

BUILDING THE BODY OF THE *SHEKHINAH*:
RE-ENCHANTMENT AND REDEMPTION OF THE NATURAL WORLD IN HASIDIC THOUGHT

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NOTE: This version is my draft rather than the edited version in the book, since JPS introduced some errors in their final editing. It also includes one section left out of the book version.

INTRODUCTION

Kabbalah began the process of re-enchanting the Jewish relationship with Nature, after rationalist Jewish philosophy had drained Judaism of its mythic character.¹ This process took place on multiple levels. For example, the Torah became vested with mythological imagery. The *mitsvot* were understood to affect the flow of blessing into Nature itself. Souls could reincarnate from human to animal to plant to angel and back again, while the physical body once again became a locus of the divine image, instead of just the soul.²

Hasidism both continued and radically updated Kabbalah, bringing it into new relationships with new realms. The mythical fields and forests of the Kabbalists in the *Zohar* became the real fields and forests in which many rebbes and their Hasidim prayed. But just how much can we make of their encounter with Nature, and how useful is it to the ecological conversation of our age? That will be my focus here, as we examine more closely the strength and the limits of the Hasidic embrace of Nature within what was essentially an anthropocentric worldview. We will see both that there is much to build on, and that a neo-Hasidic Judaism will need to expand greatly on Hasidism's vision of Nature in order to respond to the crises we are facing.

One of the earliest records of Hasidism, a letter written by the Ba'al Shem Tov to his brother-in-law, says in fact that this kind of expansion is the messianic goal of the BeSHT's teachings. The letter describes the BeSHT's soul ascent to meet the soul of *Mashiach*, the Messiah. Upon meeting soul-to-soul, the BeSHT asked *Mashiach*, "When will the master come?" *Mashiach* answered, "When your wellsprings spread out beyond (or, outside – *chutsah*)."³

How far should they spread? Beyond what boundary? To what end, what purpose, what limit? The BeSHT's letter does not specify. One obvious interpretation would be

1 This is not to say that Jewish philosophy has nothing to contribute to a theology of Nature. Maimonides was and still is the only Jewish thinker to significantly challenge anthropocentrism and his work is essential. See David Seidenberg, "Maimonides", in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), pp. 1026–1027; also at neohasid.org/torah/rambam/ (Jan. 2014).

² See David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-*

³ *Keter Shem Tov ha-Shalem* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 2004), §1, pp. 4-5

that the teachings of Hasidism must spread beyond the BeSHT's disciples (which it was soon to do), and even beyond the Orthodox world of Eastern Europe, to all Jews. A second would be that his teachings would spread beyond the Jewish world to all humanity. For this it would need Martin Buber, writing a century and a half later than the BeSHT. But a third meaning would be this: the BeSHT's teachings must spread beyond the human world to include the more-than-human world⁴ of Nature.

The Neo-Hasidic movement is already an unfolding of this vision and a universalizing of the BeSHT's teachings, in all three ways. But here I am going to look exclusively at the third rung of expansion, and explore Hasidic teachings that can help us move beyond the confined circle of the human world to embrace and live in fuller communion with the more-than-human. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi often talked about this process in terms of protecting Gaia, and I believe it must play a central role in any version of Neo-Hasidism.

I am suggesting that we take on the mission nascent in Hasidism to make manifest the *Shekhinah* in the more-than-human world. Doing this in a maximal sense could entail transcending our normal anthropocentrism, and finding God's presence and image in the more-than-human world in a way that is inherently revealed by nature itself. In each section below, I will explore teachings that can be vital for this ethical evolution, and I will examine how these teachings might be reshaped by us to serve that end.⁵

I. THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD⁶

According to stories, the BeSHT would go off into the mountains for days at a time to do what we might call meditation. This process must have included intense observation of the natural world, if we are to believe the stories. Though the mode of observation was religious, not scientific, the BeSHT saw the hand of the divine in every gesture and movement of the creatures. For example, a report tells us,

Once the Ba'al Shem Tov showed to his disciples a certain leaf as it fell to the ground and told them to pick it up. They did so and saw that a worm was

⁴ The term "more-than-human world" was coined by David Abram to emphasize that the human world is both embedded in and part of the natural world. See *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). It embraces a world that is both immanent and intimately related to us, but it also acknowledges that this world transcends our needs, purposes, and knowledge. From a mystical perspective it would not be wrong to imagine the worlds of divinity included in this framework.

⁵ This means that rather than summarize the teachings in *Chasidut* that praise or affirm our connection to the natural world, I will focus on those teachings that can lead to substantive theological evolution.

⁶ The term "more-than-human world" was coined by David Abram to emphasize that the human world is both embedded in and part of the natural world. See his *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). "More-than-human" embraces a world that is both immanent and intimately related to us, but it also acknowledges that this world transcends our needs, purposes, and knowledge. From a mystical perspective, it would not be wrong to imagine the worlds of divinity included in this framework.

underneath it. The Ba'al Shem Tov explained that the worm had been suffering due to heat, so this leaf had fallen to give it shade.⁷

The BeSHT's emphatic declaration that a leaf does not fall without being directed by God marked a special way of seeing the world. Divine providence, God's guidance of the destiny of each living being, called in Hebrew *hashgachah peratit*, was generally applied to human beings, but the Ba'al Shem Tov applied it to other creatures. For the Ba'al Shem Tov, *hashgachah peratit* extended to all beings, independent of their participation in the human world, and to every change in the world. In the workings of *hashgachah*, the BeSHT saw the expression of a divine compassion that touched the individuality of each and every living thing.

