, Maharash’s references can also be seen as projecting his own insight—that “in truth the root of finitude is loftier than the infinite capacity”—backward to illuminate these earlier texts and to saturate their intimations with the fuller revelation of his own bold articulations. For all his boldness, however, Maharash preserves his characteristic brevity. While he does not elaborate the more esoteric and theological aspects of his theorization, he immediately explicates the practical consequences thereof with much greater transparency:

And this [the meaning of], “Indeed, You are a hiding G-d” (Isaiah 45:15). That is, “You” refers to direct revelation, and just as “You” are in the aspect of revelation, exactly so are You “hiding,” that is, [in] the aspect of the capacity of concealment etc. It transpires that accordingly there is no thing that exists at all other than He, blessed be He, for all the physical things that are created, they themselves are literal divinity ... In truth, even the fact that the created being appears to be an autonomous substance, when one contemplates it very well, it transpires that this too is the power of G-d etc.¹⁷²

וזהו מ"ש אכן אתה אל מסתתר פי' אתה הוא בחי' גילוי לנוכח וכשם שאתה הוא בבחי' הגילוי כמו"כ אתה ממש
הוא מסתתר היינו בחי' כה ההסתר כו' ונמצא שלפ"ז לא יש כלל שום דבר זולתו ית' כי כל הדברים הגשמיים

כשנכלל במקורו בבחי' העלם זהו כענין התכללות האור במאור. וגם האותיות בטלים שם

For a much fuller discussion of the Şemaḥ Şedek’s intertextual interventions in this particular *hagahah*, and the broader significance he accords to the analogy of “letters,” see Eli Rubin, “The Pen Shall Be Your Friend,” Part 1. One more note is, however, relevant to our present discussion: The Şemaḥ Şedek emphasizes the “effacement” of the letters—and, by extension, the created cosmos—within the luminary. Maharash, however, invokes this discussion in service of an argument that uses the same metaphysical principles to argue against acosmism. In line with the general trajectory of his interventions, he replaces formulations that emphasize effacement with formulations that emphasize the apotheosis of the physical.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 53c: האותיות הם בחי' האחרונה שבאור א"ס

¹⁷² R. Shmuel, Schneersohn, “Mi kemokha” in *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5629*, 163-4 [old pagination 150].

אשר נתהוו הם הם אלקות ממש ... באמת גם מה שנראה הנברא למציאות דבר מה כשתשכיל בו היטב תמצא שגם זה כח אלקה כו'

This passage draws a direct line from Maharash's argument against acosmism to the explicit apotheosis of the physical world. Equally significantly, this comes directly on the heels of his declaration that "the root of finitude is loftier than the infinite capacity," which intimates that the pre-*simsum* primordiality of the *reshimah* transcends even the *or eyn sof*. The *reshimah* was previously an obscure detail of post-Lurianic metaphysics. Yet for Maharash it clearly provided the crucial opening through which a fundamental ontological continuity could be established between the highest reaches of divine being and the cosmic nadir that is this material realm. Once we understand that limitation and concealment are actually an even more intimate disclosure of divine being, it follows that the brutal arrogance with which created materiality asserts its reality is actually an esoteric articulation of G-d's primordial omnipotence and completion.

Tracing Maharash's crucial theological recalibration of Habad thought to the winter prior to his father's passing reveals his intellectual boldness to be an inescapable factor in the emerging succession controversy. At the same time, it is clear that ideological differences were deeply imbricated with differences in personality and even age. As an infant, Maharil had been cradled by Rashaz, his great-grandfather.¹⁷³ As a young man he had been a favoured disciple of R. DovBer, his grandfather.¹⁷⁴ Maharash, by contrast, was born after these founding figures had already passed away. The latter was not gifted with the charisma of nostalgia, nor burdened by it. We might say that he was gifted instead with the charisma of possibility. Over the course of his tenure as *admor* in Lubavitch he mined the possibilities implicit in the texts bequeathed by his forebearers and trenchantly hewed the metaphysical foundations upon which the intellectual and activist future of Habad-Lubavitch would be built.

Part 6 - The Controversy Over Maharash's Posthumous Publication

In 1884, two years after the passing of Maharash, a volume was published in Vilna, titled *Likutei torah misefer bereishit*. The cover page describes it as a compendium of discourses by Rashaz to which "many true elaborations, discourses, and glosses have

¹⁷³ Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 13a. See also *Vekakhah*, Section 46, Page 66, where Maharash cites and discusses a remark made by Rashaz at "the circumcision (*brit milah*) of my brother, the rabbi and sage, R. Yehudah Leib of blessed memory (על ברית מילה ש"א הרה"ג רי"ל ז"ל)." ¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

been added by the *admor* ... Rabbi Shmuel ... son of the *admor* ... Rabbi Menachem Mendel ... of Lubavitch.”

Much has already been written about the nature of this volume, its authorship, and the controversy that it aroused, especially by three scholars working within the Habad community—Shalom DovBer Levine, Yosef Yitzchak Keller and Yehoshua Mondshine—who published articles on the topic both in rabbinic journals and popular magazines, as well as in an academic article by Ariel Roth that has already been mentioned.¹⁷⁵ All of these articles attest to the contestation that this publication aroused, which should rightly be seen as a posthumous resurgence of the succession controversy of 1865-6. As Levine and Keller have convincingly demonstrated, however, an examination of extant manuscripts in the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad reveals that it was Maharash himself who prepared this work for publication, and it seems to have been part of a very conscious attempt to continue and expand on the intertextual work of his father, the Şemaḥ Şedek. In addition to the textual and methodological issues at play, here we will also focus on the theological and cosmological aspects of Maharash’s posthumous publication.

By this point, Maharash’s regard for the Şemaḥ Şedek’s glosses (*hagahot*) to Rashaz’s discourses, especially as published in *Likutei torah*, should be clear. Yet this was the second of two such compendia compiled and published by the Şemaḥ Şedek, and it contained discourses related to the last three books of the Pentateuch and to the Song of Songs. The earlier publication, titled *Torah or*, included discourses related to the first two books of the Pentateuch and the Book of Esther. While both are curated collections of Rashaz’s discourses, the *hagahot* interpolated in *Torah or* are usually quite brief, just a line or two, and are also few in number. The Şemaḥ Şedek’s intertextual project to systematically contextualize and elaborate his grandfather’s work was not fully instantiated in print until *Likutei torah* was published. Similarly, while Rashaz himself would often offer a more esoteric elaboration (*bi’ur*) as a follow-up to his own discourses, relatively few such *bi’urim* are included in *Torah or*, in stark contrast to *Likutei torah*. Maharash set out to update the discourses published in *Torah or* by republishing them

¹⁷⁵ Shalom DovBer Levine, “Likutei torah legimel parshiyot,” *Kovets yagdil torah* 3:1 (Tishrei-Cheshvan 5739): 52-59; Yosef Yitzchak Keller, “Haḥibur veba’arikhah shel ‘likutei torah legimel parshiyot’,” *Heikhal habesht* 6 (Nissan 5764): 154-166; Yehoshua Mondshine, “Parshat hadfasat ha’likutei torah’ lesefer bereisihit,” Kfar Chabad Magazine, Nos. 931 and 933, via *Shturem.net*, <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?section=blog_new&article_id=29> (accessed August 17, 2020). Also see the responses to Levine’s article in *Kovets yagdil torah* 3:2 (Kislev-Teves 5739): 125-127; and Roth, “Reshimu.”

with the addition of *bi'urim* and *hagahot*, as well as a few additional discourses (*derushim*) that he deemed relevant, following the model of *Likutei torah*.

Keller's detailed analysis of extant manuscripts in Maharash's own handwriting, together with Maharash's published discourses, shows that the latter worked on this project beginning in 1835 and continuing into the last year of his life. During this period many of the discourses and *hemshekhim* that he wrote and delivered were based on discourses from the first three sections (*parshiyot*) of *Torah or on bereishit*, incorporating their as yet unpublished *bi'urim*, unpublished *hagahot* by the Şemaş Şedek, as well as his own additions. As an example, the discourse published in *Torah or* beginning with the words *Mayim rabim* is the basis for the eponymous *hemshekh* delivered by Maharash in thirty-six instalments from the autumn of 1835 till the summer of 1836.¹⁷⁶

More importantly, Keller identifies ms. 1162 in the Chabad Library as the manuscript master copy that provided the outline and template for the published volume of *Likutei torah misefer bereishit*. The manuscript includes a table of contents in Maharash's own handwriting listing all the discourses to be published along with citations to manuscripts from which additional material is to be copied from. It also includes additional glosses penned by Maharash, along with directions for where they are to be inserted. Levine's earlier article is less detailed in its analysis, but broadly arrives at the same conclusions. Only one item listed in this table of contents does not appear in the published volume.¹⁷⁷

Maharash was not only continuing and developing his father's methodological approach to the perpetuation of Habad thought through the composition of *hemshekhim*, he was also consciously preparing to continue his father's work as a curator, embellisher and publisher of Rashaz's discourses. This is the clear implication in the choice to appropriate the title *Likutei torah* and apply it to the updated compendium whose core discourses were originally published in *Torah or*. Maharash's sons, who were named as those who brought the work to the print house, made this even more explicit in their description of the volume on its title page: Much of the new material was the product of the Şemaş

¹⁷⁶ Keller, "Haḥibur," 164. Maharash, *Likutei torah torat shmuel, mayim rabim — 5636* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1946).

¹⁷⁷ This is noted by Kasriel Kastel, "Likutei torah leg"p," *Kovets yagdil torah* 3:2 (Kislev-Teves 5739): 125, item 2. In a phone conversation with this writer (August 12, 2020), Keller—who has a detailed knowledge of the relevant manuscripts—opined that in one case the version of the discourse indicated by Maharash was replaced with an inferior transcript of the same discourse. But Keller was clear that, other than these anomalies, the printed work is faithfully aligned with the manuscript template. It is possible that these anomalies may be related to the later Lubavitch traditions that Kopust loyalists interfered with the publication so that some material was omitted, and additional material added. About these traditions see Mondshine, "Parshat." One way or another, these traditions should certainly be seen as echoes of the controversy that the publication of this volume elicited.

Şedek's pen, but he was not the compiler of this new compendium. Rather, it was stated, all the new "elaborations (*bi'urim*), discourses (*derushim*), and glosses (*hagahot*) have been added by the *admor* ... Rabbi Shmuel ... son of the *admor* ... Rabbi Menachem Mendel ... of Lubavitch."

Less than two years after Maharash's passing, his sons were now harnessing the power of the printing press to establish him as the authoritative custodian, heir, and disseminator of Habad's intellectual tradition. For the better part of two decades, Maharash's nephew and chief rival, R. Shlomo Zalman of Kopust, had maintained his independence from Lubavitch without directly challenging his uncle's preeminence, even though the latter was actually a couple of years junior in age. But this posthumous publication was apparently a step too far, and it provoked a two pronged assault from R. Shlomo Zalman.

According to Mondshine, in the autumn of 1884 R. Shlomo Zalman disseminated the following denouncement:

In the "*Torah or*" on the three sections nothing was published other than writings and glosses and explanations of my holy grandfather, the *admor* [the Şemaḥ Şedek] whose soul is in eden, without any additions at all. All the innovations of R. Shmuel, peace upon him will not even yield four folios. Yet the name of my holy grandfather, the *admor*, is not associated with them at all, only the name Maharash, peace upon him. And this is something that has never yet been heard of in this world ...¹⁷⁸

בה'תורה אור' דעל ג' סדרות נדפסו רק כל הכתבים וההגהות וביאורים של כ"ק אאזמו"ר [ה'צמח צדק] נ"ע, בלי שום תוספת כלל. כל חידושי הר"ש ע"ה לא יהיו גם ד' דפים. ושם כ"ק אאזמו"ר לא הזכיר עליהם כלל, רק שם מהר"ש ע"ה. וזה מעשה.. אשר לא נשמע עדיין בעולם

This denouncement levels an accusation of plagiarism, according to which the publishers sought to pass off the Şemaḥ Şedek's work as that of Maharash. But R. Shlomo Zalman

¹⁷⁸ Mondshine, *ibid*. I have not been able to locate this text elsewhere and Mondshine, uncharacteristically, does not cite his source. But presumably it is preserved in a manuscript copy, perhaps in the National Library of Israel where Mondshine worked for many decades. I have, however, located an independent witness to the existence of such a letter in a footnote to a report published by the *Hameilis* newspaper, December 21 1885, page 3 (No. 92, 1492). The report can hardly be cast as unbiased journalism, and is part of a series of competing submissions to the newspaper regarding the contemporaneous controversy over the Kolel Habad fund in aid of the hasidic community in the Holy Land. While the testimony regarding R. Shlomo Zalman's attack may be somewhat garbled, and focuses on questions of ownership as well as questions of authorship, it nevertheless provides broad corroboration to the the substance of the text published by Mondshine:

זה לא כביר הוציאו לאור יורשי האדמו"ר ר"ש מליובאוויץ את הספר "תורה אור" לאדמו"ר הזקן עם הערות ובאורים מאביהם. והצדיק ר"ז מקאפוסט עומד וצווח שכל הערות והבאורים הם של הרב בעל הצמח צדק נמצאים אצלו בכתב ידו ממש. וא"כ לא היה להם הרשות להדפיסם מבלי רשותו, שגם הוא מירשיו

also denounced Maharash's own intervention regarding the nature of the *reshimu*, as articulated in one of the new *hagahot* published in *Likutei torah misefer bereishit*. When Don Tumarkin—a learned Habad philanthropist and communal leader who had become a Lubavitch loyalist following the passing of the Şemaḥ Şedek—wrote to R. Shlomo Zalman in defence of Maharash, he received a sharp rebuttal. The exchange that ensued exposes the continuing centrality of Maharash's bold recalibration of Habad thought, with particular reference to *şimşum* and *reshimah*, in the posthumous resurgence of the rivalry between Kopust and Lubavitch.¹⁷⁹

From the very outset, R. Shlomo Zalman noted, there were members of the Kabbalistic fraternity who suppressed discussion of the entire notion of the *reshimah* since it is not mentioned in the authoritative texts of the Arizal's foremost disciple, Rabbi Ḥayim Vital, and is only elaborated by the Sarugian branch of the Lurianic tradition.¹⁸⁰ He acknowledged that the early Hasidic masters had nevertheless “upheld this tradition,” and that Rashaz and the Şemaḥ Şedek had therefore taken up the topic of the *reshimah* in “Lehavin mah shekatuv be'oşrot ḥayim” and elsewhere. As to the innovative theorization of Maharash, however, he insisted “there is no one in our generation who can uphold it.” R. Shlomo Zalman made his view clear: Maharash had pushed an already controversial topic far beyond any precedent and drawn conclusions that were unacceptable and indefensible.¹⁸¹

As discussed above, in several earlier discourses Maharash has explicated the notion that *reshimah*—the “trace” that remained in the void in the aftermath of the primal *şimşum*—was itself untouched by the *şimşum*. As a finite form of infinite delimitation, the *reshimah* traces a fundamental ontological continuity between infinitude and finitude, between divine being and material reality. While divine revelation within the cosmos is mediated and limited by *şimşum*, the ineffable esotericism of divine being remains the unmediated ground of all cosmic being, and of the containing bounds that circumscribe material being in particular. The key word here is unmediated; it is specifically in the finite contours of materiality that we encounter divine being without mediation—immediately. This point is

¹⁷⁹ This correspondence was initially preserved in manuscript copies by Kopust loyalists, but was later published by Yonosan Dovid Reinitz under the title “Mikhtevei haviku'ah bein ba'al hamagen avot im har”d tumarkin” in the Lubavitch journal *Koveş he'orot ubi'urim - oholei torah* 548 (1990): 36-45. These letters are also referenced in Heilman, *Beit rabi*, III 19b, where a brief biographical sketch of their recipient is provided. All references below are to the text published by Reinitz.

¹⁸⁰ On Rabbi Yisrael Sarug as a competitor to Vital, and on the former's treatment of “processes that took place prior to the tzimtzum” including theorizations of “language and textuality” as “the most primordial of processes,” see Garb, *A History*, 49 and 53.

¹⁸¹ Reinitz, “Mikhtevei haviku'ah,” 39-40. Also see the relevant discussion in Roth, “Hashpa'at 'emek hamelekh'.”

more explicit in Maharash's *hagahah* to *Likutei torah misefer bereishit* than in any earlier text.¹⁸² Yet, for all its novelty, this fuller theorization is firmly anchored in a statement found in a discourse by Rashaz as published and remarked upon by the Şemaḥ Şedek in *Torah or*.¹⁸³

Rashaz's original discourse distinguishes between the *sefirot* as they are manifest in the cosmic realm of emanation (*aşilut*) and the so-called "hidden *sefirot*," that are secreted within the pre-*şimşum* primordially of the *or eyn sof*.¹⁸⁴ While the emanated *sefirot* each have their own container, which articulates each of them in their individuated form, in their hidden and unarticulated root and source all of them are "verily in one container" (בכלי א' ממש).¹⁸⁵ The distinction between articulation (or revelation) and concealment, is accordingly commensurate to the distinction between multifarious differentiation and all-encompassing oneness. Rashaz goes on to extend this conception to the distinction between the *kav* and the *reshimu*:

And in the same manner is the distinction between the radiance of the *kav* and the *reshimu* that remains after the *şimşum* and empty space; the radiance of the *kav* shines in each realm according to its station, whereas the *reshimu* is the aspect that is encompassing of all the cosmic realms.¹⁸⁶

ועד"ז ההפרש בין הארת הקו להרשימו שנשארו אחר הצמצום ומקום פנוי דהנה הארת הקו מאיר בכל עולם לפי ערכו אך הרשימו היא בחי' הכוללת לכל העולמות

Here we have an explicit statement that the *reshimu* is not merely prior to the *kav* in the cosmic hierarchy, but that its fundamental esotericism encompasses the entire cosmos as a single undifferentiated whole. As in the case of the "hidden *sefirot*," concealment is commensurate to all-encompassing oneness. Implicit in this analogy is also the more ambiguous intimation that the *reshimu* does not first emerge in the aftermath of *şimşum* but is rather primordially secreted within the *or eyn sof* in a similar manner to the "hidden *sefirot*." It would follow that after the *şimşum*, which is a concealment of divine

¹⁸² *Likutei torah misefer bereishit*, 74a.

¹⁸³ *TO*, 10d.

¹⁸⁴ As Moshe Idel has shown in two articles on the topic, the origins of this distinction can already be discerned in some of the earliest extant layers of Kabbalistic literature. See Moshe Idel, "Demut ha'adam shemei'al hasefirot," *Daat* 4 (1980): 41-55; idem., "Hasefirot shemei'al." Here Rashaz focuses on a passage from the *Tekunei zohar*, and interprets the distinction through the reigning post-Lurianic paradigm.

¹⁸⁵ *TO*, 10c.

¹⁸⁶ *TO*, 10d. For a similar formulation cited in the name of Ramḥal see Shaul Magid, "Origin and Overcoming," 185: "The *reshimu* encompasses all of existence." As far as I can tell, however, the original formulation is somewhat different. See Ramḥal, *Kalah pithey hakhmah*, 26: סוד זה הרשימו הוא הנקרא מקום כל הנמצא. The possible relationships between the corpuses of Ramḥal and Habad are certainly worthy of investigation, but this is not a project that can be undertaken here.

revelation, the esoteric being of the primordial *reshimu* is left precisely as it was, only that it is no longer saturated with the exoteric assertion of infinite light.

This reading of Rashaz's analogy might seem perfectly reasonable, and even intuitive, to a reader schooled in the teachings of Maharash. It must be emphasized, however, that in its original context this cryptic analogy is not easily parsed. Indeed, when *Torah or* was first published in 1836 the Şemaḥ Şedek himself added a brief *hagahah* registering his perplexity that the *kav*, a revelatory ray of infinite light that extends into the cosmos, should be cast as inferior to the finite trace. In fact, he noted, another important and well known text by Rashaz made it explicit that the *kav* itself originates as a ray of infinite light, yet its luminosity is increasingly circumscribed as it descends into realms of increasing limitation and corporeality, such that only “a ray of a ray” of the *kav*'s light “is vested in the soul and spirit ... of the created realms and also in all their containers (*keilim*).”¹⁸⁷ Since these containers derive from the *reshimu*, it would follow that the *reshimu* is subordinate to the *kav*.¹⁸⁸

In R. Shlomo Zalman's first response to Don Tumarkin he insisted that nothing should be made of this analogy to the “hidden *sefirot*” at all, and instead offered a reading of Rashaz's words that severely curtailed their implications. In his view, the statement that “the *reshimu* is the aspect that is encompassing of all the cosmic realms” simply means that:

In the *reshimu* is hidden something of the general light of *malkhut of eyn sof*, of which the *kav* is only a ray. And therefore the root of the containers is loftier than the light. And this is sufficient.¹⁸⁹

בהרשימו יש בהעלם מכללות האור דמל' דא"ס שהקו רק הארה ממנו ולכן שרש הכלים גבוה מהאור ודי בזה

When this interpretation is placed side by side with Rashaz's original words it becomes clear that R. Shlomo Zalman chose to abandon their plain meaning rather than allow any room for the bold theological conclusions drawn by Maharash:

¹⁸⁷ Rashaz, T4:20 (“*Iyhu vehiyuhu*”), 131b:

הארת הקו מאירה משם ומתלבשת באור הנשמה די"ס דבי"ע שהוא אלקות והארה דהארה מתלבשת בנפש רוח די"ס דבי"ע ואף גם בכל הכלים שלהם והארה דהארה הוא בכל הנבראים ונוצרים ונעשים

¹⁸⁸ The text of the Şemaḥ Şedek's *hagahah*, as published in *Torah or*, reads:

וצ"ע דמבואר בכמה מקומות דהקו גבוה הרבה מהרשימו וע' באגה"ק מאמר איהו וחיוהי הארת הקו והארה דהארה והארה דהארה דהארה כו'

¹⁸⁹ Reinitz, “*Mikhtevei haviku'ah*,” 40.

Rashaz:

The *reshimu* is the aspect that is encompassing of all the cosmic realms

הרשימו היא בחי' הכוללת לכל העולמות

R. Shlomo Zalman:

In the *reshimu* is hidden something of the general light of *malkhut* of *eyn sof*

בהרשימו יש בהעלם מכללות האור דמל' דא"ס

The switch is subtle but significant, and it hinges on the word הכוללת. In changing the prefix from an adverb to a preposition meaning “from” or “of” the very meaning of the word and the work that it is doing in the sentence is changed. The *reshimu* is not itself an aspect that encompasses, but it rather has received something “from” an encompassing or general aspect. A more dramatic change is the erasure of the words “all the cosmic realms” such that the *reshimu* is no longer cast as esoterically encompassing all realms subsequently emanated, created, formed and made. We are instead left with the much more conventional notion that the *reshimu* simply receives and conceals the most extraneous manifestation of the infinite (*malkhut* of *eyn sof*) within its finite trace. Indeed, R. Shlomo Zalman goes on to argue that this is just another reiteration of Rashaz’s insistence that the *šimšum* should not be interpreted as a literal withdrawal of the *or eyn sof*, but merely as a form of concealment.¹⁹⁰ Accordingly, no novel conclusions are to be drawn that confer any special status to the *reshimu* other than the fact that it occurs earlier than the *kav* in the cosmological sequence.

It is striking that at no point does R. Shlomo Zalman consider what was bothering his grandfather, the Šemaḥ Šedek, who apparently did understand Rashaz to be saying something new and significant about the *reshimu*, which would—as he wrote in his original *hagahah*—“require investigation” (צריך עיון) before it could be properly parsed and reconciled with other statements.¹⁹¹ Moreover, in several later discourses and *hagahot*, the Šemaḥ Šedek indeed followed up on this requisite investigation, referring explicitly to this discourse in *Torah or*, and going so far as to declare that the *reshimu* is “a trace of the being of the *eyn sof* when there was not yet an empty place [i.e. prior to the *šimšum*], whereas the radiance of the *kav* [is] after the hollow is made.”¹⁹² With characteristic brevity, this is intertextually associated with the notion that the containing finitude that gives specific form to all post-*šimšum* manifestations derives “its root and

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. Rashaz’s non-literal interpretation of *šimšum* was discussed in the introduction to the present study.

¹⁹¹ *TO*, 10d.

¹⁹² Šemaḥ Šedek, “Kein šipor,” section 9, in *Or hatorah - devarim, II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1965), 924: רשימו של מהות א"ס כשלא פי' המקום פנוי עדיין ... והארת החוט לאחר שנעשה חלל

source from the essence of the *or eyn sof barukh hu*, and not from the light of the *kav*.”¹⁹³ This can be understood as an explanation of Rashaz’s statement that “the *reshimu* is the aspect that is encompassing of all the cosmic realms”: As the finite capacity that is inherent to the omnipotent essence of divine being, the *reshimu* is the encompassing root of all possible iterations of finitude *ad infinitum*.

These excerpts are from a discourse known as “Derush kein şipor,” which was evidently widely circulated in manuscript copies, as was the norm in Habad throughout the 19th century. In Don Tumarkin’s first letter to R. Shlomo Zalman, he actually excerpted the relevant passage, citing it as a basis for the more explicit theorization found in Maharash’s new *hagahah* to *Likutei torah misefer bereishit*.¹⁹⁴ Despite Tumarkin’s erudite and well-articulated arguments, this epistolary exchange yielded no fruit. In each successive response R. Shlomo Zalman doubled down on his insistence that Maharash’s theorization was utterly unjustifiable. In dismissing the various texts adduced by Tumarkin, R. Shlomo Zalman took him to task for using the Şemaş Şedek’s words as hooks upon which to hang Maharash’s “empty bottles (בוקי סריקי).”¹⁹⁵

Aside from the substance of the debate, the sheer vehemence of R. Shlomo Zalman’s attack attests to the fact that this was not merely a point of scholarly interpretation or even religious theology, but rather a posthumous challenge to Maharash’s legitimacy as the successor who filled the Şemaş Şedek’s seat in Lubavitch. This resurgence of the controversy between Kopust and Lubavitch was also manifest in a struggle over the governance of the Kolel Habad fund in aid of the hasidic community in the Holy Land. It is not insignificant that Don Tumarkin had been appointed as custodian of the fund by the Şemaş Şedek circa 1855; he continued to serve in post throughout the tenure of Maharash and subsequently took part in negotiations between the respective heirs of Kopust and Lubavitch.¹⁹⁶ In purely philological terms, however, the correspondence between R. Shlomo Zalman and Tumarkin highlights the innovative nature of Maharash’s formulations, both in style and in substance. Any antecedent to be found in earlier texts is sufficiently ambiguous that its relevance could be dismissed by his rival with at least some plausibility. Rather than sufficing with cryptic intimations, Maharash states his theorizations clearly and boldly.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 925:

¹⁹⁴ Reinitz, “Mikhtevei haviku’ah,” 37-39.

¹⁹⁵ Reinitz, “Mikhtevei haviku’ah,” 41.

¹⁹⁶ See above, n178.