This legacy of field and forest was passed on by the BeSHT to his great-grandson Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), one of the great poetic spirits of the Jewish tradition. Nachman had an intense passion for being "out in Nature" (to use a contemporary idiom), and even enjoined upon his Hasidim the practice of going alone everyday into the fields or forests to pray aloud. He claimed that human prayer can actually be a process of gathering up the prayers of the more-than-human world:

Know that when a person prays in a field, all of the grasses/plants together come into the prayer, and they help him, and give him strength within his prayer. And this is what it means when prayer is called "conversation" (*sichah*): it refers to "the growth of the field" (*siach ha-sadeh*, Gen. 2:5), [meaning] that every shoot from the field gives strength and helps his prayer. And this is [what the verse means when it says,] "And Isaac went out to reflect in the field" (*la-suach ba-sadeh*, Gen. 24:63): that his prayer (*sichah*) was made with the help and strength of the field (*siach*), that all the plants of the field gave strength and helped his prayer...for all the plants prayed with him.⁸

Prayer, which is so essential in every system of Hasidic thought, is rooted in the conversation of the plants, and ultimately, in the earth itself. One could say that human beings are not the creators of language but tools used by the creatures to fashion their language into prayer. I believe that here and throughout his teachings about the natural world, Nachman is describing his lived experience, and using scripture to give that experience weight.

Nachman of Breslov took a theological and midrashic approach to finding the source of prayer not just in Nature generally but in the unique character of each place or habitat or ecosystem (to use modern terms) in the more-than-human realm. Nachman explains that it is the uniqueness of every landscape that inspires the unique song of one who is intimate with the land:

Know that every shepherd has a unique melody (*niggun*) according to the grasses and the place where he herds. For every animal (*beheimah*) has a grass unique to her that she needs to eat, and also a shepherd is not always in one place, and according to the grasses and the place where he herds, so he has a *niggun*. For every grass there is a song (*shirah*) which it speaks...and from the song of the

⁷ Sha'ar ha-Otiyot, *hashgachah pratit*, quoted in David Sears, *The Vision of Eden: Animal Welfare and Vegetarianism in Jewish Law and Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Orot, 2003), p. 15.

⁸ *Likutey Moharan* 2:11.

grasses is made the *nigun* of the shepherd...And this is the dimension of “From the edge (or “wing”, *kanaf*) of the earth we heard songs (*zemirot*)” (Isa. 24:16)— [it means] that songs and *nigunim* come out from “the wing of the earth”, for by means of the grasses growing in the land a *niggun* is made. And since the shepherd knows the *niggun*, by means of this he gives strength to the grasses...and there is pasture for the animals.⁹

While every blade of grass sings its own song, all the plants in a given locale form a kind of chorus, and from their chorus one derives a unique melody that is whole and unified and connected to that place. When one sings the song of a specific place, according to Nachman, one also helps the plants in that place grow. Thus, our relationship with the plants is one of mutual help. This is not just a beautiful idea – it is essential to a theology of Nature, because Nachman’s teaching explains how each ecosystem or habitat can be a unique expression of divine blessing and love.

The mutual quality of our relationship with the more-than-human world is already hinted at in the Torah verse already quoted: “And all the growth of the field was yet to be in the land, and any plant of the field was yet to sprout, for Y-H-W-H *Elohim* had not made it rain on the land, for there was no human to serve¹⁰ the soil.” (Gen. 2:5) But Hasidic thought, most especially Reb Nachman, gives us many new ways to think about our mutuality with the land, and our ability to serve the land and the ecosystems in which we participate.

II. THE DIVINE ECOSYSTEM, SONG, AND PRAYER

Nachman’s understanding of the role of human song also describes a divine ecosystem – the song made from the grasses serves to bring sustenance back to them to nourish the animals, and it does so by reaching the divine realms and eliciting blessing from them. Elsewhere, Nachman taught that song and prayer, encumbered by words, cannot reach the highest levels of divine reality, but that *niggun*, meaning a melody without words, can even cross the silence and empty space that separates the universe from God, reaching all the way to *Ein Sof*, to the infinite, primordial source.¹¹ Humanity in his vision has a vital role to play by creating *nigunim*, bringing the melody of Creation back to the Creator.

Nachman’s anthropocentrism is the opposite of domination, because for Nachman, being at the center means being responsible. Similarly, he taught,

⁹ Likutey Moharan 2:63.

¹⁰ *La-‘avod et ha-adamah* is usually translated “to till the soil” or “to work the ground.” While that would not be incorrect in terms of functional connotation, the Hebrew phrase does not imply the idea that humanity is controlling and dominating the land, bending the land’s inherent nature to serve humanity’s ends. In fact, the formulation is no different from the phrase “to serve *Adonai*.” Similarly, where the Torah explains that the human being was placed in the garden *le-‘ovdah ule-shomrah* “to serve her and to guard her”, this is an exactly parallel to the commandment “to worship [God]” *ul-ovdo* in Deuteronomy. For the ancient Hebrews, farming was a sacramental act and a way of serving the land.

¹¹ *Likutey Moharan* 1:64.

[S]ince the world is created for my sake, I need to see and look in every moment into repairing the world / *b'tikkun ha'olam*, and to replenish what the world lacks, and to pray on their behalf.¹²

Nachman's emphasis on the essential role played by human beings is normative for Kabbalah and *Chasidut*. The human role in the cycle of divine blessing was always part of Kabbalah, but its relation to the actual world of Nature became sharper in Kabbalistic circles just before Hasidism began. For example, a seventeenth century Kabbalistic prayer for the fruit trees, which comes from the *Peri 'Ets Hadar* and is recited at the *Tu B'shevat* seder,¹⁵ asks that God cause the flow of blessing to flow over the fruit trees, and awaken the sap in them, through our eating fruit and "our meditating upon the secret of their roots...to make them grow and bloom from the beginning of the year until the end of the year."¹⁶ The purpose of prayer and meditation was to stimulate new blessings to flow into the trees and into the physical world.

Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745–1813), a leading student of the Maggid of Mezritsh (the disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov who turned Hasidism into a movement) who himself founded Habad Hasidism in the late eighteenth century, voiced parallel ideas about the spiritual light of the plants and trees. But unlike Reb Nachman, Shneur Zalman uniquely emphasized that the cycle of divine energy was driven by a great upwelling of light from the Earth itself, without the need for human intervention.¹⁷ This light, he taught, is a manifestation of the original light of Creation (and the only manifestation that is still revealed to us),

for during the seven days of the beginning, there shone in this world a radiance from the light of the *Ein Sof* in pure or freely-given Love (*chesed chinam*)... to make plants and trees and fruits grow from nothing to something continually, more than enough, year by year, which is an essence of the dimension of *Ein Sof*.¹⁸

¹² *Likutey Moharan* 1:5.

¹⁵ See *Kabbalah and Ecology*, Excursus 2, pp. 357-9, for a fuller excerpt of the prayer, or go to neohasid.org/torah/blessing_for_tubi/. The celebration of the New Year for the trees that takes place between winter solstice and spring equinox. In Kabbalah, it is also a celebration of the Tree of Life.

¹⁶ First published in *Chemdat Yamim* (Constantinople, 1763), vol. 2, fol. 109a–b. On *Peri 'Ets Hadar*, see Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 212–13, 357–9. The full moon of the month of *Shevat* that falls midway between winter solstice and spring equinox was traditionally the New Year of the trees, but it also became celebrated in Kabbalah as the New Year of the Tree of Life.

¹⁷ That of course is closer to the physical truth, but it was a big step away from Kabbalistic anthropocentrism. Shneur Zalman nevertheless believed that human intervention through farming increased the power of the fruit by also drawing down supernal light through arousing *mayin nukvin* (feminine waters).

¹⁸ *Likutey Amarim—Tanya* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1956), *Igeret Ha-kodesh* 20, fol. 129a-133a. The notes explain that this was the last teaching that he ever wrote down, close to the end of his life.

Shneur Zalman used the Kabbalistic term *Or Chozer*, meaning the light that is reflected or returned back to the source of Creation, to describe this light.¹⁹ As we are sustained by the plants and by the creatures that eat them, we become part of a great cycle of Life that keeps this infinite light flowing back to the One.

Zohar Chadash also emphasizes a cycle that existed before humanity existed, in the form of song rather than light:

The Holy One created desiring songs with the creation of heavens and earth...
[A]ll the world are desiring and rejoicing to beautify the One who formed them...
and this is “In beginning (*B’Rei’ShiT*)” (Gen. 1:1)—look at the letters and see:
Desiring Song (*ShiR Ta’eV*).²⁰

Together, these passages and images describe a kind of ecosystem of language and song and prayer in which the human being is one organ of a complex cycle nurturing both Life and divinity. Understanding that we are in dialogue with the world around us—understanding this not just as metaphor but as phenomenology—opens us up to new dimensions of experience. When we lift up speech to the level of song, human language shifts from being something that separates us from most other creatures, to a process that emerges from the rhythms and music of a world constituted by relationship. In this sense, the challenge of our time is not to learn to speak with the more-than-human world, but to realize that we are already speaking with it.

III. REDEEMING THE SPARKS

The BeSHT saw divine compassion in every movement of Nature and divine providence over every creature in every occurrence. However, the BeSHT did not apply such lessons about God’s nature and Nature’s God to how most humans should act. Instead, the Hasid’s characteristic manner of interacting with the more-than-human was to seek out divine sparks and redeem them. Human compassion was not extended to other creatures but rather to the sparks that were found within them.

At its best, redeeming the sparks was described by the Ba’al Shem Tov as a process that could reveal the divinity concealed in everything. The BeSHT used code words to allude to this concept, describing each spark as a “human being” or as a *komah sheleimah*, a “complete [spiritual] body”, using a Kabbalistic term that means a complete expression of the Sefirot, which are the image of God.²¹

For example, the Besht explained that “in truth, in every desire of the world, there are sparks of the dimension of human beings (*beney adam*) which are a complete body (*komah sheleimah*).”²² Here the BeSHT means every *human* desire. More remarkably, the Ba’al Shem Tov also taught that the sparks found throughout the more-than-human world

¹⁹ However, the meaning he gives this term is *sui generis*. See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 255-265.

²⁰ *Midrash Hane’elam, Bereishit* 5d.

²¹ *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 288-92.