שרשו ומקורו הוא מעצמות אא"ס ב"ה ולא מאור החוט

The passage from Maharash's *hagahah* that elicited R. Shlomo Zalman's indignation reads as follows:

Perhaps we can suggest that by the measure of revelation the *kav* is more transcendent, for through the radiance of the *kav* revelation is drawn into the realm of emanation, and [into the realms] above the realm of emanation (*ašilut*). Moreover, the *kav*'s breakthrough is rooted in the infinite light that is prior to the *šimšum*, from whence it breaks through such that the circumscription of the ray (*šimšum hakav*) is drawn forth. However, the *reshimu* is without any circumscription at all (*bilti šimšum klal*). For that self-circumscription, to the degree that only the *reshimu* remained, is that the light which was touched by the *šimšum* departed to the sides, as is written elsewhere. And the fact that the aspect of the *reshimu* remained [i.e. it didn't depart to the sides] is a sign that the *šimšum* did not touch it at all. For if the *šimšum* would have reached the luminosity of the trace (*or hareshimu*) as well, it too would depart as did the light that initially filled the place of the hollow. And since the trace remained it transpires that the *šimšum* did not touch it at all. Accordingly, the aspect of the trace is a luminosity that is not circumscribed at all (*habilti mešumšam klal*) ... Therefore, on account of this advantage, it is explained here that the *reshimu* is the all-encompassing aspect, only that this is hidden, as is known, and the advantage of the *kav* is [only] on account of the revelation etc.¹⁹⁷

ואולי י"ל שבענין הגילוי הקו גבוה יותר שע"י הארת הקו נמשך הגילוי באצי' ובלמעלה מהאצי' וגם כי שורש ענין בקיעת הקו הוא מאוא"ס שלמעלה מהצמצום שהוא בוקע להיות נמשך בחי' צמצום הקו כו' אמנם הרשימו היא בלתי צמצום כלל שהרי מה שנתצמצם עד שלא נשאר רק רשימו הנה אור שנגע בו הצמצום נסתלק לצדדי' כמ"ש במ"א ומה שנשאר בבחי' הרשימו ה"ז אות שלא נגע בו הצמצום כלל שאם הי' מגיע הצמצום גם באור הרשימו הי' ג"כ מסתלק כמו האור שהי' ממלא תחלה מקום החלל ומאחר שנשאר בחי' הרשימו הרי לא נגע בו הצמצום כלל וא"כ בחי' הרשימו הוא אור הבלתי מצומצם כלל ... לכן מצד מעלתה זה נת' כאן שהרשימו היא בחי' הכלליות רק שזהו בהעלם כנודע ומעלת הקו זהו מצד הגילוי כו'

Here we have the first, and the more radical, of two suggestions that Maharash offers to explain the words of Rashaz. He begins with a point that is already explicit in discussions by the Şemaḥ Şedek, and which—as mentioned above—R. Shlomo Zalman also invokes, namely that the *kav* is considered loftier in that it is fundamentally revelatory. With Maharash's second point, however, he preemptively rules out the other facet of R. Shlomo Zalman's resolution, according to which the *reshimu* is loftier because within it

¹⁹⁷ *Likutei torah misefer bereishit*, 74a.

“is hidden something of the general light of *malkhut* of *eyn sof*, of which the *kav* is only a ray.”¹⁹⁸ The logic here is that the *reshimu* is loftier simply because it is prior to the *kav* in the cosmological sequence. Maharash, however, notes that on these terms it can also be argued that that *kav* is actually loftier than the *reshimu*, because “the *kav*’s breakthrough is rooted in the infinite light that is prior to the *šimšum*.”¹⁹⁹ Moreover, Maharash is not interested in a solution that simply plays around with stations in the cosmic hierarchy. He rather seeks to unlock the ontological significance of Rashaz’s statement. For him, the question is twofold: 1) In what sense is the *reshimu* “the aspect that is encompassing of all the cosmic realms”? 2) What does this tell us about the nature of finite being?

As already noted, Rashaz’s alignment of this conception of the *reshimu* with his theorization of the “hidden *sefirot*” opens the way for the implication that just as the latter are primordially secreted within the *or eyn sof* so is the former. Maharash brings this from the realm of implication into the realm of explication, declaring that the fundamental distinction between the *reshimu* and the *kav* comes down to one word: *šimšum*. “The *reshimu* is without any circumscription (*šimšum*) at all ... the *šimšum* did not touch it at all.” In the case of the *kav*, by contrast, *šimšum* is cast as so fundamental to its substance that the term becomes conjoined in its moniker: “the circumscription of the ray (*šimšum hakav*).”

On this score, the *reshimu* should not be understood as a subsequent trace that can only be thought about within the context of the prior occurrence of *šimšum*. Nor should it be understood as a finite trace of concealed infinitude. It should rather be thought of as the antecedent trace that infinitely encompasses every finite possibility. It is the pre-*šimšum* trace of finite primordially. As such, Rashaz’s statement—that “the *reshimu* is the aspect that is encompassing of all the cosmic realms”—is well understood. Indeed, as Elliot Wolfson has pointed out, Rashab would subsequently describe the *reshimu* “as the trace that exists before the act of withdrawal.”²⁰⁰ As he goes on to explain, this “leads to the

¹⁹⁸ As cited above, note 192. For another juxtaposition of R. Shlomo Zalman’s explanation of *reshimu*, elsewhere, with that of Maharash, see Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 110n147.

¹⁹⁹ For more on the *kav*’s rootedness in pre-*šimšum* infinitude see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Achronic Time, Messianic Expectation, and the Secret of the Leap in Habad,” in *Habad Hasidism: History, Thought, Image*, ed. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2016), 54* where a text by Rashaz is cited according to which it is specifically the *kav*, rather than the *reshimu*, that is drawn from *malkhut* of *eyn sof*. In the same article (75*) Wolfson similarly cites Rashab to the effect that the *kav* “is contiguous with and conjoined to the finite.”

²⁰⁰ Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 108. In addition to the sources cited there, n141 and page 110n150-1, also see Rashab, *Samekh vav*, 6. It is noteworthy that he makes this point as part of the initial discussion that sets the frame for the *hemshekh* that, as argued in the following chapter, is the most complete and systematic statement of his thought.

bending of the arc of temporality and the affirmation of a linear circularity.”²⁰¹ Adapting Wolfson’s notion in line with my own analysis, we can say that the *reshimu* is first the infinite foreshadowing of all finite possibilities and then the finite shadow in which infinite being is immediately traced.

In transforming the cosmological significance of the *reshimu*, Maharash transforms our understanding of finite being itself. Finite being is now seen to be a facet of the true being of the divine self. More specifically, finite being is the introverted and esoteric facet that, prior to *šimšum*, is so saturated with the exoteric projection of infinite illumination as to be imperceptible. *Šimšum* withdraws or conceals that projection and exposes the unmediated essentiality of the *reshimu*, which was there all along. What was most esoteric and introverted prior to *šimšum* is ultimately rendered as the most exoteric face of finite materiality.²⁰²

There is certainly more to say about the rich theoretical and theological dimensions of this *hagahah*, which also includes a second interpretation of Rashaz’s words that does not depend on Maharash’s avant-garde redefinition of the *reshimu*. There is also more to be said about R. Shlomo Zalman’s response to it. But here we will return to the broader significance that emerges from the historical and social context in which it was written and published. Just as Maharash’s argument against acosmism was a factor in the beginning of the succession controversy, so did his bold perpetuation of Habad’s legacy of methodological and theological innovation play a central role in the renewed controversy that followed his own passing.

Conclusion - Phenomenology and Historiography, Metaphysics and Materialism

The debate between Kopust and Lubavitch over the significance of the *reshimu* would loom large in the vast corpus of discourses and *hemshekhim* by Maharash’s son Rashab, including in the epic and unfinished serialization known as *Ayin bet*. In an important paper devoted to the theorization of the *reshimu* in that work, Elliot Wolfson has shown that for Maharash’s successor the *reshimu* does not merely signify “the trace of transcendence,” but also “the transcendence of the trace.” Invoking a formulation that can

²⁰¹ Ibid., 112. On Maharash’s willingness to eschew the usual chronological axioms, see the discussion regarding “making the will of G-d,” above, at the beginning of Part 4.

²⁰² For more on this point, see the relevant discussion in Rubin, “Hemshekh Vekakhah Ha-gadol,” Part Four, <chabad.org/3647000> (accessed August 9, 2021).

be traced to *Vekakhah*, he writes that “the point of the trace ... intones the secret of the supreme paradox, the incarnation of the infinite essence in finite nature.”²⁰³

The entanglement of Maharash’s theorization of the pre-*simsum* primordially of the finite with the controversy between Kopust and Lubavitch in the fourth and fifth Generations of Habad carries larger methodological implications. Evaluations of Hasidism that consider sociological, anthropological or historiographical factors alone will—at best—remain incomplete. Conceptual and phenomenological concerns—albeit imbricated in broader tensions around questions of continuity and renewal—may well have been the more decisive factors in Maharash’s emergence as leader of Habad-Lubavitch, and in the continuing trajectory of the movement into the 20th century. As Wolfson has written, in the case of Habad “the phenomenological explains the historical, not the other way round.”²⁰⁴ Wolfson has further argued that the complexity of Habad’s own temporal conceptions—examples of which were discussed above—requires scholars to adopt a more critical stance towards their own concepts of time and history.²⁰⁵

Thinking through the above analysis of Maharash’s methodological and theological innovations in light of these two considerations, it is important to further unpack one of my central claims, namely that Maharash orchestrated a “recalibration” of Habad thought according to which “the rhetoric of acosmism would be increasingly displaced by an ever deeper theorization of the apotheosis of the physical.” The word “rhetoric” is important here because I do not mean to assert an absolute phenomenological or conceptual break with the past. Maharash was deeply engaged in the work of studying, apprehending, assimilating, and communicating the teachings of his predecessors. In this sense, his relationship with the past is such that his own teachings can actually be projected retroactively to illuminate the phenomenological constructs articulated by his father (the *Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek*), grandfather (R. DovBer Schneuri), and great-grandfather (Rashaz). At the same time, Maharash’s new articulations are unprecedented: he does not merely repeat, but rather grasps the essential originality of the received teaching and draws it anew into the open. As we have shown, Maharash developed a new genre via which to express his own distinct vantage point in his own distinct manner. Maharash’s rhetorical recalibration is not subject to history in any reductive or straightforward way, but is rather the medium

²⁰³ Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 119-120. On the divergence between Lubavitch and Kopust on this point see *idem.*, 110n147. As Wolfson noted, the formulation “the point of the trace” was coined by Rashab, on its roots in *Vekakhah*, see Rubin, “Hemshekh Vekakhah Ha-gadol,” as cited in the previous note. For more on Rashab’s continuation of his father’s legacy see Loewenthal, “The Thickening of the Light,” 7*-43*.

²⁰⁴ Wolfson, “Achronic Time,” 46*.

²⁰⁵ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 21-24.

via which he places Habad's tradition of phenomenological practice in innovative dialogue with the historical moment.²⁰⁶

This more complex interleaving of phenomenology and historiography also bears on the question of the relationship between the internal intellectual history of Habad and broader trajectories of intellectual history. In the case of Maharash, a recent work by Eliyahu Stern, *Jewish Materialism: The Intellectual Revolution of the 1870s*, provides important context. Alongside the aforementioned Şvi Rabinowitz, particular attention is given to one Joseph Sossnitz (1837–1910). Born into a Hasidic family, Sossnitz made annual pilgrimages to the Şemaḥ Şedek's court in Lubavitch between 1855 and 1862. With time he was increasingly drawn to the scientific literature of the day. In the mid 1870s he wrote and published a treatise titled *Akhen yesh hashem (Indeed, There Is a G-d)*, described by Stern as an explicit attempt to uphold the natural science of Charles Darwin without surrendering to the atheistic materialism espoused by Ludwig Büchner.²⁰⁷

As Stern shows, Sossnitz was fundamentally concerned with the tension between notions of the continuous and causal evolution of nature, on the one hand, and the discontinuous “leap” of creation, on the other hand.²⁰⁸ These themes resonate deeply with the question of whether *şimşum* should be understood as signifying a continuous or discontinuous transition between infinitude and finitude, between the divine self and the created cosmos. Relying on Wolfson's work, Stern links Sossnitz's discourse on the leap both to Habad's characterization of *şimşum* as a leap (*dilug*) and to F. W. J. Schelling's notion of the “Sprung.”²⁰⁹ Contra to Wolfson's own theorization of these concepts—according to which *dilug* should be understood as “the leap across the divide of the indivisible”²¹⁰—and also contra to Maharash's theorization of the *reshimu* as tracing a fundamental ontological continuity irrespective of the rupture of *şimşum*, Stern casts Sossnitz as “trapped between Habad acosmism and scientific pantheism.”²¹¹ More on point is Stern's observation that Sossnitz's intellectual struggles also “reflected some overlap between a

²⁰⁶ See Wolfson, *ibid.*, 24: “From this ideational stance ... one can legitimately move through the present from past to future or from future to past.”

²⁰⁷ Stern, *Jewish Materialism*, 85-113.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 98-101.

²⁰⁹ See the extensive discussion in Wolfson, “Achronic Time,” 45*-86*. For broader discussions of acosmism and pantheism see the previous chapter.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84*.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101. For broader discussions of acosmism and pantheism, especially following Wolfson's theorizations, see the previous chapter.

certain strand of materialist thought and a Hasidic worldview that privileged the idea of divine worship through the physical world.”²¹²

As described by Stern, Sossnitz was operating in the marginal territory between traditional Jewish learning and life, on the one hand, and the emergent secular tradition of scientific materialism on the other. Sossnitz, and others like him, were not part of the Haskalah movement that sought to reform traditional Jewish religious practices and beliefs and replace them with an “enlightened” culture that was fundamentally secular.²¹³ Equally, however, their preoccupation with scientific questions and materialistic philosophy made it difficult for them to find suitable interlocutors within the traditional rabbinate. It is noteworthy that Sossnitz appreciatively cites a discussion by the Şemaḥ Şedek about the nature of time and its beginning.²¹⁴ As Stern argues, however, it seems that Sossnitz was ultimately unable to satisfyingly reconcile the acosmic overtones of classical Habad teachings with his new found materialism. After the Şemaḥ Şedek’s passing he traveled to R. Ḥayim Shneur Zalman in Liady. “Returning from him on the last occasion,” Sossnitz later wrote, “I despaired of finding in Habad resolutions to the doubts that encircled me in my investigations.”²¹⁵ He twice visited Maharash in Lubavitch, as well as the non-hasidic rabbis of Lodz, Bialistock and Kovno, but wrote that “I did not extract from them a scientific response.”²¹⁶

Though he was not able to discern it himself, Sossnitz was not actually as alone as he thought. Even as Sossnitz was coming to the conclusion that Habad teachings could not help him, Maharash was slowly but resolutely carving out a metaphysics of materialism that executed a bold phenomenological recalibration while remaining deeply rooted in the received corpus of Habad teachings and texts. He replaced the rhetoric of acosmism with the apotheosis of the physical, and established an ontologically continuous account of creation, rooted in the pre-*šimšum* primordially of the finite. While this project did not go unchallenged, history would ultimately bear witness to its success.

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²¹² *Ibid.*, 100-101.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

²¹⁴ Joseph Sossnitz, *Akhein yesh hashem* (Vilna, 1875), 85.

²¹⁵ Joseph Sossnitz, autobiographical contribution to Benzion Eisenstadt, *Hakhmei yisra'el be'amerika* (New York, 1903), 44: “בשובי ממנו בפעם האחרונה נואשתי ממצוא בהב"ד ההתרות לספקות אשר כתרונני במחקרי: (New York, 1903), 44: “לא אצלתי מהם תשובה מדעית:”

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*: “לא אצלתי מהם תשובה מדעית:”

CHAPTER THREE

The Purpose of *Şimşum* and the Essential Dynamic of Reversion and Innovation in the Thought of Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn (“Rashab”), 1895-1920

Introduction - Tradition and Change at the 20th Century’s Dawn

Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn (“Rashab,” 1860-1920) was the fifth rebbe in the dynastic line of Habad-Lubavitch that begins with Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (“Rashaz”). He has been the subject of three well researched PhD dissertations. Two of those studies—by Ilia Lurie and Naftali Brawer—focused exclusively on Rashab’s institutional and communal activism, leaving his prolific theological writings completely unstudied.¹ The third—by Reuven Leigh—does take up Rashab’s intellectual work, placing him in dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, and advancing an argument that Rashab was “a prescient precursor to the avant-garde thought which emerged in France in the nineteen sixties and seventies.”² Leigh’s discussion is restricted to a series (*hemshekh*) of eight discourses delivered by Rashab in 1898, known as *Ranat*.³ Only passing reference is made to texts outside of this *hemshekh*, so the question of how it relates to his thought more generally, and likewise to the sort of communal activism described by Lurie and Brawer, remains to be more fully investigated.

Academic discussions of Rashab are, however, not limited to these three dissertations:

An article by Naftali Loewenthal sets Rashab’s teachings and theological texts in their social and historical context. This provides a model that I will build on in constructing a wider contextual frame for an exploration of *şimşum* in Rashab’s thought.⁴

Elliot Wolfson has devoted an article to the particular theorization of “the paradox of *şimşum*” found in Rashab’s longest—and yet uncompleted—*hemshekh*, composed during

¹ Ilia Lurie, “Lyubaviş umilhamotehah: ḥasidut ḥabad bema’avak al dmutah shel haḥevrah hayhudit berusiya ḥaşarit” (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2009) [Hebrew], a version of which was subsequently included in idem., *Milhamot lyubaviş: ḥasidut ḥabad berusiya ḥaşarit* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2018). Naftali Yosef Brawer, “Resistance and Response to Change: The Leadership of Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn (1860-1920)” (PhD diss., University College London, 2004).

² Aaron Reuven Leigh, “Poststructuralism Avant la Lettre: Language and Gender in the Thought of Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn” (PhD diss., King’s College, University of Cambridge, 2019). For the formulation cited here, see page 175.

³ See Leigh, *ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Naftali Loewenthal, ““The Thickening of the Light”: The Kabbalistic-Hasidic Teachings of Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneerson in Their Social Context,” in *Habad Hasidism: History, Thought, Image*, eds. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2016), 7*-43*.

the last decade of his life and known as *Ayin bet*.⁵ Wolfson’s work on *šimšum* in Habad thought, in that article and elsewhere, has already been engaged in previous chapters and will be returned to below. Additionally, his contextualization of Rashab’s discussions of temporality within a wider Kabbalistic discourse on “the fusion of the linear and cyclical, the innovative and repetitive” will be shown to be particularly relevant to Rashab’s theorization of the purpose of *šimšum*.⁶

Also focusing on *Ayin bet*, Jonathan Garb has especially highlighted Rashab’s development of the relation between the “scholastic pleasure” attained in Torah study and the elicitation of “divine pleasure.”⁷ Dov Schwartz has offered comments on a few excerpts from Rashab’s corpus, especially concerning notions of the primordial desire of G-d, and concerning the subtle differentiation between different strata within the primordial revelation of G-d’s infinite light (*or eyn sof*).⁸

In his thesis, Leigh highlights Rashab’s central focus on the generative quality of communication and of the feminine—which is an important intervention in its own right—and discusses the significance of *šimšum* within that context, as “allowing for the emergence of the divine essence.”⁹ Invoking the work of sociologists Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock, he also advances a more general argument that Rashab’s combination of religious traditionalism with an intellectual project of “critical reflection” and “epistemic transformation,” demonstrates that modernity and secularisation should not be seen as synonymous.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Loewenthal has argued that the trajectory of Habad Hasidism can be seen not only as a part of modernity, but as moving “beyond modernity” in a manner that is characterized by a “bridging of the unbridgeable” or by “a

⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu—The Trace of Transcendence and the Transcendence of the Trace: The Paradox of *Šimšum* in the RaShaB’s Hemshekh *Ayin Beit*,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, 30 (2013): 75-120.

⁶ Idem., *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 55-117. The particular formulation cited here appears on page 82. Though Rashab is by no means the central focus of this discussion, Wolfson notes the “sophistication” of his presentations (p. 70), and at several points quotes or references his discourses (pp. 71; 106; 225n231; 230n278 & 285; 231n289; 232n292).

⁷ Jonathan Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul: Psychological Thought in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 159-161.

⁸ Dov Schwartz, *Mašshevet ḥabad mereshit ve’ad akharit* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010), 199-206.

⁹ Leigh, “Poststructuralism,” 145. Also see idem., “Hasidic Thought and Tsimtsum’s Linguistic Turn,” in *Tsimtsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology* ed. Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 83-103.

¹⁰ Leigh, “Poststructuralism,” 24-25.

combination of contrasting positions,” among which he lists “premodern/postmodern, enclave/outreach, particularism/universalism, faith/reason,” and “rationality/mysticism.”¹¹

In the case of Rashab we will encounter a number of similar contrasts, such as quietistic seclusion and public activism, conservative traditionalism and radical change, essential concealment and hyperabundant luminosity. The particular meaning of these latter terms will be clarified below. Central to Rashab’s intellectual project, I will argue, is an interrogation of the dynamic between reversion and innovation, and the theorization of this dynamic as “essential.” Other intimations of the meaning of the word “essential” will be explicated below, but one of the senses in which I intend it is that, for Rashab, reversion and innovation are not merely held together pragmatically, to accommodate an undesirable set of circumstances—as might well be supposed. Rather, the dynamic between them is seen as necessary for the ultimate realization of cosmic purpose.

Below I will discuss 1) the social and historical context of Rashab’s emergence as *admor* of Habad-Lubavitch, 2) Rashab’s new theorization of *malkhut* and *šimšum* and its autobiographical resonances, circa 1897-8, 3) the new theorization of the purpose of *šimšum* set out at the beginning of *Samekh vav*, 4) his development of a unique concept of “essentiality” that transcends the ordinary dynamic of revelation and concealment, 5) his explicit move from normative rational modes of thinking to a distinctly phenomenological centering of desire and pleasure, 6) his association of the hypernomian rupture of *teshuvah* with the essential transcendence of sense, and 7) his construction of an unruptured nomian path by which to generate an unprecedented and hyperabundant disclosure of the otherwise ineffable essence.

Part 1 - The Social and Historical Context of Rashab’s Leadership

Before turning to the specific texts and concepts through which Rashab’s theological and methodological contributions will be assessed, it is instructive to set them within the larger context of his emergence as the *rebbe*, or *admor*, of the Habad court in Lubavitch, and as one of the foremost rabbinic activists in the Russian Empire:

The decade or so following the passing of Rashab’s father, Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn (“Maharash”), in 1882, was a period of great uncertainty for the future of the Lubavitch branch of Habad. In at least one contemporaneous newspaper report, as well as in later memoiristic writings that authoritatively formulate the internal historiographic tradition of

¹¹ Naftali Loewenthal, *Hasidism Beyond Modernity: Essays in Habad Thought and History* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020). For the formulations cited here, see pages 1, 15 and 24.

the Habad-Lubavitch community, this decade was characterized as the era of “the ruin of Lubavitch.”¹² Even as Maharash’s sons moved to establish and continue his intellectual legacy through the publication of *Likutei torah misefer bereishit* in 1884, as discussed at the end of the previous chapter, none of them showed any inclination to fill his seat as the *admor*.¹³

Initially the two oldest sons—Rabbi Shneur Zalman Aharon (“Raza,” 1858-1908) and Rashab, the primary protagonist of this chapter—both delivered hasidic discourses and responded to individual requests for advice.¹⁴ But both likewise resisted the sort of public

¹² See the report that appeared in *Hamelitz*, no. 6, 20 Jan., 1889 / 18 Shvat, 5649, p. 2, where “the ruin of Lubavitch” (הרבנה של לובאוויטש) is depicted thus: “From the time that glory has been exiled from Lubavitch, and the *ṣadikim*, whose souls are in Eden, departed to rest in supernal concealment, and they did not leave sons to fill their place, the hasidim have been left abandoned and desolate, like sheep that have no shepherd ...”

מעת שגלה כבוד מלובאוויטש והצדיקים נ"ע הלכו למנותות בסתר עליון, ולא הניחו בנים ממלאי מקומם, נשארו החסידים עזובים ושוממים כצאן אשר אין להם רועה

A variation of this designation, “חורבן לובאוויטש”, appears in a letter penned in 1935 by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (“Rayatz,” 1880-1950, the only son of Rashab). The letter responds to greetings relayed to Rayatz from a certain Mr. Horovitz. Rayatz recalls the latter’s father, Shmuel, who had lived in Lubavitch for a period beginning during the mid 1880s. Shmuel Horovitz is said to have penned a five volume manuscript chronicle of Habad history up to and including the period under discussion, which he allowed Rayatz to borrow and excerpt circa 1892. It is unclear whether Rayatz intended to attribute the characterization of this period as “the ruin of Lubavitch” to Horovitz, or whether this was a term used more widely. See Rayatz, *Igerot kodesh*, vol. 3 ed. Shalom DovBer Levine (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1983), 385-389, and esp. 388. On the “blurring of generic categories” in the historiographic writings of Rayatz, according to which the terms “‘memoirs’, ‘histories’, and ‘stories’” are “often used interchangeably,” see Ada Rapoport-Albert, “Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism,” in eadem., *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender* (Liverpool, UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2018), esp. 236-237 and 242-243.

¹³ See Alexander Ziskind Rabinovitch, “Toldot mishpaḥat shni’urzohn” in *Ha’asif*, year five, 5649 (Warsaw, 1889), 179: “The sons of Rabbi Shmuel did not consent to accept the leadership although there were some who sought to convince them that they should sit upon the seat of their father.”

בני הר"ש לא אבו לקבל את הנשיאות אף כי היו אחדים אשר דברו על לבם כי ישבו על כסא אביהם

As we will see below, by the time this report was published Rashab was already on the verge of emerging more visibly as his father’s successor, but he had yet to cross that verge and fully take on the mantle of leadership.

¹⁴ Only fragmentary impressions preserved in various memoirs attest to developments during this period. See for example Švi Har-Shefer, “Lubavitch: ir moshav admoret haḥabad beyemei ha’admor rabi shmuel,” *Ha’avar: revu’an ledivrei yemei hayehudim vehayahadut berusya 2* (Tel Aviv, 1954): 93, who writes that the hasidim first looked to Raza for leadership, “but he refused to vest himself with the cloak of *admorut* ... did not accept notes of supplication and did not acquiesce to the request of any man that he bless him ... Therefore the hasidic elders decided to crown Rashab with the title rebbe.”

[בתחלה שמו עיניהם בבכור,] אולם הוא מאן להתלבש באצטלא של אדמו"רות ... לא קבל פתקאות ולא נעתר לשום איש לברך אותו ... לכן החליטו זקני החסידים להכתיר את הרש"ב בשם "רבי".

According to a more detailed account by Yisrael Zev Wolfson—who came to know Raza towards the end of his life, when he lived in Vitebsk—Raza did act as *admor* for a period of about six months before deciding that the role was not his to fill. See Wolfson, “Megilat vitebsk,” in *Sefer vitebsk* (Tel Aviv: Irgun Olei Vitebsk Vehasevivah, 1957), 302-303. Also see the two accounts transcribed in Chitrik, *Reshimot devarim*, 161, according to which the two brothers were both consulted by hasidim and purposefully gave contradictory advice. Only one discourse by Raza has been published and it dates from 1883, see Shneur Zalman Aharon Schneersohn, *Ma’amar vayisharnah haparot* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2009), accessed online at <chabad.org/media/pdf/893/kINV8932489.pdf> (accessed on October 16, 2020). According to the publishers this is one of a small number of extant discourses by Raza held in the Library Of Agudas Chassidei Chabad. According to Rayatz, who always wrote and spoke of his uncle Raza with warmth, the latter burned most of his writings prior to his passing and requested that the ashes be buried with him. See Rayatz, *Likutei diburim I* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot 2009), 36-37. Rashab’s discourses from the period

leadership role that would inextricably place them at the center of communal life, materially and spiritually, as the axial conduit between heaven and earth.¹⁵ For a time, it seems, they were perceived as sharing the leadership between them—along with their younger brother, Rabbi Menachem Mendel (1867-1941).¹⁶ Given the discussion of the question of succession in the previous chapter, this may reflect an awareness of the wish espoused by their grandfather—the *Ṣemaḥ Ṣedek*—before his own passing just sixteen years earlier, that his sons should lead the community collectively. Back then, the resulting controversy had split Habad into several different streams. This time, it seemed that the Lubavitch stream had struck a dam that threatened to bring its flow to an end.