²² Yitshak Ayzik Safrin, *Notser Chesed ‘al Masekhet Avot*, ch. 3 (quoted in *Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov al ha-Torah, Bereishit*, §157).

contained this divine image. As Yakov Yosef of Polnoye (1710–84), one of the earliest promulgators of the BeSHT’s teachings, reports:

It is known that every spark, from the silent, growing, moving/living and speaking ones [i.e. rock, vegetable, animal, human], has in it a complete body (*komah sheleimah*) drawn from 248 limbs and 365 sinews (i.e., a human body).²³

These sparks represent God’s image embedded in all creatures. Their universality is reflected in one of the most radical teachings from the BeSHT about the sparks in what we use:

[We] eat human beings / *beney adam* and sit on human beings and use human beings — these are the sparks in those things. Therefore, a person must have pity/*chas* on their implements and on everything that is theirs, for these [things come to them] because of sparks that are there.²⁴

Scattered sparks and scattered souls, or fragments of soul-life, were alternative ways of describing the same reality.²⁵ However, the presence of these sparks in the other creatures did not necessarily imply that the creatures have *intrinsic* value, nor did human compassion toward the sparks necessarily translate into compassion toward the world. This reason for this may be that Hasidic thought often included a Gnostic element, derived from Lurianic Kabbalah,²⁶ that regarded the material world negatively.

A. IMPRISONMENT OR GESTATION?

We can see that compassion for the sparks did not entail compassion for the creatures that held them in the last passage quoted, Yaakov Yosef explains that we are enjoined to redeem the sparks we encounter because they are *imprisoned* in other creatures and in the material world:

When [a spark] is found within the silent or the growing being (rock/mineral or plant), it is in the prison house, for it cannot spread out its hands and its legs or speak, for ‘its head [is] on its knees and gut’ (Exod. 12:9). And one who is able through the goodness of one’s thought to raise the holy spark to living or speaking brings it out to freedom, and there is no greater redeeming of captives (*pidyon shevuyim*) for you than this, as I heard from my teacher.

²³ *Ben Porat Yosef* (Pieterkov Poland, 1884) 74a.

²⁴ *Keter Shem Tov*, vol.1, §218. The version of this teaching in *Tzava’at Harivash* §109 נז corrupted, or perhaps “corrected” to make it less radical. This has led to many misinterpretations, both traditional and scholarly, of what the BeSHT meant.

²⁵ Quite often the sparks were interpreted by later teachers as sparks of a human soul had reincarnated into an animal or plant in order to achieve a *tikkun*. See e.g. Sears, *The Vision of Eden*, p. 153. But this interpretation, while common in many stories about the BeSHT, is not explicit in these texts, and may have been added by the BeSHT’s disciples in order to tame the BeSHT’s teachings. See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 298–299.

²⁶ According to Luria, the world was created out of broken shards from a previous Creation, which could not contain the divine light and so shattered into pieces. Sparks of that divine light became trapped in the shards, and humanity was created in order to rescue them.

Redeeming the sparks, according to this picture, meant releasing these “captives” from the prison of the natural world. Such a view could easily inspire the opposite of compassion towards the world.

This makes it hard to characterize the Hasidic view of Nature.²⁸ It is not certain that the metaphor of imprisonment was part of the BeSHT’s original teaching. But whether it was or not, this formulation, which became normative, is problematic for any contemporary ecotheology.

However, there is a transformative image embedded in the verse Yaakov Yosef quotes in the name of the BeSHT, which may help us. If you imagine a spark whose “head is on its knees and gut,” who cannot spread out its hands and legs or speak, this does not conjure the image of a prison at all, but rather the image of a fetus in the womb, awaiting birth. Even though one could imagine the womb as a place of confinement, it is so only for the moments or hours between the breaking of the waters and a baby’s birth. For the rest of a fetus’s maturation, the womb is the source of all life and preserver of all wholeness.

Neo-Hasidism, then, can lift up that image, and choose to look at the world around us as a world awaiting birth into a state of redemption. We ought not imagine that this birth rests entirely in our human hands, but it is a birth that with grace we can help midwife.

B. CONSUMPTION OR CONNECTION?

The pathos of redeeming imprisoned sparks was magnified in later explanations of the BeSHT’s teaching. For example, Aharon (Arele) Roth (1894–1947), Rebbe of the Shomer Emunim/Toldos Aharon community, introduced the teaching just quoted with these words:

My beloved brother, when some bit of food is brought before you, or drink, you must imagine...that here there is a spark crying out and seeking and pleading to you that you would have mercy on her...and not push her away, God forbid.²⁹

According to Yaakov Yosef in the same passage, redeeming the sparks “is the purpose of a Jewish person’s service in Torah and *mitsvot*”, and not just the purpose of eating. However, there was and is a tendency in normative Hasidism to focus on redeeming the sparks by consuming the food in which they are found. This is quite distant from encountering Nature in its own terms, especially since the requirement to consume and incorporate any spark (in order to “raise it to the human level”) means one must *destroy* the being in which the spark is trapped. Beyond this, other teachings also emphasize that redemption does not even happen through the act of eating itself, but only through the use of that food’s strength to serve God by studying Torah or doing a *mitsvah*. This further distances the Hasid from any encounter with other creatures as beings-in-themselves.³⁰

²⁸ On the debate about the value of the natural world in Hasidism, see Seth Brody, “Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* (July–Oct. 1998): 3–44. While people like Scholem thought that Buber misrepresented Hasidism, there is more validity to Buber’s interpretation than most scholars would allow.

²⁹ *Shulchan Hatahor* (Jerusalem, 1996), ch. 2, p. 165.

³⁰ *Keter Shem Tov*, §218, pp. 124–125. The spark contained in a tool or vessel could also be redeemed by using that implement to do a *mitsvah*, which creates the same kind of distance.

I believe that the BeSHT's meaning was broader, however. Redemption was effected not only by using something for a holy purpose, but more fundamentally, by encountering that thing or being with holy intention. The passage from Yaakov Yosef emphasizes that it is "the goodness of one's thought" in the encounter that redeems the sparks.

This idea that our intention is what sanctifies and redeems the sparks we encounter was part of the milieu and sources of the Hasidic tradition. The *Peri 'Ets Hadar* prayer already quoted does not call on us to eat the fruit of the *seder* in order to free sparks from the physical world, but rather to cause the Tree of Life to bring *shefa*, abundant divine energy, to the trees and to the physical world. By doing so, we support the trees to joyfully make more fruit.³¹ Thus, the liberation that the *Peri 'Ets Hadar* focuses on is the liberation of *chiyyut*, life-force, rather than sparks, and our eating is a divine encounter not with the fruit, but with the trees themselves.

Where the *Peri 'Ets Hadar* focuses on sparks, these are sparks trapped by our sins, rather than by the world:

[M]ay all the sparks scattered by our hands, or by the hands of our ancestors, or by the sin of the first human against the fruit of the tree, return now to be included in the majestic might of the Tree of Life.

The depth of *tikkun* imagined by this prayer goes back to the Garden of Eden. It suggests an encounter that can bear all of history, and the possibility of changing all of history, at a single stroke. The goal is to strengthen the Tree of Life so that it becomes as strong as it was in the beginning of Creation. In Kabbalah, this tree is the *sefirah* of *Tif'eret*, but for us, the Tree of Life is also the web of all living beings over the course of all evolution.

We can use the *Peri Eits Hadar* as a model to inform the way we interpret and apply the BeSHT's teachings in our time. However, even with the most positive interpretation, the Ba'al Shem Tov still seems anchored to the idea that the sparks we encounter can only reach their potential through human intervention.

In a Neo-Hasidic theology of Nature, we would seek to understand the other avenues by which the sparks in each being, and in Being as a whole, can reach their potential – whether or not that being provides humanity with tools or food, whether or not we interact with that being directly.

IV. ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER CREATURES

For the needs of our time, we could add one more element not native to the BeSHT's thought: when we assist in birthing the sparks in other beings of this world into personhood, we will also find that the other beings – not just human but also animal or plant or soil or ecosystem, or any other lifeform – assist in the birth of sparks from within ourselves.³²

³¹ "Then the trees of the forest will sing out' (Ps. 96:12) and the tree of the field will raise a branch and make fruit, day by day."

³² The BeSHT does explain that the sparks one redeems are specifically related to the root of one's own soul. This idea could be interpreted as implying that our own souls are being redeemed in the same process.

Imagine then that every interaction between beings has the potential to birth the sparks from the unconscious divine realm into the world of meaning and consciousness. The essential element is not how we use something, but the goodness of our thought – whether we behold another being with proper love and awe.

A good model for what we need can be found in the Kabbalah of Moshe Cordovero. The BeSHT invites us to strive to discern both compassion and *hashgachah* in all the workings of Nature, rather than in the creatures of Nature. Cordovero emphasized that divine compassion extended to every living creature, whether plant or animal.³⁴ Cordovero insisted that when we use any plant or animal, our compassion must be modeled on God's compassion. For Cordovero this compassion was characterized not just by caring but by honor and respect. This entailed much more than not harming and not destroying anything needlessly. He also meant that a person has no right to uproot a plant or kill an animal, unless they intend to raise that plant or animal's soul, for only then is "the debt outweighed by the merit".³⁵

In essence, one has a covenantal responsibility to act in the highest interests of all the creatures one uses. Though we can also draw on Martin Buber's idea of encounter to illuminate the interior experience of this compassion,³⁶ only Cordovero's model suggests a deontological ethics for how we make use of the creatures, such that when we use them well, they also use us well.

Unlike Cordovero, the BeSHT did not demand of human beings that they imitate God's compassion in this way. For the BeSHT, or at least for some of the Hasidim who passed on his teachings, human compassion for the sparks radically differed from divine compassion for the creatures.

This does not mean that the BeSHT lacked compassion for the suffering of animals. In fact, an oft-recited tale about how the BeSHT conducted slaughter illustrates that animal suffering was a real focus for some in the Hasidic world. According to Jewish law, a butcher or *shochet* must check the sharpness of his slaughtering knife, and if necessary re-sharpen it, before every slaughter. According to the story, the BeSHT would not whet his sharpening stone with water when he went to sharpen the knife, but with tears.³⁷

Though this story is rooted in fellow-feeling for other creatures, it did not define a normative ethic. The BeSHT's tears were the tears of a saint. They did fulfill any explicit cosmological or theological purpose or commandment. Nor did they lead anyone to abjure slaughter.