How exactly the question of continuity was negotiated over the course of the next decade remains somewhat unclear. But it is worth taking note of the contrast, found in several memoir sources, between Raza and Rashab. Raza is said to have been gifted with a strong intellect and with his father’s sharp sense of humor; he was curious, worldly, and

following his father’s passing are published in Rashab, *Sefer hama’amarim 5643-5644-5645* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot 2005). Also see Ramash, *Reshimat hayoman* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2009), 257: “There was a period when on the first day [of Rosh Hashanah] Raza would say [i.e. deliver a hasidic discourse] and on the second day, *admor nishmato eden* [i.e. Rashab].”

ה' זמן שביום א' אמר רז"א וביום ב' אדנ"ע.

¹⁵ On the various dimensions of significance with which the role of the *admor* is endowed see Ada Rapoport-Albert, “G-d and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship,” *History of Religions* 18:4 (May 1979): 296–325; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (SUNY Press, 1995), 189–207, and further sources cited on page 365, note 1. For the case of Habad specifically see Eli Rubin, “The Second Refinement and the Role of the Tzaddik,” *Chabad.org* <chabad.org/3041292> (accessed October 16, 2020); Philip Wexler et. al., *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Transformative Paradigm for the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019), 79–81.

¹⁶ See the report that appeared in *Hamelitz*, no. 12, 23 Feb., 1883 / 16 Adar I, 5643, p. 184 [3] under the title, “Rabot ra’ot ṣadik!,” which purports to be from the pen of a hasid loyal to Maharash’s brother—and Raza’s father-in-law—Rabbi Yisrael Noah Schneerson of Nezhin, and claims that the latter is unhappy that “the devil placed it in the hearts of the rabbis among the hasidim of Lubavitch to seat upon the departed *ṣadik*’s throne his three sons, to divide among them reign over the hasidim” (הס"ם נתן בלב הרבנים מהסידי) rather than attaching themselves to R. Yisrael Noah. There are many reasons to treat this report with caution, but it likely does reflect some truth about how things were perceived at the time. Note that there is some ambiguity about whether the three brothers shared their father’s seat or “divided” the leadership between them. For some clues as to the various forms this division may have taken, see Schneerson, *Reshimat hayoman*, 174 (to the effect that on Simchat Torah the first *atah hareitah* verse was recited by Raza, the second by Rashab, and the third by R. Menachem Mendel), 257 (as excerpted above, n14), 277 (to the effect that each brother led their own prayer quorum throughout the year of mourning), and 415n40 (to the effect that each brother would be honored with the last portion of the Shabbat *torah* reading and the reading of the *haftorah*, once in three weeks.) Also see Hayim Mordekhai Perlov, *Likutei sipurim* (Jerusalem, 2002), 256–7; Chitrik, *Reshimot devarim*, 161 as encapsulated above, n14, and the report in *Hamelitz*, no. 92, 21 Dec., 1885 / 13 Tevet, 5646, p. 1493 [4], which asserts that “the two sons” of Maharash [i.e. Raza and Rashab] had succeeded their father, and that while some hasidim were reluctant to accept their authority “the rabbis of towns that desired that the glowing coals of leadership in the holy town of Lubavitch shall not be extinguished exerted effort ... to sanctify the young *admorim*, to the point that the leadership is secured in their hands.”

על כסא הרבנות ישבו שני בניו ... רבני הערים החפצים שלא תכבה גהלת הרבנות בעיר הקודש ליובאוויץ השתדלו גם הם ... ויקדישו את האדמו"רים הצעירים עד כי נכונה הרבנות בידיהם.

sociable, but not one to suffer fools.¹⁷ Rashab was more earnest and withdrawn, but also more emotionally and mystically inclined; on a daily basis he would immerse himself for long hours in the sort of contemplative prayer that Loewenthal has described as “distinctive” of Habad Hasidism.¹⁸ One memorist, writing specifically of the aftermath of Maharash’s passing, labeled Raza a *maskil* (one who excels in the intellectual apprehension of the subtlest of mystical concepts) and Rashab an *oved* (one who excels in the devotional practice of contemplative prayer).¹⁹

According to another memorist, Maharash was said to have made the following comment, which reflects an awareness of the perceived contrast between his sons:

People think that the elder [Raza] has a better head. This is a mistake; a deeper head belongs to the younger [Rashab].²⁰

העולם אומרים, אז דער עלטערער האט א בעסערע קאפ. עס איז אטעות, א טיפערע קאפ איז בייא דעם אינגערען.

This anecdote can rightly be regarded as belonging to the broad genre of hagiography, related and preserved to underscore the legitimacy of an already established religious leader. But that should not necessarily lead us to dismiss it as fictitious; in light of the contrast between Raza and Rashab found in other sources, it actually seems quite plausible. Be this as it may, it will be shown below that Rashab’s intellectual contributions would indeed be distinguished by a penetrating phenomenological orientation and an expansive elucidatory style. Within Habad, Rashab’s discourses have long formed the core of the curriculum for in-depth textual and conceptual study in

¹⁷ In one letter Rayatz quotes Raza as remarking “that he by nature detests a foolish person and by nature loves an intelligent person” (אז ער האט בטבע פיינט א שוטה און בטבע האלט א קלוגיגן). See Rayatz, IG3, 157-158. There are many anecdotes sprinkled throughout Rayatz’s writings illustrating Raza’s humor, and some of his witticisms pointedly draw a contrast between himself and Rashab through making light of the latter’s piety. See, for example, Rayatz, *Likutei diburim IV*, 1346-8, for the story that as a child he once asked Raza why his father spends so much longer in prayer than anyone else; Raza responded that he wasn’t capable of articulating the words at the speed that ordinary people could. For more on Rashab’s dedication to contemplative prayer and Raza’s contrasting attitude, see below, n18. On Maharash’s sense of humor, see above, 2:2. For more on Raza’s worldliness and intellectual capacities, see Wolfson, “Megilat vitebsk,” 302.

¹⁸ On the contrast between Raza and Rashab see Svi Har-Shefer, *ibid.* Regarding contemplative prayer in Habad see Naftali Loewenthal, “Habad Approaches to Contemplative Prayer, 1790-1920,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), 288-300.

¹⁹ Svi Har-Shefer, *ibid.* It is especially noteworthy that Har-Shefer contrasts Raza’s “simple” manner in prayer (תפלתו הייתה פשוטה) with the “*deveikut*” exhibited by Rashab. For a similar contrast—found in other sources—between Maharash and Maharil, see above, 2:2. For more anecdotes that illustrate the distinction between Raza and Rashab in their attitude to prayer, see Schneerson, *Reshimat hayoman*, 220 (where Raza is said to have asked Rashab to explain the connection between contemplation and prayer) and 407 (where a comment of Raza is recorded that makes light of Rashab’s emotional sensitivity as expressed in tearful prayer).

²⁰ Perlov, *Likutei sipurim*, 229.

yeshivot. Within academic studies of Habad “his sophisticated philosophical presentation of Hasidic lore” has certainly been acknowledged.²¹ Yet, for the most part, it has been engaged only peripherally, rather than extensively analyzed.²²

In the mid 1880s, Raza began to pursue various commercial interests—including the establishment of a soap factory in Lubavitch—clearly signaling that he did not see himself as the new rebbe.²³ If he had decided to assume the leadership he would probably not have faced serious opposition, and it seems quite clear that he made these choices of his own volition.²⁴ There are also indications that Rashab was actually quite distressed by this turn of events.²⁵ Though they did not always see eye to eye, Raza and Rashab seem to have always remained on close personal terms, and the former was often at his brother’s court in Lubavitch even after moving to Vitebsk in the early 1890s. According to one memoirist, he spent the entire winter of 1905-6 in Lubavitch, apparently in order to hear

²¹ Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 70.

²² This point has already been explicated in Garb, *Yearnings*, 51. Also see Loewenthal, “The Thickening of the Light.” As mentioned above, the contributions of Leigh and Wolfson are the notable exceptions to this rule.

²³ On the establishment of the factory see Wolfson, “Megilat vitebsk,” 303-304, and Rayatz, IG3, 385 (where it is related that the aforementioned Shmuel Horovitz, above n12, moved to Lubavitch in order to work as a supervisor in Raza’s factory). By all accounts the venture was not a success. According to Wolfson Raza was too good-hearted to ever be successful in business. For an account of Raza’s equanimity on hearing that the factory had burned down see Yehoshua Mondshine, “Sipurim shesuparu be’otvušk ubevarsha,” item #64, *Shturem.net*, <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?section=blog_new&article_id=98&lang=hebrew> (accessed Nov. 20, 2020) from *Kfar Chabad Magazine*. For a report that Rashab told both of his brothers that they would be unsuccessful in making a living through business activities see Schneerson, *Reshimat hayoman*, 271.

²⁴ For an account of Raza’s discomfort with serving in the capacity of *admor* see Wolfson, “Megilat vitebsk,” 302-303. Wolfson also notes that although the extended Schneersohn family in Lubavitch were uncomfortable with Raza’s choice to go into business, they nevertheless deferred to him, and put money from Maharash’s estate at his disposal. Various anecdotes record witty responses Raza later gave when hasidim asked him why he stepped aside and opened the way for Rashab to emerge as the new *admor*. See Mondshine, “Sipurim shesuparu,” item #63. For a similar story, see Wolfson, *ibid.*, 302. Also see Raphael Nachman Kahn, *Shemu’ot vesipurim ... I* (Third Edition, Brooklyn, NY: Yitzchok Gansburg, 1990), 78 and 81. According to another anecdote Raza once said that while his forebears had divinely inspired foresight or intuition (*ru’ah hakodesh*), both he and Rashab were only gifted with a “first thought” (*muskal rishon*). Raza went on to say that while he was prone to second guess that impression and follow his own logic instead, Rashab never deviated from it. See Shmuel Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, “Reshimot ... shmu’el menahem mendel shneersohn” in *Teshurah mesimhat nisu’in vogel - huss* (2013), 7, viewable at <<http://www.teshura.com/Vogel-Huss%20-%20Adar%2010%2C%205773.pdf>> (accessed August 9, 2021).

²⁵ See Rayatz, *Likutei diburim IV*, 1377-1379. This is part of a memoristic account of the author’s childhood and is directly connected with a memory of a scene that occurred when Rashab passed through Kharkov after spending the winter of 1885-6 in Yalta. In Kharkov he was received by a large group of prominent hasidim, who apparently sought to persuade Rashab to more actively fill the leadership vacancy that they acutely felt. Rayatz connects his mother’s tears in Kharkov to the tears shed by both his father and mother in Yalta, when they received news of Raza’s commercial activities. For indication of a dispute between Rashab and Raza during the mid 1880s, combined with indication that they nevertheless remained on intimate personal terms, see the letter addressed to Rashab by Rashdam as published in Shalom DovBer Levine, *Mibeit hagenazim* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2009), 37-38. One line of this letter appears to have been censored. (For more on Rashdam, see above, 2:2)

the ongoing *hemshekh* that Rashab was then delivering; this *hemshekh* will be a central focus in the discussion of *šimšum* below.²⁶

Rashab, for his part, spent significant periods between 1882 and 1887 away from Lubavitch.²⁷ His visits to spas and doctors in Crimea, Germany, and France seem to have had a dual motive; to find respite both from his physical ailments and from the pressure to fill his father's empty seat. His son and successor, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak ("Rayatz," 1880-1950), later wrote that Rashab was on "a path of introspection" or "self-seclusion" during this period, "working with himself and within himself."²⁸ In an ethical will, addressed to his wife circa 1888, Rashab wrote in an unusually autobiographical vein:

I spent my days only on the study of *da"ḥ* ["words of the living G-d," i.e. Habad discourses], and I studied well the words of my holy forefathers ... and devoted my mind and heart to understand them well ... and I give thanks and praise to the blessed name [of G-d] on what has passed, and request for the future that my portion shall be among those who toil in His blessed Torah, and—most importantly—that this should affect me for the better in "worship of the heart, which is prayer" (Talmud bavli, Ta'anit, 2a), and the fulfilment of His *mišvot* etc.²⁹

²⁶ Perlov, *Likutei sipurim*, 275 and esp 306-7. At about this time there was also an acrimonious incident involving students in Rashab's yeshivah, Tomchei Temimim, and youthful members of the Zionist group Hovevei Zion. Raza, who was acquainted with leaders of the group in Vitebsk, acted as an intermediary between the involved parties. On Raza's involvement in this episode, see Shalom DovBer Levine, *Toldot ḥabad berusya hašarit* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2010), 266-277. For an account of Raza's association with Hovevei Zion from the perspective of one of the leaders of the organization, see the memoirs of Shimon Velikovsky in *Sefer vitebsk*, 140. For memoir material by Rayatz related to Raza's stay in Lubavitch during this period, see the appendix to Rashab, *Sefer hama'amarim 5666-5667* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2013), 240, 242, 245-6. For an account of Raza standing among other members of the hasidic elite to hear Rashab deliver a discourse, circa 1901, see Ben-Zion Dinur, *Be'olam sheshakah* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1958), 146. In the late 1880s, when Raza was still living in Lubavitch, Rashab would show deference to his older brother by visiting him in his home on the eve of Simchat Torah. See Schneerson, *Reshimat hayoman*, 174-5; Rayatz, IG3, 401.

²⁷ The details of these travels are well attested in his correspondence and in the memoristic writings and talks of his son, Rayatz. For a compilation of relevant texts see "Rashei perakim metoldot ... shalom dovber," in Rashab, *Hanokh lena'ar* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2000), 11, also see the relevant critical notes on page 57. The correct itinerary of Rashab's travels can be reconstructed based on his extant correspondence. Also see the report from Paris in *Hazefirah* (yr. 12, no. 7), 24 Feb., 1885 / 9 Adar, 5645, p. 56 where Rashab had taken up temporary residence: "Also the party of the hasidim is not absent here, the number of its members is not a few, for the heir apparent of Lubavitch has pitched his tent, for six months, in the city that contains everything, and, in a crowded celebration marked *ḥa"y* and *khaf-tet kislev* [sic] with feasting and joy."

גם מפלגת החסידות לא תחסר פה, מספר חבריה לא מעט, כי הירוש עצר מליבאוויטש תקע את אהלו זה ששה חדשים בעיר דכולא בה ובהמון חוגג עשו את ח"י וכ"ט כסלו משתה ושמה

²⁸ Rayatz, *Likutei diburim I*, 287: טאן מיט זיך און אין זיך

²⁹ Rashab, *Hanokh lena'ar*, 28.

רק אצלתי ימי על עסק דא"ה ולמדתי היטיב דברי אבותי הק' ... ונתתי מוחי ולבי על דבריהם להבינם היטיב ... ואני נותן שבה והודי להשי"ת על שעבר ומבקש על להבא שיהי חלקי מעסקי תורתו ית', והעיקר שיפעלו בי לטוב בעבודה שבלב זו תפלה וקיום מצותיו כו'.

Rashab's introspective inclination would remain strong, but as the 1880s drew to a close he increasingly acquiesced to the expectation of Lubavitch loyalists that he should serve as *admor*, and by the mid 1890s had fully committed himself to public leadership.³⁰ One impetus for Rashab's activist debut may have been the Fifth Session of the Rabbinic Commission, convened in 1893 by Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs.³¹ The three traditional rabbis appointed to the 1893 session were outnumbered by four acculturated, or "enlightened" Jews (that is, Maskilim in the general sense of the term rather than in the particular Habad sense invoked above). Yet this was a significant change relative to the 1879 session, which was dubbed "the rabbinic commission with no rabbis."³² Expectations were therefore raised both in the Jewish community generally, and among orthodox rabbinic leaders in particular, that they might be able to dominate the next commission, thereby gaining direct access to ministerial officials, and displacing figures such as the influential philanthropist Baron Horace Günzburg, who had previously acted

³⁰ The following report in *Hamelitz*, no. 12, 7 Nov., 1887 / 20 Heshvan, 5648, p. 2478 [1], suggests that even at this late date Rashab was almost as ambivalent as Raza about these expectations, though perhaps for different reasons. This contribution is part of a polemical exchange about the ongoing intrigue relating to the Koler Habad fund, which deserves study in its own right, but the particulars of the following excerpt are broadly reflected in other sources too. Of the sons of Maharash we read: "I can testify ... that they have all but entirely thrown off from upon them the title '*admor*' ... before them there are no audiences (*yehidut*) and no supplications (*pidyonot*) ... Only when the hasidim of Lubavitch gather to prostrate themselves at the graves of the *śadikim* there, they sometimes extend themselves to deliver before them hasidic discourses, not garbed as *śadikim*; only as private individuals."

אוכל להעיד ... כי כמעט אשר השליכו מעליהם לגמרי את שם "אדמו"ר" ... ואין לפניהם לא יחידות ולא פדיונות ... רק בהתאסף חסידי ליובאוויטש להשתטח על קברי הצדיקים שמה, יוסיפו לפעמים לדרוש לפניהם דרושי חסידות לא בלבוש הצדיקים רק בתור אנשים פרטיים.

By 1894, however, it seems to have been increasingly recognized that Rashab had now emerged as the new Lubavitcher Rebbe, and that his word now carried weight far beyond the immediate vicinity of Lubavitch. In *Hamelitz*, no. 12, 31 August., 1894 / 29 Av, 5654, p. 4, in the context of local rabbinic politics in Ekaterinoslav, we read that "Lubavitch has removed its veil of mourning and dressed itself in the garb of its splendor, for her rebbe has come to her, a new *admor*, a youngster who has grown up, who has risen to sit upon the throne of his forefathers ..."

הסירה ליובאוויטש את צעיף אלמנותה מעליה ולבשה בגדי תפארתה, כי רבה בא לה, אדמו"ר חדש קטן שהגדיל, שעלה לשבת על כסא אבותיו

For an internal account according to which leading hasidim planned and orchestrated the revitalization of the court in Lubavitch, with Rashab at its center, circa 1890, see Rayatz, IG3, 388-9. A letter written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman Fradkin (famed as the author of *Torat hesed*, 1830-1902), then living in Jerusalem, indicates that by the spring of 1895 the news had arrived in the Holy Land that "all of our fraternity" were once again making pilgrimages to Lubavitch "as before":

יודעיני ... אם כנים הדברים מנסיעות] כל אנ"ש [לשם] כמקדם

See Yehoshua Mondshine (ed.), *Igerot ba'al ha'torat hesed* (Jerusalem, 2001), 28.

³¹ For a detailed overview of the rabbinical commissions convened between 1840 and 1910 see ChaeRan Y. Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis, 2002), 243-79.

³² This formulation appears in the letters by Rashab and Rabbi David Friedman of Pinsk-Karlin (1828-1917) published in *Habezeleth*, no. 22, 10 Dec., 1909 / 27 Kislev, 5670, p. 1: אספת רבנים בלי רבנים

as the exclusive representatives of the Jewish community to the higher echelons of the government.³³

Raza had actually been elected as a regional representative to the 1893 commission, but was not ultimately selected by the ministerial officials.³⁴ This disappointment may well have galvanized Rashab's recognition that a far greater activist effort was needed if the traditional rabbinate was to take the helm of Jewish communal affairs in Tsarist Russia.³⁵ Whether or not this theory is correct, Rashab quickly emerged as the most energetic and visible hasidic leader in the Russian Empire, working in close cooperation with the leading non-hasidic rabbis of the era, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Maisel of Lodz (1821-1912), Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk (1853-1918), and Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski of Vilna (1863-1940).³⁶ When the next commission was convened, in 1910, Rashab would stand out as the dominant figure.³⁷ He would also stand out as the most fierce traditionalist, arguing that religious matters should be regulated only to satisfy religious standards, rather than to satisfy any externally imposed civic or Maskilic concerns.³⁸

Bearing this concern with the rabbinate in mind, it is also noteworthy that Rashab's first open foray onto the national stage seems to have been in 1895, when—as Ilia Lurie has documented—he successfully impeded, and ultimately thwarted, Günzburg's plan to establish a “reformist” rabbinical school in St. Petersburg.³⁹ It is also noteworthy that in 1897 Rashab would found an educational institution of his own, the Tomchei Temimim

³³ Freeze, *Jewish Marriage*, 251. On Günzburg (sometimes written as Gintsburg or Guenzburg), his family, and their activist role in Jewish concerns during this period, see John Klier, “Gintsburg Family,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gintsburg_Family> (accessed December 8, 2020).

³⁴ See the report in *Hazefirah* (yr. 20, no. 155), 25 July, 1893 / 12 Av, 5653, p. 632 [2]; Lurie, *Milhamot lyubaviš*, 37-8. Raza would continue to be active in future efforts to represent Jewish concerns to the government, working in concert with his younger brother despite some apparent areas of ideological difference between them. (Raza is sometimes portrayed as being more open to Zionism and the modernization of Jewish education.) In 1904 he was elected to an advisory committee on Jewish affairs, but Günzburg, who chaired the committee, did not issue him an invitation. Rashab understood this as a clear attempt to cut people close to him out of the conversation. See the relevant discussion and citations in Lurie, *ibid.*, 284-7.

³⁵ For one example Rashab's expression of disappointment over decisions agreed to at the 1893 commission see Lurie, *Milhamot lyubaviš*, 211-2.

³⁶ These personalities, and others, are constantly mentioned throughout the six volumes of *Igrot Kodesh ... Muharasha*”b. I mention these three in particular as they partnered with Rashab at a very early stage. See Brawer, “Resistance and Response to Change,” 56.

³⁷ Lurie, *Milhamot lyubaviš*, 309-340; Yehoshua Mondshine, “Asifat harabanim berusya beshnat 5670 - 1910,” *Shturem.net*, <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?section=blog_new&article_id=24> (accessed Dec. 8, 2020) from *Kfar Chabad Magazine*; Levine, *Toldot ḥabad berusya hašarit*, 296–301.

³⁸ Lurie, *ibid.* Freeze, *Jewish Marriage*, 261-2. Also see Vladimir Levin, “Orthodox Jewry and the Russian government: an attempt at rapprochement, 1907-1914,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 39:2 (August 2009): 187-204.

³⁹ See Lurie, *Milhamot lyubaviš*, 207-211. Lurie's account is based both on new archival research together with letters published in Rashab, *Igerot kodesh*, vol. 3, ed. Shalom DovBer Levine (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1986), pages 41-48. Based on the archival documentation Lurie disagrees with Levine about the dating of these letters. See Lurie, *ibid.*, 192n225.

yeshivah, which has been well recognized in recent scholarship as a central plank in what Brawer termed Rashab's program of "resistance and response to change," or in Lurie's formulation, his "fight for the image of the Jewish society in czarist Russia."⁴⁰ It should not escape us that it was precisely through change that Rashab set out to resist the forces of change, using the same kinds of institutional and political tools that leading Maskilim were seeking to deploy against tradition in order to engineer a renaissance of tradition. Indeed, ChaeRan Y. Freeze has framed this orthodox reassertion of self-representation as part of a broader democratic turn; as the autocracy faltered, "virtually every group in the Russian Empire ... began to organize, articulate their demands, and establish their own recognized leadership."⁴¹

The establishment of Tomchei Temimim, Brawer notes, additionally reflects the example set by the *musar* yeshivahs, especially Slobodka, whose founders similarly sought to counter the secularising trends of Haskalah and Zionism. Tomchei Temimim's curriculum was not designed simply to turn its students into competent Talmudists and knowledgeable rabbis, but also to entrench within them deep spiritual sensibility and devotional commitment. To that end, four hours—a full third of the daily schedule—were devoted to the study of Hasidic teachings. Slobodka, by comparison, dedicated only half an hour to the daily study of *musar* (Jewish ethics). Tomchei Temimim also distinguished itself by integrating contemplative prayer and *farbrengens* into the curriculum, and its faculty structure differed from all other traditional *yeshivot* in that its most prestigious members were hasidic mentors, *mashpi'im*, rather than Talmud instructors.⁴² In what may be one of its most radical educational interventions, Tomchei Temimim's preparatory *hadarim* took the additional step of introducing R. Shneur Zalman of Liady's *Tanya* to students as young as eight or nine.⁴³

Taken together, these innovations constitute nothing less than an educational revolution. But in the present context—where we are primarily concerned with Rashab's thought, and only secondarily with his activism—there is yet one more factor to consider: From

⁴⁰ Brawer, "Resistance and Response to Change," esp. Part 3, "Rashab and the Establishment of Tomkhei Tmimim." (Rather than transliterating the Hebrew name of this institution, as Brawer does, I have chosen to use the contemporary spelling used both by the institution itself and by relevant Habad publications. Also see Lurie, *Milhamot lyubaviš*, esp. pages 66-69.) Lurie, "Lyubaviš umilhamotehah," as cited above, note 1.

⁴¹ Freeze, *Jewish Marriage*, 244.

⁴² All of these aspects are documented in detail by Brawer. Also see Loewenthal, "The Thickening of the Light," 19*-24*.

⁴³ See Chitrik, *Reshimot devarim*, 335n32.

the autumn of 1898 onward Rashab would engage the senior students of his yeshivah as the chief audience for his formal discourses.⁴⁴

Hillel Zeitlin was certainly correct to characterize Rashab as “a conservative through and through.”⁴⁵ But Zeitlin further argued that “from the inner-psychological perspective” (פונ'ם אינערליך-פסחיאליגישען שטאנדפונקט) Rashab’s integrity and independence should make him a figure of fascination even to those who generally “love to praise a Torah sage or a *ṣadik*” only “when they find one” who “could bend to the spirit of the time.”⁴⁶ Taking this perspective one step further, our interest is drawn to the ways in which Rashab held conservative traditionalism and radical change together. We have already seen that these contrasts are at play in Rashab’s work as a builder of institutions and as a rabbinic activist, but our task here is to show that they are also at play in his contributions to Habad’s intellectual tradition, and—in particular—in his theorizations of *ṣimṣum* and its purpose. Some might suppose that Rashab used innovative tools only as pragmatic means by which to counter change—that is, in the service of reversion—but attentiveness to his formal teachings will yield a more nuanced conception.