To fully develop a Neo-Hasidic ethos, we need to give such tears normative value – for example, we would want to say that a *shochet* who does not in some manner cry over slaughter is not qualified to be a *shochet*, and that any system of slaughter or animal husbandry that inures people to an animal's suffering is inherently not kosher. This could

³⁴ *Tomer Devorah* (Jerusalem: Or Yikar, 1969), end of chs. 2 and 3, pp. 19, 20.

³⁵ *Tomer Devorah*, ch. 3, p. 20.

³⁶ See *Kabbalah and Ecology*, 327-30.

³⁷ *Kitvey Rabbi Yoshe Shohet Uvodek* §18, quoted by Yithak Buxbaum in *The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov* (New York NY: Continuum, 2006). This story is not historical but didactic. Other versions of the story are told from the perspective of a non-Jewish Ukrainian who is shocked when the *shohet* or butcher who succeeds the BeSHT uses water instead of tears.

be seen as an extension of the concept of eco-kashrut. To fulfill this ideal, we would probably need to forbid as not kosher most forms of industrial animal management, including CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) and factory slaughterhouses.³⁸

More fundamentally, we would want to follow Cordovero over the BeSHT and model our interactions with the more-than-human world directly on the principle of divine compassion toward all the creatures.

V. DIRAH BA-TACHTONIM: A DWELLING PLACE BELOW

If the physical world is not a prison from which trapped sparks need to be redeemed, is it instead fully the dwelling place of divinity? The earliest aggadic midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* (fourth or fifth century), taught that it was so: “The root/essence of God’s presence was in the lower creatures” (*‘ikkar Shekhinah ba-tachtonim haytah*).³⁹ But by the time *Exodus Rabbah* was written, some six centuries later, the teaching had literally become reversed, so that the text now read: “The essence of the *Shekhinah* was *not* in the lower realm.”⁴⁰ The point was that humanity was God’s only site of earthly indwelling, and that this was equivalent to being “rulers among the lower creatures.”⁴¹

In the face of this tendency, the normative Hasidic understanding of this concept recovered a place in the world for God by teaching that the primary dwelling place of God was within the human heart.⁴² In this way, later Kabbalistic and Hasidic interpretation was also able to make an end run around the tragic negation of the *Shekhinah* in the world. R. Azaryah De Fano in the sixteenth century explained that by returning to God with one’s whole heart, one “sets up a *dirah* for the *Shekhinah* within his heart.”⁴³ Shneur Zalman of Liady taught that when the soul’s love for God burns so fiercely in your heart that you wish to leave the body, you should “return to your heart” and remember that “you are living in this body...in order to be a *dirah batachtonim* for God’s oneness.”⁴⁴

These teachings bring us close to the beautiful idea that we each must work on our hearts in order to make a dwelling place for God within us. But looking at these same ideas from the perspective of Neo-Hasidism and the evolution of civilization, we need to

³⁸ Though many Jews in the Jewish environmental movement already accept such restrictions upon themselves, but no one has taken the next normative step, which would be to declare that any utensils used to cook such meat would become *treif*.

³⁹ *Genesis Rabbah* 19:7.

⁴⁰ *Exodus Rabbah* 13:2.

⁴¹ *Batey Midrashot* vol. 1, Bereishit §9.

⁴² For some Hasidic teachers, it was only the hearts of the Jewish people that could become a dwelling place. More generally, even as Kabbalah and *Chasidut* expanded the image of God to include many aspects of the more-than-human world, many of the same texts limit the image of God in humanity, applying the concept only to Jews. This is an element that Neo-Hasidism must decisively reject. See e.g. Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, p. 228.

⁴³ *Yonat Eilem*, ch. 9, p. 7b.

⁴⁴ *Likutey Amarim—Tanya*, ch. 50, fol. 71a.

ask: is it enough to return to God by repairing ourselves, without repairing the world that surrounds us? Can we do work on our own hearts, without also working to revive the radiance of the *Shekhinah* in the whole world?

In fact, a more eco-centric, bio-centric interpretation of *dirah ba-tachtonim* in *Hasidut* can be found in the teachings of Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He wrote:

Since the essence of the commandments is to make for the Holy One, blessed be, an earthly dwelling, it is necessary to fulfill them by means of Nature/*hateva* ‘really/*mamash* (meaning, through physical actions using physical objects), so that the world’s Nature itself (*teva* ‘*ha-’olam* ‘*atmo*) will be made into a dwelling place.⁴⁵

While Schneerson is referring to the need to fulfill commandments by physical means, he takes this idea much further than that. He makes a similar point in another passage, where he interprets his ancestor Shneur Zalman’s teaching that during Elul, the time leading up to Rosh Hashanah, “the king is in the field.” Shneur Zalman explains his means that God’s presence is especially accessible, like a king who is traveling and camps outside the city in a field, where all are able to greet him without the formality of the royal court.⁴⁶ The Lubavitcher rebbe, however, asserts that the true meaning of this metaphor is not that the king has come to camp in the field for Elul, but rather that the field was already the real dwelling place of God’s essence:

“The king is in the field”: God’s essence, blessed be, is in the field, especially/*davka*, as is known, that among the lower creatures (*ba-tachtonim*, *davka*), is the dwelling place (*dirah*) of His essence, blessed be.⁴⁷

God’s true place is not in the palace, Schneerson explains, for the Alter Rebbe doesn’t say “the king goes to the field” in Elul but rather “the king is (already) in the field.”