Part 2 - *Malkhut* as the Crucible of Essentiality in Rashab’s Nascent Theological Project

Rashab’s emergence as a leader and institution builder in the public sphere was matched by a new blossoming of his intellectual ruminations and of their expression in literary productivity. Between 1882 and 1897 he had for the most part delivered and written self-contained discourses. Occasionally he had also extended the elaboration of a single theme over the course of two or three discourses. But in 1897 he began composing and delivering more extensive serializations of discourses (*hemshekhim*)—in the style pioneered by his father—with a single topic now being subjected to more searching and sustained analysis.⁴⁷

Rashab’s first *hemshekh* of this sort was delivered over the traditional week of celebrations that followed the marriage of his only son, the aforementioned Rayatz. It is not coincidental that these celebrations also occasioned the announcement of the establishment of the yeshivah that would later be named Tomchei Temimim. Rayatz,

⁴⁴ Loewenthal, “The Thickening of the Light,”; Leigh, “Poststructuralism,” 42-45

⁴⁵ Hillel Zeitlin, “Einer fun di letste: etlikhe verter vegen der histalkus funimlubavitcher rebbi za”1,” *Der moment*, Warsaw, August 13, 1920, pg. 4: א קאנסערוואטאר דורך און דורך

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*:

האבען ליעב צו לויבען א גאון אדער א צדיק ... ווען זיי געפינען איין ... געקאנט געהן "לפי רוח הזמן"

⁴⁷ On Maharash’s innovative development of the *hemshekh* see above, 2:3.

though only seventeen years old, was appointed executive director (*menahel*), responsible for overseeing the faculty and the progress of individual students.⁴⁸ It is also noteworthy, that when Rashab subsequently delivered his weekly discourses in the study hall of the Yeshiva, he would address himself to his son who would be seated facing him.⁴⁹ From the outset, Rashab's nascent institutional and intellectual project is thus bound up with a foreshadowing of succession, and with the associated questions of continuity and change.⁵⁰

The *hemshekh* associated with Rayatz's wedding was subsequently copied, disseminated, and ultimately published under the title *Samah tesamah*, after its opening phrase, which is taken from one of the seven blessings traditionally recited in celebration of a marriage: "Rejoice, rejoice, loving companions ..."⁵¹ Running over one hundred pages in its published form, the physical consummation of the union of bride and groom is used as a prism through which to explore the devotional and divine joy elicited through the embodied relationship with G-d enacted through ritual observance, which far exceeds the joy of a devotional relationship that is merely spiritual or cerebral. Rashab's concern with questions about revelation and concealment, inwardness and articulation, reversion and innovation—together with the centrality of *šimšum* in the negotiation of such questions—is already very evident here.⁵² The same concerns are likewise evident in two additional works completed over the course of the next eighteen months, *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu* and the aforementioned *Hemshekh ranat*, which was the subject of Leigh's study.⁵³

What is perhaps most striking about *Samah tesamah* and *Ranat* is the emergence of a particular concern with the last of the ten sephirot, namely *malkhut*. As discussed above, in the second part of *Tanya*, Rashaz wrote that "the faculty of His *malkhut* ... is the faculty of *šimšum* and concealment," and enshrined it as the fulcrum of creative union with the world.⁵⁴ In both of these texts Rashab especially emphasizes the associations of

⁴⁸ Brawer, "Resistance and Response to Change," 203 and 271-5; Lurie, *Milhamot lyubavis*, 65-6.

⁴⁹ Raphael Nachman Kahn, *Liyubavitsh vehayaleha* (Brooklyn, NY: Empire Press, 1983), 23n3: "the entire time of the delivery of the discourse ... they did not turn away their eyes from one another" (כל זמן אמירתו ... לא הסירו העינים זה מזה). Also see the account in Naḥum Shamaryahu Sassonkin, *Zikhronotai*, ed. N. Z. Gottlieb (Jerusalem: 1988), 49. For a general discussion of the place of Rashab's discourses in the curriculum see Brawer, "Resistance and Response to Change," 222-5; Loewenthal, "The Thickening of the Light."

⁵⁰ On this point see Brawer, *ibid.*, 275n715.

⁵¹ See *Kallah rabbati* 1:1; Rashab, *Ma'amar samah tesamah* — 5657 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1965).

⁵² See *Samah tesamah*, esp., 10-31, 42-5, 52-6, 68-81.

⁵³ Rashab, *Hagahot ledibur hamathil patah eliyahu* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1981). (Note: the pagination of this edition was preserved in subsequent editions as well.) *Idem.*, *Sefer hama'amarim* — 5659 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1976), 1-114. A new edition appeared in 2011 but preserves the original pagination. Henceforth this text is referred to as *Ranat*.

⁵⁴ Rashaz, T2:7, 82a-b: מדת מלכותו ... היא מדת הצמצום וההסתרה

malkhut with motherhood and the “feminine” facet of divine manifestation, which in “birthing” the created cosmos does not simply continue the evolutionary chain of revelation embodied by the other sephirot, but rather creates something new. What sets apart the embodied union of bride and groom—rather than more cerebral or spiritual aspects of human relationships—is that their love and joy is expressed with such uninhibited potency that it leads to conception, and ultimately to the gestation and birth of a new person.⁵⁵ The associations both with motherhood and language are also linked to a particularly striking image of *malkhut*, and the entire created cosmos, as the cup from which G-d drinks. The cup does not merely receive what is poured into it, but actually becomes the medium via which G-d receives in turn.⁵⁶ Like a teacher who receives new insight through pedagogic speech, G-d too is also somehow enhanced through the unique relational dynamic of *malkhut*.⁵⁷

The contrast between Maharash’s earlier attentiveness to the significance of *ḥokhmah*, as discussed in the previous chapter, and Rashab’s attentiveness to the significance of *malkhut* is noteworthy. In *Hemshekh vekakhah* Maharash sharply excavated a conception according to which *ḥokhmah* instantiates a finite testimony of pre-*ṣimṣum* infinitude. Furthermore, he cast the entirety of Judaism’s spiritual and religious trajectory as a path through which *ḥokhmah*’s instantiation of primal “nothingness” could be drawn into the entire cosmos, phenomenologically rendering the created “something” transparent to the divine “nothing.”⁵⁸ Maharash’s preoccupation with *ḥokhmah* reveals that he is interested in what can be understood as a reversal of the concealment enacted by *ṣimṣum*, such that the pre-*ṣimṣum* infinitude can be perceived to be traced in the finite reality of creation.⁵⁹ Rashab’s contrasting preoccupation with *malkhut* highlights his interest in the finite being of the created cosmos as a crucible in which an entirely new form of revelation is forged, as the utterance that generates a new flow of essential and exponential insight, as the womb from which a new child is birthed.⁶⁰

See the relevant discussion above, 1:2.

⁵⁵ *Samah tesamah*, 103, 105-7; *Ranat*, 96-8, 113. Also see Leigh, “Poststructuralism,” 72-3, 87-8, 147, and 173-4. Cf. Shaul Magid, “Origin and Overcoming,” 174: “*Zimzum* is thus a simultaneous expression of self-alienation and love, viewed as G-d’s exile into Himself to give birth to His own finitude.”

⁵⁶ *Ranat*, 17. On *malkhut* as the cup of G-d, here and in earlier sources, see Leigh, “Poststructuralism,” 67-74 (esp. note 193) and 160-1.

⁵⁷ *Ranat*, 4. See Leigh, “Poststructuralism,” 76-8. On the principle of reciprocity in Habad thought—including between humankind and G-d, and with particular reference to *malkhut*—see Wexler et. al., *Social Vision*, Chapter 4, esp. 132-4.

⁵⁸ See the relevant discussions above, Chapter 2.

⁵⁹ For some relevant comments on the correspondence and difference between *ḥokhmah* and *malkhut* see *Vekakhah*, 48 and 50-1.

⁶⁰ Cf. Magid, “Origin and Overcoming,” 180: “The cosmic child is the carrier of this new consciousness, bringing new divinity into the world.”

The following excerpt, from the penultimate discourse in *Ranat*, encapsulates Rashab's theorization of the particular uniqueness and pivotal purpose of *malkhut*:

It was explained above that there are two aspects in the *or eyn sof* that precedes the *šimšum*: [1] The diffusion of the light and the essence of the light, and [2] transcending this the essence of the luminary, which is the infinite, the true being etc. ... The root of *malkhut* is the infinite, His being and essence, the essence of the luminary etc. ... and the import of “the history of heaven and earth” (Genesis 2, 4) is that there shall be the revelation of *malkhut* as it is in its root, that [the state of] “a woman of valor is the crown of her husband” (Proverbs 12, 4) shall be attained, that the revelation of the essence shall be drawn below, in the worlds, from the pinnacle of all stations to the nadir of all stations ... transcending measure and limitation etc.⁶¹

נת"ל שיש ב' בחי' באור א"ס שלפני הצמצום, בחי' התפשטות האור ועצם האור, ולמעלה מזה בחי' עצמות המאור שהוא בחי' א"ס יש אמיתי כו' ... שרש המל' הוא בבחי' א"ס עצומ"ה בחי' עצמות המאור כו' ... וענין תולדות השמים והארץ הוא, שיהי' גילוי בחי' המלכות כמו שהיא בשרשה בא"ס עצומ"ה, ולהיות אחעט"ב, שיומשך גילוי בחי' העצמות למטה בעולמות מרוכ"ד עד סוכ"ד ... למעלה מבחי' מדה וגבול כו'.

As described here, *malkhut* is the crucible of infinite creativity because it is an instantiation of the essential being of G-d that transcends the luminous revelation of *or eyn sof* that precedes the *šimšum*. Moreover, when the transcendent root of *malkhut* is revealed, the entire hierarchy of the cosmos is inverted, such that the previously unarticulated pinnacle of all stations is drawn forth and articulated in the nadir of all stations. Other concepts mentioned or alluded to in this passage—such as the distinct strata of luminous diffusion and essentiality prior to the *šimšum*, as well as the problematic question of how the essence that transcends revelation can be revealed—will be returned to below. For now, however, it is sufficient to note that for Rashab *malkhut* is the crucible of overflowing essentiality.⁶²

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that these discourses also include an autobiographical subtext. As noted, *Samah tesamah* was not only delivered in connection with the wedding of Rashab's only son, but also in connection with Rashab's announcement that he would no longer limit himself to cerebral introspection or spiritual

⁶¹ *Ranat*, 97. For a discussion that focuses on the continuation of this text at the outset of the final discourse in this *hemshekh*, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 210-213.

⁶² On this point, and on its intertwinement with the association of *malkhut* with the feminine, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 203-209. Wolfson is absolutely correct to emphasize that the facility of *malkhut* “to function like a male, for the recipient to become the donor, derives from her being female quintessentially, that is, she brims over when she becomes a vessel unto herself—no longer a vessel to receive, but a vessel to overflow.”

devotion, but would take the activist step of establishing an educational institution. As noted by Leigh, *Ranat*'s theorization of *malkhut* does not simply emphasize linguistic articulation generally, but specifically the enriching and creative dynamic of communication in an educational context.⁶³ Rashab's embrace of the leadership role after an interim of more than a decade since his father's passing seems to reflect a realization that—despite his personal inclination to work only “with himself and within himself”—individuals realize their most essential capacity and telos specifically through engaging with others and through activist work on a communal scale. His discourses show that he understood this to be true for G-d just as it is seen to be true for human beings. In drawing such lines of comparison he sometimes uses the phrase “as is seen tangibly” (כנראה בחוש), which underscores the degree to which his theorizations are rooted in a deep phenomenological sensitivity to his own experience.⁶⁴

In 1929, nearly a full decade after the Rashab's passing, Rayatz noted that “those who study hasidic literature, and have some understanding of it, see a certain change in the discourses of the years 1897 to 1900—both with regards to the essential topics of the discourses and also in the manner of the explanation and the reasoning—from one year to the next.”⁶⁵ The nature of this “change,” especially from a methodological perspective, can further be assessed when we consider the third work from this period, *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu*.

This text is especially noteworthy for three reasons. First, it very explicitly continues the literary project begun by Maharash to update the oral discourses of Rashaz that were published by the Şemaḥ Şedek in *Torah or* (Kopust, 1836) with additional glosses (*hagahot*) that provide further elucidation and contextualization, following the model found in *Torah or*'s sequel, *Likutei torah* (Zhytomyr, 1848). As discussed at the end of the previous chapter, Maharash's posthumous publication—*Likutei torah misefer bereishit* (Vilna, 1884)—covered the first three sections (*parshiyot*) of *Torah or on bereishit*. Rashab's *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu* picks up where Maharash left off, presenting the first discourse on the next *parshah* with the interpolation of extensive glosses. The conscious situatedness of this project as a continuation of the literary tradition of his father and grandfather is explicit in Rashab's reference to earlier and later discourses in

⁶³ Leigh, “Poststructuralism,” esp. 73, and 83-4.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Ranat*, 40 [54]:

כנראה בחוש דבעת שנופל לו ההשכלה חדשה מאיר אצלו דקות האור באין ערוך כלל לגבי הגילוי שאח"כ בבינה כו'

⁶⁵ Rayatz, *Likutei diburim II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2009), 298a-b [595-6]:

די וואס לערנען חסידות און האבן אין דעם א פארשטענדעניש, זעהען אין דעם טאטנס מאמרים פון די יאהרן תרנ"ה—נט, תר"ס, א געוויסן אינטערשייד, הן אין די עצם ענינים פון די מאמרים און הן אין דעם אופן פון די ביאורים און הסברים, פון יאהר צו יאהר.

Torah or with the terms *le'eil* (“above”) and *lehalan* (“below”).⁶⁶ Rashab is said to have begun this project circa 1892, but soon left it aside. After completing it in 1898, he did not continue the project with subsequent discourses from *Torah or*.⁶⁷

This brings us to a second reason why *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu* is worthy of note, namely its distinction from the rest of Rashab’s corpus. Aside from this example, Rashab generally did not use preexisting Habad texts as a fundamental basis for his work. While his discourses—in ways both explicit and implicit—certainly engage and build on the preexisting corpus, they generally exhibit his own lucid style; only occasionally does he use direct excerpts of earlier texts as a fundamental basis for the construction of his discourses. This departs from the canon centric method of Maharash—described in the previous chapter—wherein bold new conceptions and literary edifices were primarily sculpted through the careful curation, modification, and embellishment of texts penned by his predecessors. On the other hand, we have already noted that Rashab embraced Maharash’s innovative method of serializing his discourses. *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu*—which was explicitly written as a commentary to a preexisting text, and which was never divided into a serialization of discourses—is accordingly a striking exception to the rule. Rashab’s *hagahot* nevertheless display the expansive lucidity characteristic of his other writings.

The third reason why this text deserves our attention is that Rashab’s original discourse in *Torah or* focuses most centrally on the particular nature and significance of the primal *šimšum*. Rashab’s glosses to this discourse accordingly provide us with a particularly clear example of the attentiveness with which he read and interpreted the canonical Habad sources on *šimšum*. Especially fundamental is his theorization, in this context, of what it means to reveal the essence that transcends revelation, a question that we find raised in the very earliest of his extant discourses, and which would emerge as central to his theological project.⁶⁸

The three texts briefly discussed thus far should rightly be seen as marking the nascent beginning of a larger theological project that would ultimately be given much fuller and more comprehensive expression in a fourth text, a serialization of sixty discourses known

⁶⁶ Notably, the term *le'eil* is also used in reference to Maharash’s glosses as published in *Likutei torah misefer bereishit*. See *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu*, 21.

⁶⁷ On the writing and dissemination of this text see the publisher’s preface to *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu*.

⁶⁸ Rashab, *Sefer hama'amarim 5643-5644-5645* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2011), 4. Note that reference is explicitly made to Rashab’s “Patah eliyahu:”

מ"ש בתו"א פ' וירא בד"ה פתח אלי ואדרבה המאור הוא בהתגלות עכ"ל ... ההתגלות הוא באופן אחר ולא שהוא גילוי ממש כמובן
For a similar example of his early engagement with this text, see Rashab *Igerot kodesh*, vol. 1, ed. Shalom DovBer Levine (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1986), 126. On Rashab’s much fuller development of the embryonic thought encapsulated here, see below, Part 4.

as *Yom tov shel rosh hashanah taf reish samekhevav*, or simply as *Samekh vav*.⁶⁹ Before turning to this text, which will be the main focus of our discussion of *šimšum* in Rashab's thought, we should take note of three "treatises" (*kuntresim*) that he wrote specifically for the students of the yeshivah. These were never delivered as oral discourses, but were written and distributed to the students in manuscript copies between the years 1899 and 1910: 1) *Kuntras hatefillah*, a guide to the practice of prayer. 2) *Kuntras eš haḥayim*, which explained the ideological basis upon which the yeshivah and its curriculum were established. 3) *Kuntras ha'avodah*, a guide to the disciplined path of becoming a servant of G-d.⁷⁰ Broadly speaking, the underlying themes of all three of these *kuntresim* are also woven into the fabric of *Samekh vav*, and are thereby integrated into the large sweep of Rashab's theological project.

Part 3 - The Purpose of Existence and the Primordial *Šimšum*

As indicated by its title, the first instalment of *Samekh vav* was delivered on the second night of Rosh Hashanah in the year 5666 (1905). It would be more than two years before it would come to a conclusion. The *hemshekh* opens with a phenomenological discussion of the devotional and mystical significance of the commandment to blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, but quickly segues into a direct relitigation of a fundamental philosophical question: What is the purpose of existence? The central concern of this

⁶⁹ Rashab, *Yom tov shel rosh hashanah taf reish samekh vav* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1971). Several volumes of oral discourses delivered in the years between the completion of *Ranat* and the initiation of *Samekh vav* in the autumn of 1905 have been published as part of the chronological series of Rashab's *Sefer hama'amarim*. One of the most oft remarked on episodes in Rashab's life also occurred during these intervening years, namely his meeting with Sigmund Freud early in 1903. Despite the attention this meeting has received in academic literature, and despite the clear psychological dimensions of Rashab's oeuvre, there is little reason to believe that this encounter was very consequential. As will be made clear below, many of the key themes and concepts developed in *Samekh vav* are already developed in nascent form in the three earlier works already described. For relevant discussions, whose value cannot be properly discussed within the limits of the current study, see Stanley Schneider and Joseph H. Berke, "Sigmund Freud and the Lubavitcher Rebbe," *Psychoanalytic Review* 87:1 (Feb 2000): 39-59; Maya Balakirsky Katz, "An Occupational Neurosis: A Psychoanalytic Case History Of a Rabbi," *AJS Review* 34:1 (April 2010): 1-31; ideam., "A Rabbi, a Priest, and a Psychoanalyst: Religion in the Early Psychoanalytic Case History," *Contemporary Jewry* 31:1 (April 2011): 3-24; Joseph H. Berke, *The Hidden Freud: His Hassidic Roots* (London: Karnac Books, 2015), esp. chaps. 1-2. Also important is the discussion in Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 145-7, and especially his comment that Rashab's oeuvre, including "the vast essay 'Yom Tov of Rosh Ha-Shana' ... has not been systematically analyzed in existing scholarship," yet "a well-founded decision on the impact of Freud's methods on Habad depends on such analysis."

⁷⁰ All three were published in the mid 1940s by Kehot together with additional material that provides insight into their original context and purpose. Also see the relevant discussion in Rayatz, *Likutei diburim II*, 299a-b [597-598]. Rashab also penned two additional *kuntresim*: On *Kuntras hiḥolšu* see Eli Rubin, "Purging Divisiveness, Embracing Difference: Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn's manifesto against self-righteousness in interpersonal discourse," *Chabad.org*, <chabad.org/3800391> (accessed August 12, 2021). On *Kuntras umayan* see Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *Sofrim veseform, III* (Tel Aviv: Abraham Zion Publishing House, 1959), 252-256.

hemshekh is, in Rashab's own words, "the ultimate purpose of the creation of the worlds and the ultimate intent for which the soul descends into the body."⁷¹

This question is certainly not new, and indeed it is directly engaged in many earlier Habad texts. But never before did it so explicitly provide the ground for such a relentless, broad, and penetrating reformulation of Jewish thought. By way of contextualization and comparison, *Tanya*—Rashaz's foundational work of Habad thought—addresses a question that is narrower and less dramatic, if no less difficult: How can imperfect human beings (albeit possessed of a divine soul) both acknowledge their imperfections and also motivate themselves to study G-d's Torah and fulfill G-d's commandments as best as they can?⁷² The question of purpose is not raised till chapter 35, and there it is first expressed more narrowly as an inquiry into "the ultimate purpose of the creation of the intermediate people (*beinonim*) ... Why did their souls descend into this world to toil for naught, heaven forbid, to battle all their days with the [evil] inclination and be incapable of victory?"⁷³ Only in chapters 36 and 37 does he discuss "the ultimate purpose of the creation of this world."⁷⁴ In *Samekh vav*, by contrast, this teleological concern is the starting point.

This speaks to a broader distinction in terms of the central concerns that animate these two texts: *Tanya* is primarily concerned with the application of cognitive techniques to motivate and inspire a consistent behavioural alignment with divine wisdom and desire as expressed in the Torah and its commandments.⁷⁵ *Samekh vav* is primarily concerned with endowing such behavioural alignment with the kind of devotional luminosity that will fully realize the ultimate purpose of existence. From the very outset, Rashab examines the question of existential purpose through the prism of the primal cosmological event demarcated in earlier Kabbalistic and Hasidic discourse as *šimšum*. As described in classical Lurianic texts, "the worlds were created via the primordial withdrawal (*šimšum*)

⁷¹ *Samekh vav*, 3: תכלית בריאת והתהוות העולמות ותכלית הכוונה בירידת הנשמה בגוף

On this point see Dovid Olidort, "Hemshekh yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666: leregel hahoša' ah haḥadashah shel hasefer beyamim elu," *Ma'ayanotekha lemaḥshevet ḥabad* 27 (Kislev 5771): 18.

⁷² Rashaz, T1:1, 5a. For a similar framing of the main concern of *Tanya*, see Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 49: "More within the purview of the intended readership, R. Shneur Zalman gives advice and guidance in spiritual service to the man who is not yet a *Zaddik* yet might, nonetheless, have attained an exalted level of spiritual attainment ... Guidance is also given to one who is far from having reached this degree of self-mastery ..." For a more comprehensive overview see Immanuel Etkes, *Ba'al hatanya* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 2012), 143-187. For a more general overview of this work, which offers a rather different framing, see Ariel Mayse, "The Sacred Writ of Hasidism: The Tanya and the Spiritual Vision of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady," in *Books of the People: Revisiting Classic Works of Jewish Thought*, ed. Stuart W. Halpern (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017), 109-156.

⁷³ Rashaz, T1:35, 43b-44a. See Etkes, *ibid.*, 169.

⁷⁴ Rashaz, T1:36-37, 45b-49b. See Etkes, *ibid.*, 170.

⁷⁵ See Etkes, *ibid.*, 143-187.

in the infinite light” which left a “hollow space,” empty of divine illumination, within which the cosmos could be “emanated, created, formed and made.”⁷⁶ Prior to the primordial *šimšum*, it is understood, the infinite assertion of divine manifestation precluded the possibility of any sort of creation; *šimšum* makes the existence of differentiated and otherly beings possible. Rashab adds that:

The ultimate purpose of the creation of the worlds, and the ultimate intent for which the soul descends into the body, is in order to elicit the revelation of the infinite light in the worlds via the Torah and the commandments ... that is, to elicit additional luminosity ... from the infinite light that precedes the *šimšum*, to the degree that in the [messianic] future the revelation of the infinite light will be in the hollow space (*makom haḥalal*) as it was prior to the *šimšum*.⁷⁷

תכלית בריאת והתהוות העולמות ותכלית הכוונה בירידת הנשמה בגוף הוא בכדי להמשיך גילוי אוא"ס בעולמות ע"י תומ"צ ... היינו להמשיך תוס' אורות ... מאוא"ס שלפני הצמצום, עד שלעתיד יהי גילוי אוא"ס במקום החלל כמו שהי' קודם הצמצום כו'.

Rashab points to the first chapter of the first section of R. Naftali Bakrakh’s *Emek hamelekh* (Amsterdam, 1648) as a source for this idea, yet the formulation found there is somewhat different. R. Bakrakh writes that through Torah study and *mišvah* observance “the hollow of the infinite will revert (*yaḥzor*) to its primordial state, and will be entirely sacred.”⁷⁸ Rashab, crucially, does not speak merely of reversion, but rather of the elicitation of “additional luminosity.” As we shall see below, this term, (*tosefet or*), might better be translated as “hyperabundant luminosity,” for it surpasses even the pre-*šimšum* luminosity of the *or eyn sof*. As is often the case in the Habad corpus, important elements of Rashab’s paraphrase of *Emek hamelekh* can be traced back to several discourses transcribed from the mouth of Rashaz,⁷⁹ and one of the closest antecedents to this

⁷⁶ See *Etš ḥayim* (Koreš, 1782), 1:2; Naftali Hertz Bakrakh, *Emek hamelekh* (Amsterdam, 1648), Sha’ar sha’ashu’ai hamelekh, chapter 1 (folios 1a-1d). Also see the relevant discussion in the introduction to the present study.

⁷⁷ Rashab, *Samekh vav*, 3-4. Other aspects of this passage are discussed in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 78.

⁷⁸ Rabbi Naftali Hertz Bakrakh, *Emek hamelekh*, folio 1b: חלול של אין סוף יחזור לקדמותו ויהיה כולו קודש. On this work, its author, and its influence, see Jonathan Garb, *A History*, 83-85, and 89. With particular reference to the influence on Habad, see Ariel Roth, “Hashpa’at ‘emek hamelekh’.”

⁷⁹ See the relevant discussion in Rashaz, *MAHAZ 5570* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1981), 168-9. On the various manuscript versions of this discourse see *ibid.*, 290, note 36. Briefer encapsulations of the idea can be found in *idem.*, *LT bamidbar*, 22b: “and he settled them in the Garden of Eden to work it, and to elicit additional light ...” and *LT devarim*, 70c. The latter text is related to the more extensive discussion found in the first source cited in this note, both of them being elaborations appended to a single discourse delivered by Rashaz circa 1810. This briefer articulation directly references Rabbi Natan Shapiro’s introduction to *Peri etš ḥayim* (Koreš, 1782). The discussion there does not engage *šimšum* explicitly, but may nevertheless be aligned with the first of the two conceptions of “additional luminosity” elaborated by Rashab and described below.

discussion can be found in one of the earliest discourses by Rashab's father, Maharash.⁸⁰ Yet earlier Habad sources do not generally relate the phrase *tosefet or to šimšum*.⁸¹ Rashab, however, is the first to subject the distinct intimations of this formulation to sustained scrutiny, erecting upon its foundation a systematic existential and religious teleology that is driven not by a nostalgic desire to return being to the primordial state, but primarily by a quest for the elicitation of something more, indeed for something that is fundamentally unprecedented.⁸²

In most of its earlier invocations, the term “additional luminosity” may simply be understood to mean a degree of luminosity that exceeds the bounds of the cosmos, and which is somehow more directly bound up with the essence of divine being. Divine light is generally understood to flow into the cosmos via the circumscriptions of the *kav*—a constrained “ray” of illumination drawn from the infinite light that precedes the *šimšum*—which emanates, creates, forms and makes the various finite realms of the cosmos within the hollow space left in the aftermath of the *šimšum*. By contrast, Torah study and *mišvah* observance are said to elicit “additional luminosity that has not yet been drawn into the diffusion of the *kav*” from “the pinnacle of the light that is within the essence.”⁸³

In *Samekh vav*, however, Rashab points out that such a conception seems to provide an account of ultimate cosmic and religious purpose that is fundamentally circular, and therefore fundamentally unsatisfactory: If the infinite light initially filled the entirety of the hollow space, why was the space then cleared only to refill it with infinite light drawn forth by Torah study and the observance of *mišvot*? “What is the innovation in this?” he asks, “is it not the case that prior to the *šimšum*, as well, the infinite light filled the entirety of the hollow space?”⁸⁴

Rashab offers two answers to these questions:

1) The self-described “simple” answer is that “initially, when the infinite light filled the entirety of the hollow space, it was not possible for worlds to exist ... however the innovation is that the revelation will be in the worlds.”⁸⁵ On this score, the innovative

⁸⁰ Maharash, *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5626*, 25.

⁸¹ See, for example, Rashaz, *LT shemot*, 2d; Şemaḥ Şedek, *Or hatorah - bereishit, V* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1970), 727b-728a [1454-5]. For an exception to this generalization see the brief discussion in idem., *Or hatorah - bamidbar, II* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1997), 331.

⁸² Notably, Rashab's discussion and citation of *Emek hamelekh* here has a close parallel at the beginning of the last discourse in *Ranat*. See there, 100. One key difference is that the question of whether the purpose of *šimšum* should be construed as a form of reversion or as an innovation is only explicated in *Samekh vav*.

⁸³ Rashaz, *MAHZ 5570*, 169:

מבחי' עילוי האור שבעצמות ... תוס' אור שלא נמשך עדיין בבחי' התפשטות דקו

⁸⁴ *Samekh vav*, 4: מהו ההתחדשות בזה והלא גם קודם הצמצום היה אוא"ס ממלא כל מקום החלל

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:

purpose of Torah and *mišvot* is to “refine” the created cosmos, including this lowest of all worlds, to the point that it shall be a “receptacle” fit to be illuminated by the infinite light that preceded the *šimšum*, even though such radiance initially precluded the very possibility of creation:

Although the light is the same light that filled the hollow place prior to the *šimšum*, nevertheless the innovation herein is that the revelation shall be within the worlds.⁸⁶

הגם שהאור הוא אותו האור שהי' ממלא מקום החלל קודם הצמצום, אמנם ההתחדשות בזה, מה שיהי' הגילוי בעולמות

This first answer upholds the original concept of “reversion,” as formulated in *Emek hamelekh*. No “new” revelation of the divine is elicited as a result of *šimšum* and creation. What is new is that the primordial radiance of the infinite light will no longer preclude the existential possibility of the created realms as it did prior to the *šimšum*. Instead, the created beings will ultimately be so refined and tempered—especially, Rashab emphasizes, through the revelation of the Torah—that they will no longer stand as the sort of opaque and egotistical assertions that must inevitably be obliterated by the disclosure of the infinite light in all its pre-*šimšum* potency. The post-*šimšum* cosmos will be saturated with the pre-*šimšum* radiance and yet remain intact. Notably, this is quite resonant with the *hokhmah*-centric theorization found in Maharash’s *Vekakha*, and discussed above.

2) Rashab’s second answer asserts that Torah and *mišvot* can ultimately elicit “a supernal luminosity that is loftier than the primordial light” that filled the empty space prior to the *šimšum*, namely, “the interiority and the essence of the infinite light.”⁸⁷ This answer rests on a distinction made by Rashaz in his discourse known as “Pataḥ eliyahu”—on which, as noted above, Rashab had penned extensive glosses: The infinite light (*or eyn sof*), according to Rashaz, is not synonymous with the essence and being of G-d, but is rather the primordial revelation emanating from the being and essence of G-d. On this score, G-d’s self should not be equated with the infinite “light” but rather with the “luminary” (*ma’or*) that is the source of that light.⁸⁸ The significance of this distinction will be addressed below, but for now it is sufficient to note that it is the axiomatic basis of

ע"פ פשוט ... תחלה כשהי' אוא"ס ממלא מקום החלל הרי לא הי' אפשר להיות מציאת העולמות ... אמנם ההתחדשות בזה, מה שיהי' הגילוי בעולמות

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 4:

אור עליון שלמעלה מהאור הקודם ... [שיאיר בחי'] פנימיות ועצמות אוא"ס [שלמעלה גם מהאור שהי' ממלא מקום החלל כו']

⁸⁸ Rashaz, *TO*, 14a. Also see the related discussion of this passage above, 1:5, n123.

Rashab's second explanation of the purpose of *ṣimṣum*. As Rashab expresses it towards the end of *Samekh vav*'s first discourse, the clearing away of the primordial revelation of the *or eyn sof* prepares the way that:

specifically via the fulfillment of Torah and *miṣvot* ... shall be elicited a new luminosity, with addition exceeding the principal that was already established according to the cosmic order etc. ... [that is,] the elicitation of new luminosity from the essence of the emanator ...⁸⁹

דוקא ע"י קיום תומ"צ ... דאזי יומשך אור חדש בתוס' מרובה על העיקר שכבר הוסד ע"פ סדר השתלשלות
כו' ... המשכת בחי' אור חדש מעצמות המאציל ...

The cosmic telos is not to achieve a mere reversal of the *ṣimṣum*, nor a mere reiteration of the pre-*ṣimṣum* radiance of *or eyn sof*, but rather the elicitation of a heretofore unprecedented manifestation of divine essentiality. For Rashab, it soon becomes clear, the word “new” is crucial, and the term “new luminosity” (*or ḥadash*)—sometimes with the supplemental emphasis of words such as “*legamrei*,” “*mamash*” or the like—appears at key junctures later in the *hemshekh*.⁹⁰ It is equally clear that the word “essence” (*aṣmut*) is also crucial, and that innovation and essentiality are intrinsically linked.

In Rashab's earlier discussion of the term “additional luminosity,” he similarly explained that it refers to the elicitation of “additional new luminosity from the pinnacle of the light that is within the essence, which transcends the [primordial] diffusion [of infinite light].”⁹¹ Rashab does not explicitly refer to this passage, and it wasn't published until the second half of the 20th century, but it is quite likely that he was at least peripherally aware of it. It should also be noted that this passage comes from quite a late discourse (circa 1810).⁹² An earlier discourse (circa 1806), published in *Torah or* and discussed by Elliot Wolfson, explicitly aligns with the first explanation suggested by Rashab, stating that “the intention in this *ṣimṣum* is in order that afterwards, through the toil of man in this world ... the revelation of *malkhut* of *eyn sof* shall be elicited, as it was prior to its creation.”⁹³ Rashab prefaces this with the clarification that *malkhut* of *eyn sof* is synonymous with *or eyn sof*, and distinct from “His very being and essence” (מהו"ע ממש). Wolfson points out that, per this teleological formulation, “the manifestation at the end

⁸⁹ *Samekh vav*, 8.

⁹⁰ See *Samekh vav*, 336, 337, 348, 351, 354, 356, 359, 391-2.

⁹¹ *MAHZ 5570*, 169: תוס' אור חדש מבחי' עילוי האור שבעצמות שלמעלה מבחי' התפשטות

⁹² This discourse is listed and published among the discourses delivered in 5570, which corresponds to 1809-10, but was apparently delivered in the first month of 5771. See the publisher's notes, *ibid.*, 290n35.

⁹³ *TO*, 39a: והכוונה בצמצום זה הוא כדי שאה"כ ע"י עבודת האדם בעוה"ז ... יומשך להיות גלוי מל' דא"ס כמו קודם שנברא
For the date of this discourse see the publisher's notes at the back of the 1990 edition of *Torah or*, page 322c. For the excerpt and discussion of this passage by Wolfson, see the following note.

will be homologous to the manifestation at the beginning: as the latter was a showing of the light prior to the contraction [*šimšum*], so the former.”⁹⁴ Rashab’s second explanation, however, overcomes this homology and asserts that the manifestation at the end has no precedent at the beginning.

While Rashab’s second explanation of the purpose of *šimšum* has some slight precedent in earlier Habad literature, it was previously both peripheral and undeveloped. Rashab boldly brings it to the center of our attention and expands it into a paradigmatic frame within which to undertake a systematic interrogation of how Torah and *mišvot* elicit “new luminosity from the essence of the emanator,” and not simply from the light that already radiated prior to the *šimšum*. Commenting on earlier Habad texts Wolfson writes that “the sense of futurity insinuated by the leap is expressed ... as the present that is resuscitated each moment as that which is simultaneously ancient and unprecedented.”⁹⁵ Yet Rashab explicitly pushes beyond the circular constraints of this conception. In *Samekh vav* the sense of futurity insinuated by the leap of *šimšum* is not merely the resuscitation of metacosmic primordality within the cosmos, but rather the utterly original elicitation of an unprecedented revelation from the essence that is otherwise undisclosed and undisclosable.

In making this point, I do not take issue with Wolfson’s larger claim about the “crucial and enduring” degree to which such circularity remains a fundamental facet of Habad’s messianic hope for “a future that is the retrieval of a past that has yet to happen.”⁹⁶

Ultimately, it is clear that this holds true for Rashab as well, but he stretches the sense in which the future is both “past” and “yet to happen” to a new point of acuity, according to which the “past” is the as yet unarticulated essence, rather than the primordial radiance of the essence. To retrieve and realize a yet unrealized “past” of this sort is to overcome the bounds of circularity rather than to remain within them. This is the point at which the dynamic of reversion gives way to innovation.

Rashab’s notion of “new luminosity” can be further crystallised in light of a conception adduced in Shaul Magid’s much more general discussion of *šimšum* in post-Lurianic Kabbalah. The fulfillment of history, Magid writes, is a “becoming” which is “more perfect than the initial perfection of Being.”⁹⁷ Following Richard Wolin’s reading of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Magid’s analysis preserves the dynamic between

⁹⁴ “Achronic Time,” 80*.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 82*.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Shaul Magid, “Origin and Overcoming,” 169.

reversion and innovation, according to which the innovation is achieved through an unprecedented return to the origin: “In this sense origin constitutes a return which is simultaneously a qualitative leap beyond the original condition of perfection, it’s realization on a higher plane.”⁹⁸ Wolin further argues that Benjamin’s concept of “origin”—which I would align with Rashab’s concept of “essence”—is linked to a “dynamic reading” of the Kabbalistic concept of messianic redemption, according to which “origin is still the goal” of the messianic future, “but not as a fixed image of the past that must be recaptured . . . rather as the fulfillment of a potentiality that lies dormant in origin, the attainment of which simultaneously represents a quantum leap beyond the original point of departure.”⁹⁹

In Magid’s conclusion, however, he construes the retrieval of the origin as an “erasure” of creation, and accordingly as an erasure of *šimšum*. “Israel’s covenantal responsibility,” he writes, is “to undo and thus complete G-d’s work.”¹⁰⁰ It is precisely this conception that Rashab is militating against. For him the origin cannot be retrieved except within and through creation. One way of saying this is that the temporal cycle is actually reversed such that the point of origin, the essence of G-d, lies within the world; only here can the origin be unprecedentedly grasped and retrospectively projected onto the otherwise undisclosed source from whence the *or eyn sof* emanates.¹⁰¹

For Rashab, we have seen, *šimšum* is bound up both with the constraint of language and with the messianic possibility of a “new luminosity.” The significance of this conjunction is thrown into sharp relief when we consider Susan Handelman’s theorization of the place of “Language with a capital L” in the thought of Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas:

Language becomes “autonomous,” and autonomy as the engendering of the ground of one’s own being, as the creation of one’s own origin, is the classical attribute of divinity as self-confined, self-related, autonomous. This drive to recapture the autonomy of origins is part of the pathos of modernism.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 96. Cited in Magid, *ibid.* For Rashab, as we shall see below (Part 5), it might better be said that the unprecedented perfection of Being is realized specifically on a *lower* plane rather than a higher one.

⁹⁹ Wolin, *ibid.*, 38-39.

¹⁰⁰ Magid, “Origin and Overcoming,” 195.

¹⁰¹ This point will be further developed below with particular application to innovation in Torah study.

¹⁰² Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem & Levinas* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 36. In defining “the creation of one’s own origin” as “the classical attribute of divinity” Handelman invokes the Hebrew formulation cited many times by Rashab and his predecessors in precisely this sense: מציאותו מעצמותו. See *Samekh vav*, 431-3, and 464. The locus classicus for this in the Habad corpus is Rashaz, T4:20 (“Iyhu vehiyuhu”). The notion of G-d as “self-confined, self-related” echoes the Maimonidean principle that “G-d

Handelman places this notion of language in the context of secularisation, the desacralization of the Bible by historical and critical scholarship, and the replacement of religion with literature. Remarkably, Rashab is confronting the same sort of challenges to traditional religion with the very same concepts, and yet the effect is to redeem the pathos of modernism from the clutches of secularisation. As we shall see, the drive to engender the autonomous recreation of the origin—indeed, to engender an entirely new elicitation and articulation of the essential ground of Being—is construed by Rashab as a sacred project, the realization of G-d’s original purpose. In this sense we can further appropriate another formulation by Handelman:

History, then, is messianic insofar as it can escape total enclosure within the circles of autonomous “Being.”¹⁰³

For Handelman this means that there are “possibilities in history that can break open the circular and mythical patterns of destruction, fate, and violence.”¹⁰⁴ This is the sort of messianic novelty that *Samekh vav* reckons with. More specifically, there are two central questions that Rashab consistently probes from the beginning of this *hemshekh* to its conclusion: 1) What sort of a phenomenon can rightly be construed as an “entirely new” elicitation, or revelation, of the essence? 2) How is it that Torah study and *mišvah* observance, specifically, can elicit the phenomenological manifestation of such novelty?

Part 4 - Concealment and Revelation, Innovation and Essentiality

In one of *Samekh vav*’s more explicit discussions of the nature of “innovation” Rashab asserts that anything subject to the dynamic of concealment and revelation cannot be construed as fundamentally “new.” The revelation of that which was previously concealed is merely the instantiation of a reversion; the discovery of the concealed manifestation. No “new” manifestation is thereby elicited. Such is the case within the ordinary, hierarchical, relationship between “provider” and “recipient,” which, in the Habad tradition—and in Rashab’s corpus especially—is often exemplified by the relationship between a teacher who provides knowledge and the student who receives knowledge.¹⁰⁵

is the knower, G-d is that which is known, and G-d is the knowledge itself,” discussed in relation to Habad’s theorization of *šimšum* above, in the introduction to this study and in 1:2.

¹⁰³ Handelman, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ On this point see Naftali Loewenthal, “The Sefirot and the Educational Process: A Mystical Model for Understanding the Teacher Student Relationship,” *Chabad.org* <chabad.org/2435694> (accessed August 10, 2021).

As Rashab expresses it:

[In] all forms of transmission from the provider to the recipient, nothing at all new is [received] by the recipient, since this transmission already existed beforehand on the provider's part ...¹⁰⁶

כל בחי' שפע הבאה מן המשפיע אל המקבל אין כל חדש במקבל אחרי שכבר היתה זאת השפע תחלה במשפיע

Rashab contrasts this dynamic of concealment and revelation with the dynamic of innovation that occurs when the essence of the infinite (*ašmut or eyn sof*) is made manifest:

The luminosity that is disclosed from *ašmut or eyn sof*, not by means of concealment and revelation—and that is *ašmut or eyn sof* as it is prior to the primal *šimšum*, transcending the root of the *kav* etc.—is that which is called a fundamentally new luminosity (*or ḥadash me'ikaro*) ... the disclosure of a new luminosity, verily (*or ḥadash mamash*) ...¹⁰⁷

אבל אור הנגלה מבחי' עצמות אוא"ס שלא ע"י בחי' העלם וגילוי, והיינו עצמות אוא"ס כמו שהוא לפני צמצום הראשון, למעלה משרש ומקור הקו כו', הוא הנק' בחי' אור חדש מעיקרו ... גילוי אור חדש ממש

This distinction—between the ordinary dynamic of revelation and concealment, and the new revelation of the essence—can best be unpacked by returning to Rashab's *Hagahot lepataḥ eliyahu*. In “Pataḥ eliyahu,” Rashab made the seminal assertion that the withdrawal or concealment of the primal *šimšum* only pertains to the revelation of G-d (“the infinite light”), but not to the essential self of G-d (“the luminary” or “the Infinite Himself”). “On the contrary,” he declared, “the luminary is revealed” (*hama'or hu behitgalut*).¹⁰⁸ Glossing this deeply enigmatic pronouncement, Rashab writes as follows:

There is a distinction between the concept of “revelation” that is applied to “light” and between the concept of revelation that is applied to “the luminary.” For behold, the very purpose of light is revelation, for this is the entire function of light, that it is drawn and revealed from the luminary. Accordingly, the purpose of revelation in this context is that it should be grasped and comprehended, and that is that it shall radiate internally, [meaning, in a manner] that the recipient can know and feel it, knowing how and what it is. And this pertains to the light, which is in the aspect of revelation [in the ordinary sense of the term] etc ...

¹⁰⁶ *Samekh vav*, 336-7.

¹⁰⁷ *Samekh vav*, 337.

¹⁰⁸ *TO*, 14b:

[במאור שהוא א"ס עצמו לא שייך צמצום ח"ו ולא העלם] ואדרבה המאור הוא בהתגלות [ולכן אפילו תנוקות יודעים שיש שם אלוה מצוי כו' אף שאין בהם השגה ותפיסה איך ומה לפי שאין בהם גילוי האור שמ"מ המאור עצמו הוא נמצא למטה כמו למעלה]

By contrast, the function of the luminary is not to be in the aspect of revelation, for it is not in the realm of revelation at all, for any essence (*eṣem*) does not reveal itself etc. (And nor is the function of concealment relevant to it either, for concealment relates to that which can be revealed, like the light that is the aspect of revelation ... and prior to its revelation is concealed. But the luminary itself (*eṣem hama'or*), its function is not revelation, [and] by extension it cannot be concealed either etc.) And, this being so, the concept of revelation as applied thereto, does not signify that it should become graspable and comprehensible, so that one can know what it is, for it is not in the realm of revelation etc. Rather this concept of revelation is that it is found and reveals itself as it transcends any realm of revelation and any realm of concealment. And this is [the meaning of] “the luminary is revealed,” as he [i.e. Rabbi Shneur Zalman] explains afterward that even infants know etc.¹⁰⁹

יש הפרש בין ענין ההתגלות שנאמר באור ובין ענין ההתגלות שנאמר במאור, דהנה האור הרי ענינו הוא גילוי, דזהו כל ענין האור מה שנמשך ונתגלה מן המאור, וממילא ענין ההתגלות בו הוא להיות נתפס ומושג, והיינו שיאיר בפנימיות שהמקבל ידע וירגיש את הדבר שזהו"ע הגילוי שהדבר מאיר ומתגלה אליו היינו שיוודע ומרגיש אותו ויודע איך ומה הוא וזהו"ע התפיסה שנתפס אצלו, וזה שייך בהאור שהוא בחי' גילוי כו' ... משא"כ המאור אין ענינו להיות בבחי' גילוי שאינו בגדר גילוי כלל, דכל עצם בלתי מתגלה כו' (ואינו שייך בו ענין העלם ג"כ דהעלם שייך בדבר ששייך בו גילוי, וכמו האור שהוא בחי' גילוי ... וקודם שנתגלה ה"ה בהעלם, אבל עצם המאור שאין ענינו גילוי ממילא אינו שייך בו ג"כ העלם כו'), וא"כ ענין ההתגלות בו אין ענינו שיהי' בבחי' תפיסה והשגה לידע מה הוא מאחר שאינו בגדר גילוי כו', כ"א ענין ההתגלות הוא מה שהוא נמצא ומתגלה כמו שהוא למעלה מגדר גילוי וגדר העלם כו', וזהו המאור הוא בהתגלות, וכמו שמבאר אח"כ שאפי' תינוקות יודעים כו'

In the normal sense, according to Rashab, “revelation” refers to the external articulation of something in terms that can be conceptually or phenomenologically comprehended, assimilated and described. By contrast, to speak of the “revelation” of the essence, is not to speak of any sort of external articulation beyond the being of the essence itself. This sort of “revelation” has nothing to do with the ordinary dynamic of concealment and revelation, nor is it about discerning one or another of the attributes that theologians or mystics might ascribe to the deity. This sort of “revelation” transcends all theological constructs. It is rather the disclosure of the unconstructed, unarticulated, and unfathomable essence that is the very ground of all particular phenomena and of all particular constructs. It is this essence—as it stands beyond the dynamic of revelation and

¹⁰⁹ *Hagahot lepatah eliyahu* 5658, 52.

concealment—that Rashaz declared to be readily accessible, and perhaps actually innately intuitive, even to an uneducated child.¹¹⁰

It is with this notion of “revelation” in mind that I have chosen to translate the word *or* in terms like *tosefet or* and *or hadash* as “luminosity” rather than “light.” Rashab does not use these formulations to speak of the sort of “light” that can be “revealed” in the ordinary sense, but is rather speaking of the disclosure of “the luminary itself” (*ešem hama ’or*), as it stands beyond the dynamic of revelation and concealment, as it is “itself.” The word “light” bespeaks external “revelation” in the ordinary sense, as in the case of sunlight that radiates outward from the sun. I have used the word “luminosity” to indicate that the disclosure of the essence remains enfolded within the luminary, like light that is encompassed within the globe of the sun itself, and is therefore utterly unarticulated even as it stands in open view.¹¹¹

Rashab makes this distinction explicit at the beginning of *Samekh vav*’s second discourse:

In the [messianic] future there shall be the elicitation of the essence, verily (*hamshakhat ha’ašmut mamash*) ... And the revelations of the future shall not be the aspect of diffusion and revelations of lights, but rather that the essential hiddenness, verily, shall disclose itself and reveal itself; or that this shall occur by means of ascent, that the souls of Israel shall ascend into the essential hiddenness of the essence of the infinite ... within the aspect of the interiority and essence of the infinite (*penimiyut ve’ašmut eyn sof*) etc.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ My characterization of this sort of manifestation as “unconstructed” is reflected in Wolfson’s discussion of Schelling, where the term “construction” is attached to “the process by which finite and contingent beings evolve from the infinite and necessary essence” (“Achronic Time,” 66*). Relatedly, the sociologist Randall Collins has considered the possibility that mystical techniques of meditation or contemplation might be seen as “socially organized not to construct a transcendental religious meaning, but to strip away the accretion of meanings already constructed ... allowing whatever remains (a transcendental reality?) to come shining through.” Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 378. The parentheses appear in Collins’ text. Applying this in the current context we can regard infants as having direct access to the “revealed” essence precisely because their perceptions have not yet been occluded by the construction of worldly meanings. Also see the relevant discussion of this point in Eli Rubin, “Questions of Love and Truth,” notes 23 and 28.

¹¹¹ Cf. the related formulation and discussion in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Heeding the Law beyond the Law: Transgendering Alterity and the Hypernomian Perimeter of the Ethical,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 14:2 (2020): 219. Wolfson terms the *eyn sof* “a light so incandescent it sheds the garment of light in which it is attired.” With more direct reference to Habad discussions of *ašmut* see idem., *Open Secret*, 100: “Insofar as the essence is defined as an essential concealment, the revelation of that essence must of necessity be a revelation of nothing ...” Elsewhere, Wolfson notes that “insofar as the essence is devoid of all attribution, it is considered to be like nothing but it cannot actually be nothing, since it is everything” (“Achronic Time,” 66*).

¹¹² *Samekh vav*, 10 [14-15]. On the term העולם העצמי in the Habad corpus, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 343n189.

דלעתיד יהי המשכת בחי' העצמות ממש ... והגילויים דלעתיד לא יהי' בחי' התפשטות וגילויי אורות, כ"א שיומשך ויתגלה בחי' העולם העצמי ממש כו', או שיהי' בבחי' עלי', שיתעלו נש"י בבחי' העולם העצמי דעצמות א"ס ... בבחי' פנימיות ועצמות א"ס כו'

Rashab's commentary to Rashaz's statement that "the luminary is revealed," serves not only to illuminate the axiomatic conception of "new luminosity" that is at the heart of *Samekh vav*, but also to highlight a significant point of departure: For Rashaz the essential "revelation" of the luminary is taken as a given, so accessible that "even infants know." In *Samekh vav*, by contrast, this "revelation" is cast as the fundamentally inaccessible object of the ultimate existential quest. It should nevertheless be clear that these two conceptions of the essential luminary—as at once revealed and hidden, accessible and inaccessible—cannot be seen as contradictory. Rather, the uninhibited "revelation" of the essence is a function of its ineffable "hiddenness"; it is precisely because nothing can be known of the essence that even the infant who knows nothing can apprehend its uninhabited presence. The opposite is also true; because the presence of the essence is not subject to any inhibition it consequently has no definitions or parameters by which its "revelation" can be grasped. To say that it is infinitely accessible is to say that it is infinitely inaccessible. As Rashab puts it elsewhere, "all apprehend the essentiality, but no one comprehends it."¹¹³

Indeed, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that it is specifically the infant—whose sensibilities have not been embellished with the more or less sophisticated constructions that are labeled "theology"—who can apprehend that about which nothing can be said. Most of us, however, have been robbed, by what we like to think of as our "worldliness" or "maturity," of such childish innocence; we are desensitized to the ineffable intuitions of the infant. As William James once put it, "If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits."¹¹⁴ We live in a world of corruption, divisiveness and sophistry; a world which the post-Lurianic kabbalists regard as the shattered remnants of divine chaos; a world in which the obvious is easily obscured and easily overlooked. To borrow an ancient metaphor popularized by Isaiah Berlin—who was not only an Oxford philosopher, but also an estranged scion of the Schneersohn family—we live in a world where the multifarious cunning of the fox is wont to confuse the single minded knowledge of the hedgehog.¹¹⁵ As I have argued

¹¹³ Rashab, *Besha'ah shehikdimu 5672, I* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2011), 277 [section 143]: הכל יודעים את העצמות ואין שום אחד משיגו

¹¹⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2004), 74.

¹¹⁵ See Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, first published in 1953, and later included in *idem.*, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978).

elsewhere, what set the Habad project apart, beginning with Rashaz, is the determination to articulate a visionary faith—which in this context can be aligned with the child’s “knowledge” of G-d—in the language of reason.¹¹⁶

Following this line of thinking from “Pataḥ eliyahu” to *Samekh vav*, we can accordingly frame Rashab’s teleological concept as a cosmic quest for the reattainment of lost innocence, the childlike perception of the singular essence. Crucially, however, he is not interested in a mere reversion to that primal state. He is instead in search of a “new luminosity” such that the previously unarticulated essence will be articulated within and through the multifariousness and differentiation of individuated human activity and experience, while yet maintaining its singular and ineffable essentiality.

In an article devoted to “the paradox of *šimšum*” in Rashab’s thought, Elliot Wolfson has discerningly characterized “the logic inherent to Habad thought” as “a way of thinking that begets an annihilation of thinking, an aporetic state of learned ignorance.”¹¹⁷ To my mind, this sentiment is well reflected in the texts discussed here. We might accordingly suggest that ultimately Rashab seeks to undo the distinction he so clearly elucidated in *Hagahot lepataḥ eliyahu* between “the concept of revelation that is applied to ‘light’” and “the concept of revelation that is applied to ‘the luminary’.”¹¹⁸ His quest is that even the luminary, whose function is not to be revealed, “should be grasped and comprehended ... that the recipient can know and feel it, knowing how and what it is.”¹¹⁹ Indeed, Rashab himself explicates this towards the conclusion of *Ranat*’s final discourse, which, in my view, can retrospectively be read as a preface to *Samekh vav*. There he explains the elicitation of “additional luminosity” from the primordial *eyn sof* to mean that:

the root and source of *malkhut*, which is the *eyn sof*, His being and essence ... shall shine in a revealed manner in the specifics of the immanent [manifestation of divinity] etc. ... That is, that the *eyn sof* that is literally without limit shall shine in them, and thus even on the part of the specifics they shall not be fragmented one from another.¹²⁰

שרש ומקור המלכות, שהוא בחי' א"ס עצומ"ה ... יאיר בגילוי בהפרטים דממלא כו', והגם שגם הפרטים דאחר הצמצום יהיו בבחי' בלי גבול, דהיינו שיאיר בהם בגילוי בחי' א"ס הבלי גבול ממש, וממילא גם מצד הפרטים לא יהיו מובדלים זמ"ז

¹¹⁶ Eli Rubin, “Can You Square the Circle of Faith? How to preserve an open mind and a unified core of cohesive meaning,” *Chabad.org* <Chabad.org/2849758> (accessed August 10, 2021).