Though the field is a place where a human king (or a human being) does not normally dwell, for Schneerson, it *is* the place where God dwells. For the Alter Rebbe, “the field” meant the time and place where we can encounter God’s essence without the *levushim*, the trappings, of the King’s crown and majesty. But Schneerson takes us beyond metaphor, emphasizing that this field is Nature itself, this physical world, rather than some anthropocentric realm separated from Nature. The ultimate end of this process, Schneerson wrote, is that “the perfecting (*sheleimut*) of Nature is that it will be recognized openly that Nature is divinity.”⁴⁸

Looked at altogether, the focus of these varied texts ranges from the natural world to the earthly creatures to the human being to the human heart, creating a picture of levels within levels. Anthropocentrically, one could integrate all these teachings by saying that as the human heart becomes a dwelling for God, so too does the world surrounding us. But from a more biocentric perspective, perhaps the truth is that when our hearts become dwelling places for the divine, we become able to perceive the indwelling of divinity that is already in the world.

⁴⁵ *Likutey Sichot* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1998), vol. 13, p. 40.

⁴⁶ *Likkutey Torah* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2002), *Re’eh*, p. 32a.

⁴⁷ *Likutey Sichot*, vol. 4, p. 1344.

⁴⁸ *Torat Menachem* (Brooklyn: Otsar Hachasidim, 2002), vol. 2, p. 100.

For us, as for Neo-Hasidism, this is not just metaphor, because human sin has indeed distorted the divine energy that once coursed abundantly through Nature. Whether the king is already in the field, or the king is coming into the field, the field also means the environment, the ecosystem, the real land, where we can either push away the feet of the *Shekhinah*,⁴⁹ or discover the divine within all beings.

VI. KOMAH SHELEIMAH: THE DIVINE IMPRINT IN CREATION

As we saw, the Ba'al Shem Tov applied the term *komah sheleimah*, “complete form,” to the human psyche and to the sparks found in physical reality. We also saw that the BeSHT’s intention, perhaps lost to his disciples, was that the sparks in all things have the potential to express the divine image. But *komah sheleimah* means much more than this. Yakov Yosef quotes the BeSHT as saying that “the totality/*kelalot* of the world is a single unity, a *komah sheleimah*.”⁵⁰ It is not that the whole of Creation yearns to reach its full stature, but that it always already expresses this full stature. Like several Kabbalists before him, the BeSHT saw the world as an image of God – perhaps the greatest image.⁵¹ Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt (1748–1825), elaborating on the Besht’s teaching, said that “Adam is a *komah sheleimah* (an image of God), a kind of microcosm (*‘olam katan*), and each and every world from the lower and upper worlds is a *komah sheleimah*, and so is the totality of the worlds a *komah sheleimah*.”⁵²

Key to this idea is that everything in Nature corresponds with some aspect of the human being, hence the human being is a full world or a small world, a “microcosm.” But the human being is also created in God’s image, and this implies that the universe or Creation is created in God’s image.⁵³ Heschel of Apt draws these ideas together in this passage. Contemporary with Hasidic Judaism, non-Hasidic Orthodox teachers expressed similar ideas. For example, Naftali Tsvi Yehudah Berlin (1817–1893) wrote, “the moment that it arose in thought and speech that there would be Nature, then was the Place (*Ha-makom*, i.e., the Creator) called *Elohim*.”⁵⁴ And since all of Nature is included in Adam, behold, he is in *Elohim*’s image.” The image of God in each human being is the image of Creation.

⁴⁹ This idiom is used in the Talmud Bavli to describe one who walks in an arrogant manner (*b. Berakhot* 43b) or one who sins secretly (*b. Hagigah* 16a; *b. Kiddushin* 31a).

⁵⁰ *Ketonet Passim* (Jerusalem, 1985), *Metsora* §90.

⁵¹ Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 250–55.

⁵² *Ohev Yisrael* (Zhitomir, 1863), p. 86; cf. pp. 50, 127.

⁵³ It took many centuries before this equivalence was made explicit in Jewish texts. The earliest reference I have found is in Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi’s thirteenth-century work *Perush le-Parshat Bereishit*, and in his commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah*. (See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 250–252). Note that Maimonides, in seeing the universe as a person with a soul and a heart, made an earlier interpretation that was compatible with this view. (See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 268–271.)

⁵⁴ Like the Hasidic sources, the NeTSIV here is clearly playing on the numerical equivalency of *Elohim* and *ha-teva*’.

It is these correspondences between person and world that enable us to know that the world is God's image. Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi (14th cent. Spain) had an exalted and uniquely playful way of explaining this idea:

[I]t is said, "Let us make Adam in our image, as our likeness", and it is said, "The heavens rejoiced and the earth sang out / *Yism'chU HashamayiM V'tageL Ha'areTs*" (Ps. 96:11)—the first letters (of these words) spell out *YHVH*, and the last letters of the words (read backwards) spell "His image / *tsalmo*". And this is why the rabbis said (about the name *YHVH* being used in Genesis 2, after the Creation in Genesis 1 was complete): "A full name over a full world".

God cannot be complete without Creation; God's image cannot exist until it is manifested in the wholeness of Creation; and humanity cannot exist in the divine image without partaking and participating in the whole of Creation.