¹¹⁷ Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 94.

¹¹⁸ As cited above, n103.

¹¹⁹ This phrase is appropriated from Rashab, *Hagahot lepataḥ eliyahu* 5658, 52.

¹²⁰ *Ranat*, 111.

Earlier, Rashab made it clear that the immanent manifestation of divinity (או"ס הממלא כל) (עלמין) is aligned with the ordinary sense of revelation which is “in the realm of being grasped internally” (בגדר תפיסה בפנימיות) because it “radiates only an external light that can be revealed” (מאיר רק אור חיצוני מה שאפשר לבא לידי גילוי), and is grasped precisely because “it is fragmented ... into many specifics” (שמתחלק ... לריבוי פרטים).¹²¹ But here he explains that the ultimate teleological purpose is the overcoming of this dichotomization between what is externally revealed and graspable and what is essentially hidden and ungraspable. In other words, the infinite essence will not simply be unconcealed, but will be fully revealed, grasped and internalized within every specific articulation of Being.

Part 5 - Rationale and Desire, Philosophy and Phenomenology

Having gone some way to unpacking what Rashab intends when he speaks of a new revelation of the essence, our task now is to offer a broad outline of his account of how such a revelation can be elicited. The first and most obvious element of Rashab’s account is its emphasis of the teleological centrality of the lowest rung of the cosmological order, namely the material world of human habitation. For Rashab, the sheer abjection of this world generates a powerful critique of conventional explanations of divine purpose, and thereby provides grounds for a rigorously philosophical argument that returns us to what might be termed a “pre-philosophical” teleology rooted in desire rather than rationale.

The following is an abbreviated citation of one segment of Rashab’s argument, from the first discourse of *Samekh vav*:

[As to] what is written in the Zohar, [that the purpose of creation is] “in order that they shall know Me,”¹²² it is the case that knowledge and apprehension of the *or eyn sof* is mainly in the supernal realms, such as the realm of *ašilut* (“emanation”) and beyond *ašilut*; there the revelation of the *or eyn sof* shines ... and they know and grasp the very being (*mahut*) of the divine etc. But in the realms of creation, formation, and action (*by”a*), it is the case that the light is concealed and hidden ... and the physical realm of action was created specifically in such a manner that even the existence (*meši’ut*) of divinity [much less the “being” of the divine] shall not be sensed, and that they shall be separated from their source etc ... and, on the contrary, their entire creation is specifically by means of the concealment of the light; it is only possible to know G-d through work and intense toil specifically ...

¹²¹ *Ranat*, 108-109.

¹²² *Zohar* 2:42b.

[Accordingly,] it is impossible to apply this reason to [justify] the creation of the lower realm ...¹²³

מ"ש בזהר בגין דישתמודעון לי', הרי עיקר הידיעה וההשגה באוא"ס ב"ה הוא בעולמות העליונים, כמו בעולם האצילות ולמעלה מאצילות, ששם מאיר גילוי אור א"ס ב"ה ... ויודעים ומשיגים בחי' מהות אלקות ממש כו', אבל בעולמות בי"ע, הרי האור מוסתר ונעלם ... ועולם העשיה הגשמי נתהווה דוקא באופן כזה שלא יורגש אפילו בחי' המציאות דאלקות ויהיו נפרדים ממקורם כו' ... ואדרבה, כל התהוותם הוא ע"י הסתר האור דוקא, כ"א לידע את ה' ע"י עבודה ויגיעה דוקא כו' ... א"א לומר טעם זה על התהוות עולם התחתון

For Rashab, the traditional rationalization that the cosmos was created in order that G-d should be known by created beings, or—as articulated in other classical sources—in order that G-d’s goodness and completeness shall be exhibited, are belied by the very existence of so abject a world as this one. Such rationalizations would be satisfactory if G-d had only created realms more perfect than our own, realms where such knowledge is attainable, and where such goodness and completeness is manifest. But the physical realm of human habitation seems to be completely unsuited to the realization of such ideals. Our embodied encounter with the real darkness and hardships of this world—our own experience of the axiomatic obscuration of divinity, which forms the very ground of this-worldly existence—renders such earlier teleologies unsatisfactory. In their place opens the sort of existential vacuum that can lead even the most worldly among us to seek out and elicit a more resonant explanation of why this sort of reality is meaningful and warranted. Compare the claim made by phenomenological philosopher Dan Zahavi: “consciousness ultimately calls for a transcendental clarification that goes beyond common-sense postulates and brings us face to face with the problem concerning the constitution of the world.”¹²⁴

For an explanation to satisfactorily respond to “the problem” of the world as we find it, it must transcend the idealistic conventions that govern traditional theologies, while somehow also revealing the imperceptible, making sense of the inexplicable, and communicating the ineffable within the finite bounds of our embodied lives, activities and experiences. Emphasizing the transcendence of conventional philosophical rationalization, Rashab cites the midrashic assertion that “G-d desired a dwelling place in the lowly realms (נתאוה הקב"ה להיות לו דירה בתחתונים),”¹²⁵ which Rashab had termed “the

¹²³ *Samekh vav*, 6-7.

¹²⁴ Dan Zahavi, *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

¹²⁵ See *Midrash tanhuma*, Beḥukotai 3 and Nasso 16, and *Bereishit rabbah* 3.

ultimate purpose of the creation of this world (תכלית בריאת עולם הזה).¹²⁶ In invoking this midrash Rashaz was returning the semi-bifurcated traditions of Jewish mysticism and rationalism to their shared root in what I have elsewhere termed the authoritative and impressionistic “testimony” of the pre-philosophical rabbinic imaginaire.¹²⁷ Thereby he shifted the locus of ultimate purpose from the more ideal celestial realms to the “lowly realms” (*tahtonim*), and to this material world in particular. In *Samekh vav* Rashab takes up this midrashic turn and extends it, setting it as the basis upon which to reexamine the entire tradition of Jewish religious life, thought and experience through the phenomenological prism of “desire” or “yearning,” rather than through the more conventional prism of rationalized ideals or values. He underscores this further shift by citing another midrash:

“His thighs (*shokav*) are pillars of marble” (Song of Songs, 5:15). *Shokav* refers to the world, for G-d yearned to create it, as it says (ibid. 7:11), “To me is his yearning (*teshukato*).” How do we know that this is what is meant? For it says, “and they were completed (*vayekhulu*), the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 2:1). *Vayekhulu* is nothing other than an expression of desire (*ta'avah*), as it says, “My soul desired and yearned (*kaltah*) etc” (Psalms 84:3).¹²⁸

שוקיו עמודי שש וגו' (שיר השירים ה, טו). שוקיו, זה העולם שנשתוקק הקב"ה לבראתו כמד"ת: ועלי תשוקתו (שיר השירים ז, יא), ומנין שכה"א שנאמר: ויכלו השמים והארץ וגו' (בראשית ב, א). ואין ויכלו אלא לשון תאוה, שנאמר: נכספה וגם כלתה נפשי וגו' (תהלים פד, ג).

For Rashab this intimates that the world is created, “due to yearning alone, not due to any requirement, heaven forbid—[such as] for the sake of completeness, and nor in order that they shall know Me ... but this is only due to the yearning, because the Blessed Holy One yearned to create it, and we know no logical reason as to why He so yearned etc. and the intention herein is in order to elicit the revelation of *ašmut or eyn sof*, specifically, below ... which is not due to any requirement or logical reason, but rather because He

¹²⁶ Rashaz, T1:36, 45b.

¹²⁷ Eli Rubin, “Intimacy in the Place of Otherness: How rationalism and mysticism collaboratively communicate the Midrashic core of cosmic purpose,” *Chabad.org* <chabad.org/2893106> (accessed August 10, 2021). On Midrash as “an assertive discourse of power and authority . . . to be believed and obeyed,” see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1. Also see idem., *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). On rabbinic midrash and aggadah as theological “impressionism,” see Howard Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 78–102. Also see Naftali Loewenthal, “Midrash in Habad Hasidism,” in *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Joanne Weinberg (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), 429–455.

¹²⁸ *Bamidbar rabbah* 10:1. Cited in *Samekh vav*, 7 and 544.

desired so, which transcends reason and sense.”¹²⁹ He goes on to cite a Yiddish aphorism attributed to Rashaz, which makes the point even more forcefully: “Regarding a desire, there are no questions (אויף א תאווה איז קיין קשיא).”¹³⁰ It is important to emphasize, however, that this does not bring Rashab’s quest for understanding to a close; he only closes the door on conventional rationalizations in order to open the door for a searching phenomenological account of divine desire.

Having first cited this midrash at the very outset of *Samekh vav*, Rashab invokes it again in the concluding discourse. There he simultaneously links this notion of desire to the more literal meaning of *vayekhulu* and to *šimšum* as the fundamental condition of creation:

In this desire there is supernal pleasure ... as the sages say on the verse “His thighs (*shokav*) are pillars of marble,” *Shokav* refers to the world, for G-d yearned to create it etc. ... However, at the time of the creation of the worlds—the aspect of “[in] six days G-d made etc” (Exodus 20:11, 31:17)—all the supernal stations are in an aspect of descent and degradation, and in the aspect of *šimšum* etc ... And afterwards, on Shabbat [equated with the messianic era]—about which it is written “and they were completed (*vayekhulu*),” that all forms of *šimšum* came to an end, “and he rested/returned (*vayishbot*) on the seventh day” (Genesis 2:2), which refers to the return of all of the [supernal] capacities that were degraded, [meaning] that—they return to their source, and then the pleasure is elicited, [meaning] that He takes pleasure, as it were, from all that He did, that all has been made [via Torah study and *mišvah*] in accord with the dictate of His blessed wisdom and desire ...¹³¹

ברצון זה יש בו תענוג עליון ... וכמארז"ל ע"פ שוקיו עמודי שש, שוקיו זה העולם שנשתוקק הקב"ה לבראותו כו' ... אמנם, בעת בריאת העולמות, בחי' ששת ימים עשה ה' כו', אז הרי כל המדריוגות העליונות הם בבחי' ירידה והשפלה, ובבחי' צמצום כו' ... ואחר כך בשבת, דכתיב ויכל אלקים, שכלו כל הצמצומים כו', וישבות ביום השביעי, שהוא ענין החזרת כל הכחות שנשפלו, שחוזרים אל מקורם כו', ואז נמשך בחי' התענוג, שמתענג כבי' מכל אשר עשה, שנעשה הכל כפי חיוב וגזירת חכמתו ורצונו ית' ...

In his earlier discussion of divine desire, Rashab wrote that “even now (ג"כ עכשיו)”—that is, prior to the messianic era—the Sabbath itself, “the seventh day,” is a revelation of the

¹²⁹ *Samekh vav*, 7-8:

מצד התשוקה לבד, לא מצד ההכרח ח"ו בשביל השלימות, ולא בגין דישתמודעון בל' ... אלא שזהו רק מצד התשוקה שנשתוקק הקב"ה לבראותו, ואין אנו יודעים טעם שכלי מפני מה נשתוקק כו'. והכוונה בזה בכדי להמשיך גילוי עצמות אוא"ס דוקא למטה ... שאין זה מצד איזה הכרח וטעם שכלי, כ"א מפני שנתאווה כך, שהוא למעלה מטו"ד

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 544.

divine that is not mediated by *šimšum*.¹³² Citing earlier sources, he goes on to say that the Torah is similarly a revelation of *or eyn sof* that precedes the primal *šimšum*. Being unconstrained thereby, its reach extends till the very lowest station: “Torah as it is below is exactly as it is above, unlike the revelation of the *kav* that [being constrained by *šimšum*] has [the dimensions of] above and below.”¹³³ In keeping with his theorization of the essence, specifically, as being beyond revelation and concealment, Rashab writes that “it might be suggested” that the notion that Torah transcends the dimensions of above and below likewise “refers specifically to the Torah as it is rooted in the essence, verily. And this aspect cannot be revealed except to souls embodied below, specifically, as will be explained.”¹³⁴

Before taking up the theme of Torah in earnest, however, Rashab focuses extensively on the significance of *mišvot*. His conception of the Sabbath as an unconstrained revelation of pre-*šimšum* primordially is extended to all the *mišvot*, via which “the desire is elicited from the essence of the infinite, verily.”¹³⁵ Rashab links this to the related notion that through the *mišvot* “[divine] disciplines are sweetened by the generousities of *atik yomin*.”¹³⁶ Generally translated as “the Ancient One,” in the post-Lurianic kabbalistic terminology of Habad *atik yomin* is identified with the last point of pre-*šimšum* primordially from whence the *kav* draws a ray of infinite light into the empty space left in *šimšum*’s aftermath. Rashab explains that “the disciplines of *atik yomin* (גבורות דעת)” are synonymous with the primordial withdrawal and contraction via which “radiance by way of *šimšum* (הארה ע”י הצמצום)” is drawn to be a source of cosmic vitality. It is specifically in the disciplines of *atik yomin*, he emphasizes, that we find this dynamic of withdrawal and ascendancy, by which revelation is constrained and constricted.¹³⁷ But on the part of the “generosities of *atik yomin* (חסדים דע”י),” he continues, “the very opposite is so (הוא היפוך ממש):”

The pre-*šimšum* infinitude associated with the generousities of *atik yomin*

¹³² Ibid., 22.

¹³³ Ibid.: תורה כמו שהיא למטה ה"ה כמו שהיא למעלה ממש, ולא כמו גילוי הקו שיש בו מעלה ומטה

¹³⁴ Ibid., 23:

י"ל דזהו דוקא כמו שהתורה היא מושרשת בעצמות ממש, דבחי' זו אי אפשר להתגלות כ"א לנשמות המלוכשים בגופים למטה דוקא, וכמשי"ת

¹³⁵ Ibid., 47: נמשך בחי' הרצון מבחי' עצמות א"ס ממש

¹³⁶ Ibid.: המתקות הגבורות בחסדים דע"י

Here Rashab refers explicitly to a gloss found in Rashaz, T1:41, 57b-58a, which in turn cites the *Idra rabba* section of the *Zohar* and Immanuel Hai Riki's *Mishnat ḥasidim*.

¹³⁷ Cf. the related discussion of the association of *šimšum* with *atik yomin* in Wolfson, “Heeding the Law,” 221n18.

flows like water that descends from a high place to a low place, such that their substance is not changed at all in their descent to the lowest [station], verily ... and herein is elicited the very essence, unmediated by *šimšum* at all, and therefore thereby are sweetened the disciplines of *atik yomin* etc., meaning that the *šimšum* is nullified, and the essence radiates ... Being that it is the elicitation of the essence, neither diffusion nor withdrawal is possible ... ¹³⁸

נמשך כמים היורדים ממקום גבוה למקום נמוך, שלא נשתנה מהותם בירידתם למטה ממש ... ובזה נמשך בחי' העצמות ממש שלא ע"י צמצום כלל, ולכן ע"ז מתמתקים בחי' הגבורות דע"י כו', דהיינו שמתבטל הצמצום, ומאיר בחי' העצמות. ... להיותו בחי' המשכת העצמות, אינו שייך בזה בחי' המשכה והתכללות ...

This discussion of divine desire, or will, and its relationship with *šimšum*, can be fruitfully compared and contrasted to our earlier analysis of Maharash's bold account of *mišvah* observance as eliciting, or causing, the primal *šimšum*.¹³⁹ What unites father and son here is that both use *šimšum* to dramatically underscore the power of *mišvah* observance to cut through all the normal bounds of cosmology, and indeed of theology. They diverge in that Maharash primarily interprets the significance of being and acting in the present through the prism of the past, while Rashab does the same through the prism of the future: Maharash casts *mišvah* observance as the cause that draws the cosmic beginning from its metacosmic origin. Rashab, however, casts *mišvah* observance as the key through which the cosmic telos is unlocked and grasped, thus overcoming the constraints of *šimšum* and leaping beyond the original point of departure.

This comparison also serves to illustrate the striking stylistic difference between Maharash and Rashab. While the father delivers his theorizations swiftly and sharply, the son develops his arguments unhurriedly, articulating and unfolding layer upon layer of explanation, so that the transformative power of his ideas accumulates with fulsome incrementalism. Swirling strata of orderly abstraction are presented with dizzying coherence, with each new concept being carefully distinguished from the one that preceded it, and at the same time being anchored deeply and rigorously both in human experience and in the classical canons of rabbinic and kabbalistic literature.

A further distinction between the respective discussions of Maharash and Rashab is certainly more subtle, but is no less significant. While for the former the word *raṣon* has

¹³⁸ *Samekh vav*, 47.

¹³⁹ Above, 2:4.

the more conventional connotation of “will,” the latter is explicit that his theorization of *raṣon* as being animated by pleasure gives it the connotation of “desire” (*hefets*).¹⁴⁰

Part 6 - Desire, Pleasure, and the Transcendence of Sense

Given Rashab’s emphasis of divine desire as the ultimate impetus for creation, it isn’t surprising that he devotes several discourses at the outset of *Samekh vav* to an extensive theorization of the *mišvot* as the inner desire (*penimiyut haraṣon*), which he describes as an externalized facet of the essential pleasure (*ta’anug ha’ašmi*), of G-d. For Rashab, the human psyche is a window via which to examine the innermost manifestations of the divine, both as they are encompassed within G-d’s self and as they function as an interface between G-d’s essence and the world.¹⁴¹ Accordingly, he develops a fundamentally phenomenological exploration of desire and pleasure as they are manifest in the human soul, especially in religious experience. Given the sheer voluminosity of the *hemshekh* as a whole, and even of this discussion in particular, here we will make do with a single excerpt to encapsulate Rashab’s conception of pleasure and desire, and to illustrate the phenomenological tenor of his discussion:

Pleasure and desire both issue from a singular root in the essence of the soul, and they are not two distinct faculties. Rather they issue from a singular root, only that pleasure is the inner dimension and desire the external one, and therefore pleasure is specifically concealed and desire is specifically revealed. For desire is the elicitation of the soul ... this is the attachment of the soul to something other than itself, specifically ... And this is because desire is in the aspect of revelation, and therefore it has a beginning, that is, the beginning of the arousal, and it has an end,

¹⁴⁰ *Samekh vav*, 64-65.

¹⁴¹ Of course, this has long been seen as one of the defining characteristics of the Habad school in general. On this point see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 340-1. Scholem goes on to say that “something of this attitude is indeed common to the whole Hasidic movement.” For an even broader survey, that explores similar trends beyond Hasidism, see Garb, *Yearnings*. Especially relevant in the present context is the point made in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 331-2, that Seamus Carey’s reading of Merleau-Ponty presents an especially useful paradigm through which to understand “the convergence of the ontological and the ethical in Habad”—and, I would add, the same applies to the convergence of the metaphysical and the psychological—namely, as “an ontology of the flesh that effectively overcomes the dualisms of traditional metaphysics (e.g., subject and object, mind and body).” See Seamus Carey, “Cultivating Ethos through the Body,” *Human Studies* 23:1 (2000): 33. See Rashab’s own comment—expressing this notion of an ontological overcoming of the dualism between metaphysics and embodied consciousness—as recorded in *Torat shalom sefer hasiḥot* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2003), 185: “The analogy becomes that which it represents ... when from one’s own [psychological/soul] faculties one understands the supernal ... thereby these faculties become divine faculties (דער משל ווערט א נמשל ... פון זיינע כחות פטרשטייט ער אויף למע' ... ווערען דורך דעם די כחות אלקיים).” This also raises the more general question of the function of analogy (*mashal*) in Habad literature, as discussed in Wolfson, “Nequddat ha-Reshimu,” 79-81.

that is, that it becomes attached to the object etc. This is in contrast to pleasure, wherein it is in the interiority of the soul alone that one experiences pleasure, and one's desire toward the object in which one takes pleasure is not apparent at all. That is, even as one takes pleasure in a particular object—that is, in something other than the self—one's desire [toward that object] is not apparent. Rather, one's self takes pleasure in that thing, and the principality of the pleasure is that one experiences pleasure in one's essence, and is not drawn toward any object at all.¹⁴²

תענוג ורצון שניהם באים משרש א' ממש בעצם הנפש, ולא שהן ב' כחות מובדלים, אלא שניהם באים משרש א' ממש, רק שהתענוג הוא הפנימי והרצון הוא החיצוני, ולכן התענוג הוא בהעלם דוקא, והרצון הוא בהתגלות דוקא. דהנה, הרצון הוא המשכת הנפש ... שזהו התקשרות הרצון בדבר זולתו דוקא ... והיינו לפי שהרצון הוא בבחי' התגלות, ולכן יש לו תחלה, והוא תחלת ההתעוררות, היינו תחלת ההתגלות, ויש לו סוף, היינו מה שנקשר בהדבר כו'. משא"כ בתענוג, שהוא רק בפנימיות הנפש שמתענג, ולא ניכר מרוצתו בדבר מה שמתענג בו כלל, והיינו, גם כשמתענג באיזה דבר, היינו בדבר הזולת, אינו ניכר מרוצתו, כ"א שמתענג בעצמו בהדבר ההוא, ועיקר התענוג הוא שמתענג בעצמותו, ואינו נמשך לשום דבר כלל.

It might initially be supposed that while “desire” can be aligned with the conventional notion of revelation, “pleasure” should be aligned with the essence as it stands beyond the dynamic of revelation and concealment. But Rashab goes on to make a further distinction between pleasure that is nevertheless experienced (*ta'anug hamurgash*) and pleasure that transcends experience or sense (*ta'anug habiltiy murgash*). Only the latter can really be said to be a true apprehension of the essence as it is in itself.¹⁴³ An example of this is the distinction between the pleasure of Shabbat and the pleasure of Yom Kippur; whereas the former is celebrated with food and drink, the latter is celebrated through fasting. In Rashab's words: “one shall efface from her [i.e. the soul], through affliction, any sensual pleasure, and thereby arrive at the essential pleasure that is not sensible at all.”¹⁴⁴ It is “particularly ... through true *teshuvah*”—the form of penitential devotion and return to G-d's embrace most associated with Yom Kippur—that “one arrives at the very essence ... and thereby draws additional luminosities into Torah and *misvot* as well.”¹⁴⁵

This discussion of *teshuvah* is found toward the end of the thirteenth discourse of *Samekh vav*, but it picks up a thread that begins with the *hemshekh*'s opening discussion of the

¹⁴² *Samekh vav*, 73.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 106: שיבוטל ממנה ע"י העינוי כל בחי' עונג מורגש, ויגיע לבחי' תענוג העצמי הבלתי מורגש כלל.

This notion can perhaps be compared to Kant's concept of “disinterestedness” according to which pleasure in the beautiful “is neither grounded in desire, nor does it produce it.” See Nick Zangwill, “Aesthetic Judgment,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/aesthetic-judgment/>>. I thank François Guesnet for bringing this resemblance to my attention.

¹⁴⁵ *Samkeh vav*, 108: ע"י התשובה האמיתית ה"ה מגיע בבחי' העצמות ממש ... ועי"ז ממשיך תוס' אורות בתו"מ ג"כ.

devotional significance of the commandment to blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah.¹⁴⁶ Rashab returns to that theme in order to explain why *teshuvah* specifically achieves an elicitation of the “essential pleasure that is in the essence of the infinite, verily”:

This is the significance of blowing the *shofar* at its narrow end, that it comes via extreme straits and pressure, specifically thereby the sound greatly expands and is strengthened at its broad end etc. And likewise is understood in respect to the masters of *teshuvah*, that their straits, the pain and bitterness over their distance [from the divine] ... reaches into the depth and interiority of the soul far more than the pleasure resulting from closeness [to the divine] etc., and automatically they likewise reach above into the interiority and essence of *eyn sof*, transcending the complete *ṣadik* because they are drawn to Him ... with stronger force in the essence of their souls etc. ... Specifically thereby, “I was answered with the expansiveness of G-d” (Psalms 118:5), with the expansiveness of the luminosity of the essence of the infinite that cannot be revealed at all even in the deepest pleasure [manifest] in *ḥokhmah* and *binah* etc ... For via *teshuvah* from the depth of the heart specifically, one arrives in the interiority and essential hiddenness of the infinite, which is the essential pleasure that is in the essence of the infinite, verily, which transcends the station of the rationales of Torah and *mišvot* etc.¹⁴⁷

זהו"ע תקיעת שופר בצדו הא' הקצר, שבא במיצר ודוחק גדול ביותר, עי"ז דוקא מתפשט ומתחזק הקול בצדו הרחב ביותר כו'. וכמו"כ יובן בבע"ת, דבחי' המיצר שלהם בבחי' הצער והמרירות על הריחוק ... מגיע בבחי' עומק ופנימיות הנפש הרבה יותר מהתענוג על הקירוב כו', וממילא מגיע למעלה ג"כ בבחי' פנימיות ועצמות א"ס למע' מצ"ג משום דמשכין לי' ... בכח חזק יותר בעצם נפשם כו' ... עי"ז דוקא ענני במרחב י"ה, בהתרחבות אור העצמות דא"ס, שלא יכול לבוא בגילוי כלל גם בעומק התענוג דחו"ב כו' ... שע"י תשובה מעומקא דלבא דוקא, מגיע בבחי' עומק והעלם העצמי דא"ס, דהיינו בבחי' התענוג העצמי שבעצמות א"ס ממש, שלמעלה מבחי' טעמי תורה ומצות כו'.

Here *teshuvah* is implicitly depicted as a phenomenological embodiment of *ṣimṣum* in the devotional life of the individual. The essence is not elicited through some assertion of devotional piety, for by definition any assertion is a superficial departure from the fundamental interiority of the essence. By the same token, such assertions manifest relationships between two entities that are ultimately distinct from one another. But *teshuvah* is neither an assertion of piety nor the manifestation of a relationship. On the contrary, it stems from the realization that one is lacking in piety and that one has no manifest relationship with G-d. The experience of *teshuvah* issues from the innermost

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 1-3.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 107-8.

self, the unarticulated self, and therefore it reaches and elicits the unarticulated essence of G-d. The soul's "essential point of Jewishness" (עצם נקודת היהדות) is so deeply rooted in the divine essence that to "reach into the depth and interiority of the soul" is to "automatically ... reach above into the interiority and essence of *eyn sof*."¹⁴⁸ The bond of *teshuvah* is a relationship that transcends, and indeed supersedes, any normative manifestation, and is thus most deeply expressed as an "inner cry that is inaudible (קלא פנימאה דלא אשתמע),"¹⁴⁹ which Rashab later terms "the quivering of the essence of the soul, verily (הוזת עצם הנפש ממש)."¹⁵⁰

Rashab also cites the classical Lurianic characterization of the shofar blast as "the intensification of the interiority of *atik*."¹⁵¹ The synonymy between "the disciplines of *atik*" and *šimšum* has already been noted, and this association is also implicit in the imagery of the narrow straits of the *shofar* from whence the sound issues with greater intensity, as well as in the depiction of both *teshuvah* and *šimšum* as a cosmic leap.¹⁵² Rashab goes on to explain that, via the return to the essence, "entirely new revelations" (גילויים חדשים לגמרי) are elicited; in the aftermath of *teshuvah* one's entire devotional life is infused with the new luminosity that is drawn from the essence that stands beyond revelation and concealment.¹⁵³ We should further note Rashab's statement that through *teshuvah* "one arrives in ... the essential pleasure ... which transcends the station of the rationales of (*ta'amei*) Torah and *mišvot*."¹⁵⁴ This casts *teshuvah* not only as a move from the nomian to the hypernomian, but also as a move from sensible pleasure to the sort of pleasure that transcends the circumscriptions of sense (*ta'am* having the connotation of "taste" as well as "sense" or "rational").¹⁵⁵ On this score, *teshuvah*—which literally

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 48-9, for the comment that the "point of Jewishness (*nekudat hayahadut*)"—a locution used by Rashab here, and which appears elsewhere in the Habad corpus—signifies "a monopsyche state that summons the eradication of ontic difference" between the Jewish soul and the *eyn sof*. This can be seen as a phenomenological intensification of the more general overcoming of the dualism between metaphysics and psychology adduced above, n141. Above, 2:3, we discussed the ways in which the figure of the "point" is used as a signifier both of *hokhmah* and of *šimšum*, and further noted Wolfson's discussion of Rashab's own coinage of the term "the point of the trace," according to which the post-Lurianic motif of the trace (*reshimu*) is construed not only as a contracted point but also as a point of continuity between the divine and the cosmos, a point that "intones the secret of the supreme paradox, the incarnation of the infinite essence in finite nature." (Wolfson, "Nequddat ha-Reshimu," 119-120.) It seems that here—in the psychological context—the figure of the "point" functions in the same way that it functions in the cosmological context, namely to intone the ontological continuity between the essence of G-d and the essence of the soul.

¹⁴⁹ *Samekh vav*, 2, 14, 26.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 540-1.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 540: תגבורת בה' פנימיות עתיק

¹⁵² For *teshuvah* as leap, see *Samekh vav*, 107-8. For the characterization of *šimšum* as a leap, see above, Part 3, and in the conclusion to Chapter 2.

¹⁵³ *Samekh vav*, 108-9.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 107-8. Above, n147.

¹⁵⁵ On the term "hypernomian" see below, n157.

means “return”—provides the paradigmatic realization of the essential dynamic of reversion and innovation.

By this point in the *hemshekh*, Rashab has explicitly declared that the attainment of “essential pleasure, as it is in His very essence, cannot possibly be through Torah and *mišvot* ... this is rather through *teshuvah* from the depth of the heart specifically.”¹⁵⁶ The radical and paradoxical undertone of this argument is only partially articulated: Torah and *mišvot* cannot achieve their ultimate purpose on their own terms, nor can their purpose be achieved by the complete *šadik* who studies the Torah and observes its precepts with perfect fealty and devotion. Ultimate purpose can only be achieved through the opening of a less than ideal rupture between divine will and wisdom—on the one hand—and the imperfections of human thought, feeling and practice, on the other hand. What is true of the human microcosm is true of the macrocosmos too. Only through the cosmic rupture of *šimšum*, and the ultimate devolution of “the lower realm” of human habitation, is the cosmic ground readied for the essential dynamic of reversion and innovation. Elliot Wolfson’s notion of the hypernomian is accordingly an especially apt prism through which to understand Rashab’s conception; it is only through the hypernomian work of *teshuvah* that the nomian itself is illuminated with the sort of unprecedented and hyperabundant luminosity that can be construed as an elicitation of the essence and a realization of the cosmic telos.¹⁵⁷

But this is not Rashab’s last word on the topic. Indeed, he begins the very next discourse by allowing that “in truth, through toiling in Torah,” as well, “it is possible to arrive at the essential pleasure that is not sensible.”¹⁵⁸ This reversal sets a whole new exploration in motion, which focuses less on the nature of Torah and *mišvot* themselves and more on the particular forms of devotion that—like *teshuvah*—can endow study and observance with the sort of essential dynamic that realizes an autonomous recreation of the origin, and indeed exceeds the original condition of perfection.

¹⁵⁶ *Samekh vav*, 106:

[בכדי להגיע לבה"י] תענוג העצמי כמו שהוא בעצמותו ממש, א"א להיות זאת ע"י תו"מ ... כ"א זהו ע"י התשובה מעומקא דלבא דוקא

¹⁵⁷ The term hypernomian was coined by Elliot Wolfson, and was first applied to refer “to the Sabbatian paradox of breaking the law to fulfil it.” This conception stands in contrast to that conveyed by “antinomian,” in that the law is not simply breached but rather expanded and fulfilled in a way that exceeds nomian bounds. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 237. More broadly, the hypernomian can be understood as an intensification of the significance and import of the law, rather than as a degradation thereof. Wolfson explicitly applies this term in his treatment of Habad’s theorization of *teshuvah*, noting that here the nomian and the hypernomian stand in a relationship that is complementary rather than antithetical. See *idem.*, *Open Secret*, 169. Also see Jonathan Garb, *Shamanic Trance*, 121, where “mystical hypernomianism” signifies “a yearning for nomian fulfillment, which exceeds the possibilities of normal Halakha.” It is in this sort of sense that I use the term here.

¹⁵⁸ *Samekh vav*, 110: באמת ע"י עסק התורה יכולים להגיע לבה"י התענוג העצמי הבלתי מורגש:

Part 7 - *Re'uta deliba*, and Two Nomian Paths to the Hypernomian

One of the keys taken up by Rashab as the rest of the *hemshekh* unfolds can already be found in his opening discussion of the commandment to blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah. There Rashab distinguishes *teshuvah* from another form of “interior animation of the soul” (התפעלות פנימי שבנפש), namely *re'uta deliba*, “yearning of the soul.”¹⁵⁹ While *teshuvah* results from a sense of distance (*rihuk*) from G-d, *re'uta deliba* results from a sense of closeness (*kiruv*); “the sense of the infinite light that one experiences in the soul” (הרגש האוא"ס שמרגיש בנפשו).

Rashab acknowledges that *teshuvah* is sometimes termed an “inner cry that is inaudible” (as mentioned above), but emphasizes that ultimately the *shofar* does brokenly vocalize the returnee’s anguished cry. By contrast, he casts *re'uta deliba* as an intensely silent sense of ineffable intimacy:

a sense of the *or eyn sof* that one senses in one’s soul, and it occurs when one contemplates the essence of the infinite that is superlative and transcendent within the worlds, which is not manifest in a revealed manner in the soul ... Thereby is adduced the yearning to become encompassed in the *or eyn sof* ... and hence, in the case of *re'uta deliba*—which is caused due to closeness, and its nature is also a sense of closeness—it is silent.¹⁶⁰

הרגש האוא"ס שמרגיש בנפשו, והוא כשמתבונן בבחי' עצמות אוא"ס שמופלא ומרומם בעולמות שאינו בא בבחי' גילוי בנפשו ... עי"ז נעשה הרצוא להכלל באוא"ס כו' ... ולכן ברעו"ד שסיבתה הוא מצד הקירוב, וענינה הוא ג"כ ענין הקירוב, ה"ה בחשאי

The complexity of this depiction is profound. In *re'uta deliba* intimacy and yearning are combined, and this combination is arrived at through the contemplation of the sort of revelation that is fundamentally beyond the grasp of the soul. To experience *re'uta deliba* is to sense that which transcends sense. This intimacy, accordingly, is experienced as a silent yearning born of the immanent experience of the ineffable.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ This particular designation originates in the Zoharic corpus, and receives extensive attention in Habad texts beginning with T1:17 and T1:44. Here we will focus only Rashab’s theorization of *re'uta deliba* in *Samekh vav*.

¹⁶⁰ *Samekh vav*, 1-2.

¹⁶¹ Cf. the relevant discussion in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 46-51. Of *re'uta deliba* he writes: “If we are to speak of comprehension ... then it is comprehension of what one does not comprehend.” In the very next sentence he abandons the attempt to speak of comprehension and instead speaks of “apprehending that one cannot apprehend,” the verb “apprehend” having a connotation that embraces the realm of affect and aesthetics as well as the more circumscribed realm of intellectual comprehension. As he goes on to say, this is “a movement toward transcendence ... declaimed as the ineffable ... the apophatic awareness of the divine enigma.” The Hebrew word used to mark the subjective “experience” of the divine enigma—Wolfson tells us—“is *nirgash*, a term that denotes the intimacy of a sensory feeling.” Wolfson also notes

While *teshuvah* and *re'uta deliba* are distinguished in the cause and substantive nature of the “interior animation of the soul” that they share, Rashab emphasizes that they are nevertheless aligned in their practical result. In both cases a subjugation to the sovereign will of G-d results, and of a sort that goes far beyond any normative mode of religious conformity or obligation.¹⁶² At the very start of this *hemshekh*, in other words, Rashab already laid down the basis for two different paths to the hypernomian: *Teshuvah* is a path predicated on nomian rupture and distance; only in the aftermath of rupture, and the hypernomian leap of return, is the nomian brought to its hypernomian fulfillment. *Re'uta deliba* is a path predicated only on contemplation; the ineffable yearning born of the immanent sense of that which transcends sense leaves the bounds of the nomian unruptured even as they are exceeded. Below we will see that Rashab also provides at least one more path to the hypernomian, which builds on the model provided by *re'uta deliba*.

In *Samekh vav*'s eighth discourse Rashab picks up this theme and explains that while *re'uta deliba* can only be elicited via cognitive contemplation, its affective resonance nevertheless remains unconstrained by cognitive circumscription. Accordingly, in the aftermath of *re'uta deliba* the subject does not simply submit to G-d's will behaviorally, nor merely by dint of any cognitive understanding or recognition of divine goodness, loftiness, or stature.¹⁶³ The yoke of heavenly sovereignty is rather accepted essentially and axiomatically; as Rashab puts it, “by virtue of their interiority being bound up in the aspect of essentiality.”¹⁶⁴

In exposing the essence, Rashab continues, *re'uta deliba* clears away any external manifestations of self, including any spiritual aspirations. This elicits an axiomatic and suprarational devotion to G-d, which Rashab terms “the advantage that a servant has even over a son,” noting that this “will be explained below.”¹⁶⁵ The subject is simply “doing the will of G-d,” like a servant who simply does the will of the master, entirely setting aside any independent rationalization or appreciation of why the master willed it so, thereby becoming a completely transparent vessel for the realization of the master's will without any constraint. As Rashab explains elsewhere, the highest form of *misvah*

that this word is likely a translation of the original Yiddish, the language in which Habad discourses were orally delivered, thus intimating that the original Yiddish might have conveyed this sense more eloquently. Indeed, at one point in *samekh vav* (61) Rashab does not make do with the Hebrew but by way of clarification also includes the Yiddish phrase, “*vert in em derher*” (ווערט אין עם דערהערט) a phrase that bespeaks the experience of a deep-felt and ineffable “resonance.”

¹⁶² *Samekh vav*, 2, 61.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 61: כי הי' הפנימיות שלהם קשור בבחי' העצמיות וכמשי"ת:

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 61: המעלה שיש בעבד גם על מדרי' בן

observance is alluded to by the designation “my commandments” (*mišvotay*), “which is the *mišvot* as they are in the essence (*hamišvot shebe’asmut*), and this is when the person observes them with *re’uta deliba*, for thereby the will in the *mišvot* is drawn from the essence of the infinite.”¹⁶⁶ As in the case of *teshuvah*, in other words, *re’uta deliba* is a disclosure of the point wherein the essence of the soul and the divine essence are the same.

Much later on in *Samekh vav* Rashab subjects the juxtapositional devotional models of sonship and servitude to extensive analysis, which includes a searching account of several different modes of servitude. Within the contemporary Habad community, a sequence of three discourses on this topic—beginning with *Samekh vav*’s thirty-seventh discourse, *Umikneh rav*—has come to be regarded as a mini *hemshekh* worthy of study in its own right.¹⁶⁷ Rashab goes on to argue that the most ideal model of worship is that of the son who becomes a servant.¹⁶⁸ Simply put, the son merely inherits and accrues preexisting qualities or assets, but in attaining the quality of a servant he gains the capacity to independently create new assets that may exponentially exceed anything he might inherit. For all that the perfect son leverages his father’s assets and exponentially profits from them, he does not possess the ability to sustain himself by the work of his own hands; he cannot profit independently. To gain the quality of independent creativity he must travel far away from his father’s house, without any of his father’s assets, and apprentice himself to a master craftsman:

Certainly this requires that he be as a servant, serving his master, the craftsman who teaches him, to be devoted to him and to his will, and to work with him for many days with great and intense toil to the point of soul expiration, until he too is able to fix and create with craft tools like his master. And [then] he will be able to sustain himself by the work of his own hands, [ultimately] becoming even wealthier through his independent talent than if he had remained with his father etc.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Rashab, *Sefer hama’amarim 5670* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1998), 320-1. This point is also elaborated later in *Samekh vav* itself, 360-2, but there the association with *re’uta deliba* is not explicated.

¹⁶⁷ The first of these discourses has been translated and published in English under the title *The Simple Servant: A Chasidic Discourse by Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn*, translated by Yosef Marcus (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2008).

¹⁶⁸ In addition to the passages excerpted and discussed below see esp. *Samekh vav*, 535-6. Notably, I refer here to the final section of the last discourse in the *hemshekh*, which is immediately followed by a conclusion (under the title “hashlamat haderush”) that returns to address the questions asked at the outset of the opening discourse. Though we have referred to some specific passages from this text above, a fuller discussion of it is beyond the scope of this study. We should nevertheless note that there are no similar examples in the Habad corpus of a concluding text appended to the end of a *hemshekh*.

¹⁶⁹ *Samekh vav*, 481.

שבדאי צריך שיהי' לעבד ולמשרת לאדונו, שהוא האומן המלמדו, להיות מסור אליו ולרצונו, לעשות אצלו המלאכה ימים רבים ביגיעה גדולה ועצומה עד מיצוי הנפש, עד שיוכל גם הוא לתקן ולעשות בכלי אומנות כרבו, ויוכל לפרנס א"ע מיגיע כפיו להיות עושר גדול מכה עצמו יותר משיהי' אצל אביו כו'.

The result of this is that the son attains a much higher degree of satisfaction than he ever did profiting from his father's assets, even if he is only able to support himself meagerly, and certainly if he ultimately creates an independent fortune that allows him to support his father as well. This is true for the father as well:

And the father too will be very happy, and it will be extremely pleasurable to him, that his son is able to sustain himself, far more than [the pleasure he took] in all the wealth of his household that he wholeheartedly entrusted to his son due to his good intelligence and quality ... Because this means that the son's intelligence has enabled him to create additional blessing that is wholly original ... for example ... to craft precious vessels that are entirely new, like something from nothing, as opposed to the wealth he created from his father's assets, which is merely an accrual of what preexists.¹⁷⁰

וגם האב ישמח ויערב לו ביותר מה שבנו יכול לפרנס א"ע, יותר מכל הון ביתו שהי' נותן לו בכל לבו עבור טוב חכמתו ומעלתו ... כי זהו שחכמתו עמדה לבן לעשות תוס' ברכה בחידוש מעיקרו, כמו ... לעשות כלים יקרים מחדש ממש, כמו מאין ליש, משא"כ בעושר שהצליח בנכסי אביו, שאינו רק יש מיש כו'.

The idioms used to describe the innovation achieved by the son who becomes a servant are deliberately borrowed from the cosmological terminology used in classical discussions of G-d's creation of the cosmos as “something from nothing.”¹⁷¹ Moreover, when this conception is read within the larger frame of the *hemshekh* it becomes clear that the transition from sonship to servitude reflects the transition between the two explanations of the purpose of *šimšum* as delineated by Rashab at the outset. According to the first explanation, no “new” revelation of the divine is elicited as a result of *šimšum* and creation. The purpose is rather that the post-*šimšum* cosmos will be so refined and tempered that it will be able to receive the influx of the pre-*šimšum* radiance while yet remaining intact. On this score, the relationship of the post-*šimšum* cosmos to the pre-*šimšum* radiance is one of inheritance and accrual (sonship). In contrast, Rashab's second explanation is that “specifically via the fulfillment of Torah and *mišvot* ... shall be elicited a new luminosity, with addition exceeding the principal ... from the essence of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ The locus classicus for this in the Habad corpus is Rashaz, T2:1-2.

the emanator.”¹⁷² On this score, the relationship of the post-*simsum* cosmos to the pre-*simsum* radiance is one of independence and hyperabundant innovation (the son has acquired the additional advantage of servitude).

In subsequent discourses Rashab applies this paradigm to the Torah, which is described as “the inheritance of the community of Jacob [i.e. the Jewish people]” (Deuteronomy 33:4). In their conventional mode of divine worship, and especially in their conventional mode of Torah study, the Jewish souls are likened to sons who serve their father out of love. As Rashab writes:

In general terms, Torah study is worship out of love and pleasure ... It is not in a manner of innovation, but is rather that which is drawn out from concealment to revelation from the primordial wisdom [of G-d] etc, and also the work of refinement achieved by means of the Torah is attained in a passive manner, without work and effort.¹⁷³

בד"כ ענין עסק התורה היא בחי' עבודה מאהבה ועונג ... אינו בבחי' התחדשות, כ"א מה שנמשכה מהעלם אל הגילוי מבחי' חכמה הקדומה כו', וגם עבודת הבירורים שע"י התורה הן שנעשים בדרך ממילא, שלא בעבודה ויגיעה

But like the son who is sent far from his father's home, the Torah too descends from its more theoretical, or abstract, transcendence, and must be applied in the real world, giving specific direction to all aspects of earthly life. This is reflected especially in the study of the Oral Torah, with all the difficult legal arguments—along with the deep sense of responsibility, acceptance of the yoke of heaven, and awe before G-d—that mark the process of halakhic decision making. To quote just a few excerpts from Rashab's elaboration:

All of this is with very great effort etc., till one comes to the truth of Torah, from the capacity of the hiddenness of the essence specifically, in a manner of utter innovation etc. And all this is by one's own strength and effort etc. And this is the aspect of a servant's servitude; that he works with a yoke specifically, not by dint of the pleasure and satisfaction that he has in his work, and nor to create satisfaction for his master, but rather due to the yoke of the master that is upon him ...¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² *Samekh vav*, 8. Above, n89.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 406.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 407.

כ"ז הוא ביגיעה רבה מאד כו', עד שבאים לאמיתתו של תורה, מכה העלם העצמות דוקא בבחי' התחדשות ממש כו', וכ"ז הוא מכה עצמו ויגיעתו דוקא כו'. והוא בבחי' עבודת עבד, שעובד בעול דוקא, לא בשביל התענוג ונח"ר שיש לו בעבודתו, ולא בשביל לעשות נח"ר לאדונו, כ"א מצד עול האדון שעליו

Elsewhere, Rashab characterizes the “doubts” (ספיקות) that arise in the application of Torah law with the same language used to describe *šimšum*: “withdrawal and concealment of the light (סילוק והתעלמות האור).”¹⁷⁵ He further emphasizes that “this is not merely [a disclosure] from concealment to revelation ... from the primordial Torah alone (אינן זה רק מהעלם אל הגילוי ... מבחי' תוה"ק לבד),” nor is it merely about tempering and refining the world through drawing the transcendent revelation of Torah into it. Instead, he emphasizes, in applying the law in practice one must struggle with that which stands as an obstacle to revelation, one must confront the dross that might otherwise confound the divine purpose. In other words, the emphasis here is on the hyperabundant advantage to be elicited from the struggle itself:

Through extreme toil and introspection one arrives at the truth of the matter ... and one removes all the dross and concealments ... [Thereby] one reaches *ašmut eyn sof mamash*, that is, the essential hiddenness of the infinite etc, and a revelation of new luminosity, verily, is elicited ... Because the elicitation is from the essential hiddenness, these matters themselves come in a manner of innovation, from nothing to something, verily, etc ... with greatly multifarious extensions and branches, and with deep conceptions that are entirely new etc¹⁷⁶

ע"י היגיעה וההעמקה ביותר ה"ה בא אל אמיתת הענין ... ומסיר כל הסיגים והעלמות ... מגיע לבחי' עצמות א"ס ממש, היינו בחי' ההעלם העצמי דא"ס כו', ונמשך גילוי אור חדש ממש ... שההמשכה בבחי' העלם העצמית, הרי הענינים האלו גופא באים בבחי' חידוש מאין ליש ממש כו' ... בבחי' ריבוי התפשטות והסתעפות ביותר, ובשכליים עמוקים וחדשים לגמרי כו'

To fully appreciate Rashab’s contribution here it is important to note that the ideal of renewal or innovation in Torah study has a very long history in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature. As Elliot Wolfson has written, “the worldview of traditional kabbalists ... is a deepening of an approach found in older rabbinic sources ... study of Torah demands that one be able to imagine each day as a recurrence of the Sinaitic theophany, a reiteration of the past that induces the novelty of the present.”¹⁷⁷ Riffing on an older rabbinic gloss cited in Rashi’s commentary to Deuteronomy 6:6, Rashaz taught that “each day” the precepts of the Torah shall not only be “like new (כחדשים),” but “verily new (חדשים)

¹⁷⁵ *Samekh vav*, 390-1.

¹⁷⁶ *Samekh vav*, 391-2.

¹⁷⁷ Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 63-64.

ממש).”¹⁷⁸ In a short halakhic code that he published anonymously, titled *Hilkhot talmud torah* (“The Laws of Torah Study,” Shklov, 1794), Rashaz went so far as to formalize the requirement “to innovate many innovative halakhot in accord with the breadth in his heart and the composure of his mind” as the highest fulfillment of the general obligation of Torah study.¹⁷⁹ In a wide ranging discussion that encompasses many classical sources—including texts by several of the Habad masters, including Rashab—Wolfson frames the notion of innovation in Torah as fundamentally linked to the paradoxical dynamic between eternity and time:

The idea of an infinite Torah entails that the text is inherently timeless, for that which is infinite cannot be contained in any temporal frame, which is by necessity finite, yet the meaning of a text that is inherently timeless is manifest only in and through an endless chain of interpretation that unfolds persistently in time.¹⁸⁰

On this score, the unfolding of the eternal Torah in time is a process of “unique repetition” in which the same Torah is constantly renewed, different in each moment because each moment is different. As the Torah that is above time is revealed within time it is refracted uniquely in each temporal configuration.

My argument here is that Rashab, in *Samekh vav*, pushes this conception one step further. His discussions of Torah study in the first part of this *hemshekh* conforms to the standard “hermeneutical principle of the rabbis” which “embraces a notion of time that is circular in its linearity and linear in its circularity,”¹⁸¹ inexorably tying innovation to the repetitious cycle of time. It likewise conforms to the paradigm of reversion according to which “although the light [revealed in the world through Torah and *mišvot*] is the same

¹⁷⁸ *LT devarim*, 1b.

¹⁷⁹ Rashaz, *Hilkhot talmud torah*, 2:2: לחדש חידושי הלכות רבות לפי רוחב שיש בלבו וישוב דעתו
Also see *ibid.*, 1:1 and 1:5; *idem.*, T4:2. By contrast, no mention of innovation in Torah is made in the parallel section of Rabbi Yosef Karo’s authoritative *Shulhan arukh*. Interestingly, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller, an important non hasidic halakhist who was a direct contemporary of Rashaz, penned an introduction to his famous work, *Kešot hašoshen* (Lemberg, 1788), which draws on Zoharic literature to extol the significance and ideal of innovation in Torah. It is likely that the same sources inspired Rashaz as well, but the latter’s inclusion of this ideal within a prescriptive codification of law seems to be something of a Torah innovation in its own right. My thanks to Alyssa M. Gray and others who brought Heller’s introduction to my attention. For more on this see Noam Samet, “Kešot hašoshen: reshit halamdanut – me’afaiyanim umagamot” (PhD diss., Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2016), Chapter 3. For broader discussion of the notion of halakhic change and innovation in Hasidic thought see Ariel E. Mayse, “The Ever-Changing Path: Visions of Legal Diversity in Hasidic Literature,” *Conversations* 23 (2015): 84-115; Maoz Kahana and Ariel Evan Mayse, “Hasidic Halakhah: Reappraising the Interface of Spirit and Law,” *AJS Review* 41:2 (November 2017): 375-408.

¹⁸⁰ Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 63.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

light that filled the hollow place prior to the *šimšum*, nevertheless the innovation herein is that the revelation shall be within the worlds.”¹⁸²

But when Torah innovation is achieved in the manner of a son who becomes a servant, as discussed in the later parts of *Samekh vav*, the circular paradigm is itself reversed; this is not about drawing that which transcends time into time, but rather about creating an entirely new and original innovation from within the confines of time. This aligns with the conception expounded in a text by Ramash and discussed by Wolfson in a different study, wherein it is underscored that “these novelties issue from Israel,” i.e. this is not a revelation of that which is already found above; the point of origin rather lies with the souls of Israel below. It is only “when they are generated by Israel” that these innovations “come into existence.” They are then retroactively encompassed in the Torah as it is not only “above time” but beyond existence, within the “essential concealment,” “the concealment that is not in existence,” which stands beyond the dynamic of revelation and concealment.¹⁸³

This mode of Torah innovation aligns with Rashab’s second explanation of the purpose of *šimšum*, that “specifically via the fulfillment of Torah and *mišvot* ... shall be elicited a new luminosity, with addition exceeding the principal that was already established according to the cosmic order etc. ... [that is,] the elicitation of new luminosity from the essence of the emanator ...”¹⁸⁴ I would posit that this expands and fundamentally reconstrues Wolfson’s notion of “circular linearity,” such that it is not repetition that is constitutive of innovation, but rather the more elusive phenomenon of an original and autonomous “essentiality” that is articulated not only through difference but through difficulty, and—furthermore—is less determined by the constraints of the past than by the possibilities of the future. As Wolfson has elsewhere written concerning “the Jewish apocalyptic sensibility” more generally: “The beginning whither one returns in the end is not the beginning whence one set forth toward the end.”¹⁸⁵ Rashab’s model of Torah study in the manner of a son who becomes a servant thus provides a second nomian path to the hypernomian, whereby without rupturing the law the bounds of the law are

¹⁸² *Samekh vav*, 4. Above, n86.

¹⁸³ See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 23. For the purposes of this discussion I have relied on Wolfson’s translation of Ramash’s words.

¹⁸⁴ *Samekh vav*, 8. Above, n89.

¹⁸⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Recovering Futurity: Theorizing the End and the End of Theory,” in *Jews and the Ends of Theory*, ed. Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land and Jonathan Boyarin (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2019), 304.

unprecedentedly exceeded and the divine essence is unprecedentedly and originally elicited.¹⁸⁶

Conclusion - Continuity and Discontinuity in Succession and *Şimşum*

As noted in Part 2 of this chapter, Rashab's public delivery of his discourses had an intensely personal dimension. Seated opposite him in the Yeshiva study hall was his only son, on whom he would fix his gaze and to whom he would address his words. Dynastic succession would thus have been axiomatic to the transmission of Rashab's teachings even if he had never offered any theorization of the nature of the relationship between father and son. Given this context, Rashab's explicit discussion of the nature of sonship and of the ideal of a son who attains the additional advantage of a servant—namely, the advantage of independent creativity afforded by discontinuity—can shed light both on his aspirations for the son and presumed successor who sat opposite him and also on his own self-image as the son of his father and the successor of the four Habad masters who came before him. For Rashab, it appears, dynastic authority is not merely afforded by the continuous accrual embodied in sonship but is ultimately earned through transforming discontinuous rupture into an opportunity for the additional attainment of the advantage of servitude.

In drawing our discussion of *şimşum* in Rashab's thought to a close it is accordingly appropriate to note that his theorization of the continuity between the primordial *or eyn sof* and the post-*şimşum* realm of *aşilut* is both similar and different to that of his father, Maharash. Through this comparison we will be able to better contextualize Rashab's activist and intellectual contribution within the larger arc of Habad's history.

In the previous chapter it was shown that Maharash's excavation of a trans-*şimşum* continuity between *or eyn sof* and *aşilut* provided the metaphysical basis for his argument against acosmism and for the apotheosis of the physical. Rashab widened and broadened this excavation towards a rather different end. Rather than overriding his father's conclusions, he added another layer of complexity, which was ultimately aimed at

¹⁸⁶ Also see *Torat shalom*, 233, section 21, which records a comment made by Rashab on Simchat Torah 5678 (1917). Citing a statement of Rashab that “the purpose of *şimşum* is that thereby the essence of the luminosity should be revealed (ענין הצמצום הוא שע"י יהי' התגלות עצם האור),” Rashab points out that this seems counterintuitive: Since Rashab himself is explicit that “*şimşum* occurs in the diffusion of the light specifically ... how can it be said that *şimşum* is in order to reveal the essence of the luminosity (איז דאך דער איז ענין הצמצום דוקא בהתפשטות האור ... אבל איך אומרים שהצמצום הוא לגלות עצם האור)?” Rashab's response is transcribed in a single sentence that encapsulates the argument set out with far more elaboration in *Samekh vav*: “This is the purpose of shattering the corporeality or of the preface of ‘we will do’ to ‘we will listen’ etc (זהו"ע שבירת החומריות או ענין הקדמת נעשה לנשמע כו).”

underscoring the discontinuous nature of the essential link between the physical realm and the innermost being of the divine. For Rashab, the continuity between *or eyn sof* and *ašilut* betrays that neither the latter nor the former should be construed as manifesting the divine essence, but are rather external articulations of the divine. The essence as it is in itself, Rashab insists, is only grasped through the sort of discontinuous and unprecedented innovation attained through human activity in this physical realm.

Rashab's development of this contrast between continuity and discontinuity can be seen in a sequence of discourses within *Samekh vav* that expansively and intricately discuss the upper reaches of the cosmological and pre-cosmological hierarchy. In contemporary Habad yeshivot this sequence is often studied by advanced students as a stand alone sub-*hemshekh*, beginning with the discourse *Haḥodesh*.¹⁸⁷ For them, its appeal derives from the exquisite clarity with which the most abstract echelons of divine transcendence are depicted, and with which different opinions among earlier Kabbalistic authorities are analyzed and theologically theorized. Yet, lifted from its context within the wider flow of *Samekh vav*, the true significance of *Haḥodesh* is inevitably missed.¹⁸⁸ Now that we have charted the broader arc of argumentation that the full *hemshekh* presents, the contextualization of *Haḥodesh* will serve to illustrate the ways in which Rashab's project is simultaneously continuous and discontinuous with the project of Maharash.

In *Haḥodesh* Rashab argues that the post-*šimšum* realm of *ašilut*—wherein the ten sephirot emerge as the divine interface with the created realms (*by"ta*)—is nothing more than the revelation of the pre-cosmological radiance of *or eyn sof* that was concealed by the *šimšum*: “This is not an innovation ... but only the revelation of that which was concealed.”¹⁸⁹ *Ašilut*, he emphasizes, does not reveal the essential luminosity of G-d (*ašmut or eyn sof*).¹⁹⁰

Revealed in the realm of *ašilut*, accordingly, are the infinite capacities of disclosure and containment that were previously concealed in the primordial radiance of the *or eyn sof*. The post-*šimšum* elicitation of the *kav* is construed as the primary medium via which the

¹⁸⁷ *Samekh vav*, 156-220 (discourses 19-26). For some remarks about *Haḥodesh* see Olidort, “Hemshekh yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666,” 20-1.

¹⁸⁸ One sign of the status of this sub-*hemshekh* in contemporary Habad is the recent publication of a book of commentary based on classes by Rabbi Zalman Gopin, senior mashpia in Israel's Central Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim Lubavitch at Kfar Chabad. See Zalman Gopin, *Shi'urim beḥasidut “hemshekh haḥodesh 5666”* ed. Shimon Gopin (Kfar Chabad: Kehot, 2013). Note that in this volume *Haḥodesh* is regarded as comprising five discourses, rather than eight, as indicated in the previous note. In my view this is a function of its decontextualization from *Samekh vav* as a whole.

¹⁸⁹ *Samekh vav*, 160: אין זה התחדשות ... כ"א בחי' גילוי ההעלם לבד

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160 and 195.

discontinuous rupture of *šimšum* is overcome, and it follows that *ašilut*—which receives the disclosure of the *kav*—does not reveal *ašmut eyn sof*, but only *or eyn sof*.

As Rashab explains later in the *hemshekh*:

Everything that is elicited via the *kav veḥut* ... is not designated a fundamentally new luminosity since this *kav veḥut* is the revelation of light from the concealment that was initially [revealed] prior to the *šimšum* ... It is accordingly understood ... regarding the *kav veḥut* that is drawn from *or eyn sof* via the *šimšum*, that there is nothing new at all in the revelation of this light in the *kav* that is drawn into the entirety of *ašilut* ... For even if the root and source of this *kav* would radiate, that is, the [primordial] aspect that is hidden [by the *šimšum*] etc., this too would not be a new luminosity ... Rather, it is the luminosity that is revealed from the essence of *or eyn sof*, not by means of revelation and concealment—and that is the essence of the *or eyn sof* as it is prior to the primordial *šimšum*, transcending the root and source of the *kav*—which is called a fundamentally new luminosity. That is, it does not come into the aspect of a root and source for the cosmos in a manner of concealment and revelation in the *kav veḥut* etc. And this comes by means of the toil and effort specifically, that thereby we elicit the revelation of a new luminosity, verily, which transcends the root and source of the *kav*, and as will be explained. And this is the extraordinary advantage of the toil of a servant with a yoke, with the work of refinement in a manner of innovation, that specifically thereby is elicited new luminosity, verily.¹⁹¹

כל מה שנמשך ע"י הקו"ח ... לא נק' בשם אור חדש מעיקרו, אחרי שקו"ח הזה הוא בח גילוי אור מבחי' ההעלם שהי' בתחלה לפני הצמצום ... כמו"כ יובן למעלה בבחי' הקו"ח שנמשך מאוא"ס ע"י בחי' הצמצום, שאין כל חדש בגילוי אור זה שבקו הנמשך בכל האצילות ... שגם אם יאיר בחי' שרש ומקור הקו הזה, דהיינו בחי' ההעלם כו', ה"ז ג"כ אינו אור חדש ... אבל אור הנגלה מבחי' עצמות אווא"ס שלא ע"י בחי' העלם וגילוי, והיינו עצמות אווא"ס כמו שהוא לפני צמצום הראשון, למעלה משרש ומקור הקו כו', הוא הנק' בחי' אור חדש מעיקרו, היינו שלא בא גם בבחי' שרש ומקור ההשתל' בבחי' העלם וגילוי בקו"ח כו'. וזה בא ע"י העבודה ויגיעה דוקא, שע"ז ממשיכים גילוי אור חדש ממש שלמעלה משרש ומקור הקו כו', וכמשי"ת. וזהו יתרון המעלה בבחי' עבודת עבד בעול בעבודת הבירורים בבחי' התחדשות שע"ז דוקא נמשך בח אור חדש ממש.

As should by now be quite clear, for Rashab the “revelation” of the essence is definitionally an unprecedented phenomenon that transcends the dynamic of revelation and concealment. No such phenomenon is instantiated in *ašilut*. The pre-primordial origin that stands beyond revelation and concealment, *ašmut or eyn sof*, can only be elicited via

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 336-7.

the discontinuous emergence of the created realms. Therein the divine is not revealed by default, but only through the sort of autonomous toil and effort that produces unprecedented luminosity. This, for Rashab, is why the abject physical realm of human habitation was created. This is the purpose of Torah study and *mišvah* observance: The end of being is not arrived at merely through linear progress (“revelation”), nor even via a linear circularity that will render it homologous to the beginning (this too is “revelation”), but rather through an essential dynamic of reversion and innovation by which the end elicits the origin that precedes the primordial.

Maharash’s excavation of an ontological continuity that ruptures the rupture of *šimšum* provided the metaphysical ground upon which he could uphold his anti-acosmic assertion that the physicality and limitations of the created realm are actually a manifestation of divine being, rather than a new being other than G-d. In substance, though not in form, Rashab’s argument in *Haḥodesh* is quite similar, emphasizing that *ašilut* is “analogous” to the pre-*šimšum* radiance of the *or eyn sof*. But Rashab’s larger point is fundamentally different: In undermining the rupture of the primordial *šimšum* Rashab aims to show that it is only in the created realms—and most specifically, through action, toil, and difficulty—that anything new can really be achieved.

Both as an intellectual and as an activist, Rashab was fundamentally committed to the essential and eternal value of Judaism’s deeply conservative tradition of nomos: Torah study and *mišvah* observance. But for him such conservatism provided the inexorable path by which to attain the cosmic imperative of essential innovation. He was neither afraid of thinking new thoughts nor of doing new things. On the contrary, he recognized that he was living in an era of rupture, and he recognized the essential power that it could unleash, either to rupture nomian tradition or to fill it with unprecedented and overabundant luminosity.

This chapter cannot claim to represent a comprehensive overview of Rashab’s discussions of *šimšum*, nor does it even provide a comprehensive overview of the role played by *šimšum* in *Samekh vav* alone. What we have shown, however, is that *šimšum* occupies a central place in his thought, providing the pivotal framework within which he unfolds a new account of how Torah and *mišvot* realize divine purpose in the cosmos. We have also illustrated important elements of his methodological approach more generally, including: 1) the voluminosity, clarity and breadth of his explanatory theorizations, which should rightly be seen as a conscious continuation of the style favoured by Rashab’s son and successor, R. DovBer; 2) the attentiveness with which he read and interpreted the

canonical writings of Rashaz, especially as published in *Tanya* and *Torah or*, which is an equally conscious continuation of the Şemaḥ Şedek's intertextual approach to the teachings of Rashaz; 3) the elegance with which he synthesizes a diverse array of topics—including, perhaps most significantly, cosmological and devotional questions—within a single conceptual framework, and within the single literary edifice of a *hemshekh*, a genre that was pioneered by his father, Maharash.¹⁹²

Additionally, we have gone some way to outlining the ways in which Rashab not only built on his father's innovations, but also departed from them. Rather than *hokhmah*'s continuity with pre-*şimşum* infinitude, he emphasized *malkhut*'s creative elicitation of an entirely new luminosity. This shift, we have shown, is more broadly reflected in his excavation of a new explanation of the purpose of *şimşum* according to which the teleological end is not attained through reversion to the primordial but rather through essential innovation.

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¹⁹² Regarding R. DovBer's expository style see the discussion and citations above, 1:4. On the methodological innovations of the Şemaḥ Şedek and Maharash see Chapter 2. For Rashab's appreciation of the magnitude of R. DovBer's contribution to Habad thought see *Torat shalom*, 158, where he also mentions his debt and devotion to the legacies of his grandfather, the Şemaḥ Şedek, and of his father Maharash.

CONCLUSION

The Reality and Fecundity of *Şimşum* and its Imprint on Habad Thought, Literature, and History

The above study has shown that in the Habad context *şimşum* should not be viewed straightforwardly as a theological doctrine whose fundamental meaning is fixed and settled. *Şimşum* is rather a fecund site for ongoing theoretical engagement, interpretation, and reinterpretation, with far-reaching theological, cosmological, and ontological implications. The discourse on *şimşum* is also deeply intertwined with larger literary, social, and historical developments within Habad. The necessary imbrication of phenomenology and historiography in research on Habad is especially highlighted when we note the ways in which the ongoing engagement with the meaning and significance of *şimşum* intersects with the negotiation of questions related to succession, authority, and leadership.

In the context of his defense of Hasidic doctrine against the polemics of the mitnagdim, Rashaz, Habad's founder, conclusively argued that *şimşum* should not be understood as a literal withdrawal or constriction of divine presence. But this did not bring Habad's preoccupation with the interpretation of *şimşum* to a close. On the contrary, its continued centrality in Habad's ongoing ideological and hermeneutical discourse is partly due to its centrality in the emergence and establishment of Habad as a coherent socio-intellectual institution in its own right. In addition, Rashaz's complex theorizations of how *şimşum* mediates the relationship between G-d and the created cosmos—along with the associated relationships between the infinite and the finite, oneness and multiplicity, revelation and concealment—are sometimes only expressed in cryptic or embryonic form, leaving room for divergent interpretations and ambiguities.

The most glaring of these ambiguities is the question of acosmism. Many academic scholars understood Rashaz's non-literal interpretation of *şimşum* to transform it into a mere metaphor, rather than a real cosmological event. By extension, the created cosmos itself is denuded of ontological reality. A systematic reading of relevant texts, attentive not only to the local meaning of particular statements but also to the wider textual and rhetorical context, conclusively demonstrates that Rashaz did not deny the reality of the physical world at all. Rather his theory of creation consistently emphasizes that the illusion of G-d's absence from the world is the condition that allows for G-d to unite with the world through the dialectical act of creation. The figurative transcendence of G-d,

relative to which no other entity exists at all, operates with literal immanence as the vitalizing ground of earthly reality. On this score, it was shown, the oft repeated statement that the worlds are *batel bemešit* should not be understood as indicating that their “existence is nullified,” but rather that they are “existentially effaced.” In other words, they are ontologically constituted by their suffusion with, and effacement in, the transcendent and singular being of G-d. Notably, this notion of creation as an act that simultaneously bifurcates G-d from the world (epistemologically) and unites G-d with the world (ontologically) is especially developed through the association of *šimšum* with the *sefirah* of *malkhut*.

Rashaz’s preoccupation with the enduring oneness (*aḥdut*) and singularity (*yihud*) of G-d, despite the creation of the world, tended to occlude the underlying affirmation of creation as a real ontological event. Only one such affirmation is explicated in the entire corpus of his teachings, and it is easily missed. Yet his son, R. DovBer Schneuri, boldly declared that “the separated something is ... the true something,”¹ imbuing “the world qua world” with “ultimate reality.”² He further asserted that the realization of this perspective during contemplative prayer is “higher” than the achievement of a more acosmistic experience of effacement that erases any sense of worldly existence. Rashaz’s grandson, the Šemaḥ Šedek, was less bold, but no less unequivocal in his conclusion that “*šimšum* has substance”³ and that his grandfather’s characterization of the created realms as being “like naught” is precise; they are not “naught literally” but only “like naught” in the sense that the substance of their existence is “effaced” within G-d “like the radiance of the sun when it is within the globe of the sun.”⁴ The Šemaḥ Šedek does not uphold the principle of divine immutability with the assertion that creation is not a real event, but rather with the assertion that creation is encompassed in the self of G-d: even as the created cosmos exists, G-d remains the unique being that encompasses all being in complete union and undifferentiated singularity.

Despite this clear disambiguation, the overall tenor of Habad teachings in the first three generations of the movement continued to be dominated by a rhetoric of acosmism, according to which the material realm generally appears to be denuded of any significance in its own right. Explicit instances of disambiguation are rare exceptions to the rule. Against this background, a discourse by the Šemaḥ Šedek’s youngest son, Maharash, stands out for its direct and fulsome argument against acosmism. Written, and

¹ Rabbi DovBer Schneuri, *Be’urei hazohar*, 96c [192] (43c).

² Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 171.

³ Šemaḥ Šedek, “Mišvat ha’amanat elokut,” in *Derekh mišvotekha*, 54b.

⁴ Šemaḥ Šedek, *Or hatorah - shemot II*, 488.

probably delivered in public, in the last few months of his father's life and in the midst of a brewing succession controversy, the opening words of this discourse—"Who is like You (*mi kamokhah*) among the mighty?" (Exodus 15:11)—imply that other beings do exist and might mistakenly be compared to G-d. Maharash cements this implication by buttressing our empirical experience of the world as real with the Mishnaic legal distinction between illusion and real magic. Such a distinction, he argues, is meaningless unless the world itself is understood to be real and not an illusion. Maharash also takes a further step, moving from an anti-acosmistic argument to a positive theorization of the pre-*šimšum* primordially of the finite, which leads not only to an affirmation of the reality of the physical world but to its apotheosis.

The initiation of his incisive and systematic recalibration of Habad thought at this early stage likely highlighted the differences in personality and spiritual orientation between Maharash and his older brother Maharil, thereby intensifying the succession controversy revolving around them. A comprehensive survey of available sources indicates that Maharil had long been seen as an authoritative figure in the model of the old Habad establishment. Maharash—some three decades Maharil's junior—cut a more modern figure, combining worldly acumen with a fresher and more agile engagement with Habad's intellectual and literary tradition. Ultimately, the younger brother filled his father's seat in Lubavitch and the elder established his court in nearby Kopust, where he passed away just a few months later. Over the course of the sixteen years of his tenure, Maharash would continue to develop and advance a trenchant metaphysics of materiality, repeating and expanding on the "Mi kamokhah" discourse in more than ten different iterations, and devoting an extensive series (*hemshekh*) of discourses to a phenomenological and cosmological reinterpretation of the significance of the *sefirah* of *ḥokhmah* as a post-*šimšum* incarnation of pre-*šimšum* nothingness. The telos of the spiritual journey, as presented by Maharash in this *hemshekh*, is to render all existence transparent to the transcendent ineffability that *ḥokhmah* articulates.

A related thread that runs through Maharash's corpus is his radical theorization of the post-Lurianic motif of the "trace" (*reshimah*) left in the aftermath of *šimšum*. Previously this was a relatively obscure detail of modern Kabbalistic discourse. But Maharash recast it as a facet of pre-*šimšum* omnipotence, completion, and luminosity that remains untouched by *šimšum*. This establishes a fundamental ontological continuity between the highest reaches of divine being and the cosmic nadir that this material realm is understood to instantiate. Moreso, on this score it is understood that "the root of finitude is loftier

than the infinite capacity,”⁵ for it is specifically the latter that is concealed and mediated by *šimšum* while the former extends an immediate instantiation of divine primordially into the cosmos. This actually transforms our understanding of *šimšum* itself: it does not mark the genesis of limitation, but is rather an act of infinite delimitation, or discovery, by which the primordial capacity of divine finitude is no longer secreted and obscured within the blinding assertion of the infinite light. It also transforms our understanding of the nature of material being, wherein finitude is foremost: it is not the cosmic rung furthest removed from G-d’s self, but rather manifests the most intimate disclosure of divine being. What was most esoteric and introverted prior to *šimšum* emerges as the most exoteric face of finite materiality.

Importantly, the most salient iteration of Maharash’s theorization of the significance of the *reshimah* appeared in his posthumous publication *Likutei torah misefer bereshit* (Vilna, 1884), which revived the theological and ideological facet of the split between the Lubavitch and Kopust branches of Habad. This exemplifies the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity that his recalibration of Habad thought embodied. On the one hand, his contribution was framed as a direct interpretation of a cryptic remark by Rashaz, whose paradoxical and counterintuitive implications had already been noted by the Šemaḥ Šedek. On the other hand, any antecedent to Maharash’s theorization was sufficiently ambiguous that its relevance could be dismissed with at least some plausibility by his nephew, R. Shlomo Zalman Schneersohn of Kopust, the son and successor of Maharil.

This illustrates a broader point that has been emphasized time and again throughout this study: through an intergenerational comparative analysis of Habad discourse on *šimšum* we have also illuminated broader questions concerning methodology, literary style, genre development, and print history. Habad’s institutionalization as a hereditary dynasty is shown to be deeply bound up with the question of who is seen to be the legitimate custodian of its intellectual and literary legacy. Processes of succession and their associated ambiguities and controversies were not only imbricated in social, political and monetary concerns, but naturally had intellectual and literary dimensions as well.

While Maharash crystallised the move from the affirmation of the world’s reality to its apotheosis, it was his son and successor, Rashab, who took the further step of developing a comprehensive account of the created world as a fecund crucible of creativity. In contrast to his father’s concern with drawing primordial nothingness into the cosmos via the ineffable articulation of *hokhmah*, or via the trace that remains untouched by *šimšum*,

⁵ Maharash, “Mi kemokhah” in *Likutei torah—torat shmuel, sefer 5629*, 163 [150].

Rashab's preoccupation with the embodied fecundity of *malkhut* highlights his interest in the physical world as the ultimate site of innovation wherein an unprecedented and overabundant manifestation can be elicited from the very essence of G-d. The purpose of *šimšum*, he argued, is not that we should render the world transparent to the pre-*šimšum* revelation of divine infinitude, but rather the origination of a luminosity that is "entirely new" and "essential," transcending the ordinary dynamic of concealment and revelation.

This new conception of the purpose of *šimšum* formed the foundation upon which Rashab constructed a thoroughgoing and magisterial rethinking of the phenomenological teleology of Torah study, *mišvah* observance, and the religious experiences they engender. In shifting the focus of his theorization from *hokhmah* to *malkhut* he shifted the focus of the religious quest from the retrieval of the metacosmic past to the generation of a new point of fecund originality that can only be grasped in and through the created cosmos. He taught that the rupture and occlusion of *šimšum* occasions the sort of struggles, challenges, and doubts that can only be overcome through "extreme toil," demanding a deep sense of responsibility, acceptance of the yoke of heaven, and awe before G-d. It is specifically thereby that "one reaches *ašmut eyn sof mamash*, that is the essential hiddenness of the infinite etc" and elicits "a revelation of new luminosity, verily."⁶

Rashab's phenomenological teleology combined a rigorous and unapologetic conservatism with an equally rigorous and unapologetic quest for true and essential innovation. This tension was expressed theoretically through his innovative engagement with, and development of, Habad's distinctive tradition of post-Lurianic theology and hermeneutics. It was expressed practically through his activist program of resistance and response to the secularising trends of Haskalah and Zionism, riding the broader waves of political rupture and change that marked the first decades of the 20th century to engineer a distinctly modern renaissance of tradition.

This correspondence between ideology and activism is also reflected in the fact that Rashab's emergence as a leader and institution builder in the public sphere coincided with the blossoming of his intellectual ruminations and their expression in literary productivity. Following Maharash's passing in 1882 it was not immediately clear that Rashab would fill his seat, and indeed he avoided doing so for more than a decade. In the mid 1890s, however, he set aside the path of solitude he had previously favoured. In addition to accepting the role of *admor* of Habad-Lubavitch he also committed himself to

⁶ Rashab, *Samekh vav*, 391-2.

a much broader leadership agenda. In 1895 he impeded, and ultimately thwarted an effort by Baron Horace Günzburg to establish a “reformist” rabbinical school in St. Petersburg. Two years later he established a rabbinical school of his own with a curriculum designed to entrench within its students deep spiritual sensibility and devotional commitment in addition to turning them into competent Talmudists and knowledgeable rabbis.

Henceforth, Rashab’s oral discourses would be delivered in the presence of these students, who he dubbed “*temimim*.” Over the course of the next two decades he organized and mobilized the traditional rabbinate into a force that would successfully displace the Günzburg family as the sole representatives of the Jewish community to the higher echelons of the imperial Russian government.

Viewed in isolation, Rashab’s innovative activist initiatives could be understood as a purely pragmatic attempt to stem the tide of change. Yet the profundity and originality with which he reinterpreted *šimšum*’s telos shows that he did not hold tradition and change together simply because the circumstances required it, but rather because he understood the dynamic tension between reversion and innovation to be essential and necessary for the ultimate realization of cosmic purpose. This is especially significant when we note that Rashab’s intellectual and activist legacy provided the model and the basis for Habad’s continued perpetuation and flourishing through the many tribulations of the twentieth century.

By the time of Rashab’s death in the spring of 1920, political upheaval had given way to outright revolution, civil war, and finally the consolidation of all political power in the hands of the Bolsheviks. The impact of these events on the Jewish community in general, and on the traditional rabbinate in particular, was severe. The networks Rashab had so carefully cultivated were in disarray, and the “Jewish section” (Yevsektsiya) of the communist party—aided by other agents of the state—set out to systematically and brutally stifle traditional Jewish learning and religious practice. Rashab’s son and successor, Rayatz, had been the executive director of the Tomchei Temimim yeshiva since its establishment in 1897, and he quickly mobilized the alumni into an underground network that would tenaciously and valiantly resist the Yevsektsiya’s program of compulsory secularisation. A key element of these illegal activities was the maintenance of clandestine branches of Tomchei Temimim, whose faculty and students were constantly on the move, trying to keep one step ahead of the authorities. As the historian David Fishman has written, “Schneerson’s *temimim* (i.e. the alumni of Tomchei

Temimim) were infused with the passionate idealism and heroic spirit of Russian revolutionaries. Tradition assumed the role of a subversive counterculture.”⁷

Many *temimim* were arrested, served time in the gulags or were shot for their “crimes.” Those who survived these ordeals would ultimately make their way to Poland, Israel, the United States and elsewhere, where new branches of Tomchei Temimim formed new centers for the proliferation of Habad that continues to the present day. While education had always been central to the Habad ethos, it was Rashab who institutionalized the pedagogical ethic, thereby creating a scalable infrastructure for the cultivation of the sort of religious counterculture described by Fishman. It is not incidental that the combination of ideas and ideals with a passionate commitment to activism is likewise a facet of the Habad ethos that began to crystallize under Rashab’s leadership. The contemporary institution of *sheliḥut* (ambassadorship), according to which Habad Hasidism move to Jewish communities perceived as spiritually underserved to construct a more robust religious infrastructure, is often thought of as a phenomenon of the post-holocaust era. In truth, however, it was pioneered by Rashab: in 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, he sent a *sheli’ah* to Harbin, China to oversee the provision of *maṣah* to Jewish troops,⁸ and a decade later sent another to shore up the spiritual and religious well-being of underserved Jewish communities in the Caucasus.⁹

Rashab’s discourses have continued to hold a central place in the Habad yeshiva curriculum up to the present era, in addition to the seminal role they played as the direct basis for the discourses of Rayatz. While Ramash, the son-in-law and successor of Rayatz, drew explicitly on the entire Habad corpus in his discourses, his succinct style—which became increasingly spare and allusive with the passing years—especially relied on his listeners’ knowledge of Rashab’s profuse elaborations of the mystical concepts he mentioned. An examination of the continued engagement with the significance of *ṣimṣum* in the thought of Rayatz and Ramash, applying the techniques utilized in the present study, would certainly provide a window through which to examine and illuminate their respective methodological and theological interventions. There is little doubt that between 1920 and 1992 *ṣimṣum* remained as fruitful and as central a site of interpretive dynamism

⁷ David E. Fishman, “Preserving Tradition In The Land of Revolution: The Religious Leadership of Soviet Jewry, 1917-1930” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge, MA: JTS / Harvard, 1992), 118.

⁸ See Eli Rubin, “The Chinese Matzah Campaign of 1905,” *Chabad.org* <Chabad.org/2174130> (accessed August 6, 2021).

⁹ See Shalom DovBer Levine, *Toldot ḥabad be rusya hesovyetit* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1989), 7. Also see Andrew Koss, “War Within, War Without: Russian Refugee Rabbis during World War I,” *AJS Review* 34:2 (November 2010): 231-263.

and ingenuity—with important ramifications for both ideology and activism—as it did from 1796 to 1920.

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