These same correspondences explain how a human being can effect *tikkun*, repair and redemption, on a cosmic level. This provides another basis for Neo-Hasidism to affirm that every ecosystem has ultimate value and is an expression of the image of God. Every species may also be regarded as a kind of *kamah sheleimah* and *'olam katan*. Thus, the redemption of the sparks, the divine nature of the cosmos, the intrinsic value of ecosystems and species, the uniqueness of each human being, and the depths of human psychology and spirit, are all alluded to in the concept of *kamah sheleimah*.

But speculating about this idea is not enough. Actually applying it to our interactions with the more-than-human world, including not only our spiritual interactions with Nature but also our ethical interactions and even scientific interactions with ecosystems and species, holds extraordinary promise. Most fundamentally, it calls on us to treat all the others, including other species, as having intrinsic value, as ends rather than means.

VI. BUILDING THE BODY OF THE SHEKHINAH

Finding intrinsic value in the more-than-human—meaning value that calls us to serve, rather than value that serves us—is a way to re-enchant the natural world and to make manifest the divine presence in all things. Its opposite is the fleeing of the *Shekhinah* from the world, which is equivalent to the disenchantment of Nature and its reduction to a set of useful functions.

We can look to Zev Wolf of Zhitomir (d. 1800) to understand this re-enchantment in Neo-Hasidic terms. The entire goal of Torah and *mitsvot*, according to Zev Wolf, is to build the structure of the *Shekhinah* so that the *kamah* or body of the divine feminine becomes equal to the divine masculine, called the Holy One. This can mean equal in height, in power, and in value. The diminished stature of the *Shekhinah* in comparison with the Holy One is represented in the image of the Sefirot by the *Shekhinah* (or *Malkhut*) being suspended beneath the other Sefirot, six of which represent the Holy One. Because they are not equal, they cannot see "eye-to-eye" and they cannot conjoin "body to body". This inequality corresponds with the inequality between men and women.⁵⁵ But

⁵⁵ See Sarah Schneider's extraordinary work on this subject, *Kabbalistic Writings on*

“in the time of the days of *Mashiach*, Her *komah* will be equal to His *komah*...”⁵⁶ Therefore, the Holy One “trembles [with desire] to build the *komah* of the *Shekhinah* to be *komah* facing *komah*.”⁵⁷ The Holy One beseeches the *Shekhinah*: “Who is with You in exile? Are there those searching for *YHVH* who seek Your unity, to raise up the limbs of the *Shekhinah* and to build Your *komah*?”

In redemption, *Shekhinah* will become a complete and independent body, able to freely join with the Holy One. Zev Wolf emphasizes that we are responsible for raising up *Shekhinah*’s limbs and building Her body:

And all this falls upon us, to bring near the time of redemption through means of good acts [so that] Her *komah* will be built and established...For this is the essential drive of our soul in Torah and *mitsvot* [and prayer]...to be assiduous in repairing *Shekhinah*, to build Her and to prepare Her with a *komah sheleimah*.⁵⁸

The Holy One can only tremble and ask us to do this; redemption depends on us. But what are the limbs of the *Shekhinah* that we must raise up? Homiletically speaking, if the human *komah* reflects the *komah* of Creation, which includes as its parts and limbs all the creatures, and if the *komah* of the *Shekhinah* comprises the *komah* of all humanity, then the creatures themselves are Her limbs. What would happen if we were to treat the forests, the species, the endangered habitats, as though they were limbs of the *Shekhinah*, as though our redemption and the redemption of *Shekhinah* depended on them? The impact could be enormous.

VII. THE MYSTERY OF LIFE

“All who wound God’s works wound God’s image, and the name of *YHVH* does not rest on a wounded place.”⁵⁹ This wisdom from the *Zohar* can stand us in good stead, whether we are trying to make sense of *Chasidut* or ecology. The *Peri Eits Hadar* envisions and extols “the majestic might of the Tree of Life.” This image can be taken both in mystical terms as referring to the divine Tree of Life that sustains the cosmos, and in evolutionary terms as the Tree of Life composed of all the lives and species that have ever existed that brought us to this moment. From either framework, that majesty is being diminished every day by human actions motivated by arrogance, ineptness, greed,

the Nature of Masculine and Feminine (Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 2002). In Neo-Hasidism, particularly in Jewish Renewal, a great deal of work has already been done to build the body of the *Shekhinah* by lifting up women in practice and in theology. See for example Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995) and Jill Hammer “Faces of the *Shekhinah*: Meeting the Divine Feminine in Jewish Texts” (audio), at <https://rabbijillhammer.com/2014/04/03/faces-of-shekhinah-meeting-the-divine-feminine-in-jewish-texts/>. Both works share an emphasis on different faces or personas of *Shekhinah*, which is different way to “build Her body”.

⁵⁶ *Or Hame’ir* (Warsaw, 1883), vol. 3, pp. 79–80. Cf. *ibid*, vol. 1, p. 43; vol. 2, p. 43; and many other places.

⁵⁷ *Or Hame’ir*, vol. 4, pp. 27–28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*. Cf. vol. 1, p. 20 and vol. 4, p. 76.

⁵⁹ *Zohar* 3:123b.

exploitation, servitude to our society's addictions, and by the disruption of the climate that is the consequence of all of these. We are lopping of the Tree's branches sooner than they can regrow.

Our Neo-Hasidic teaching must look like this: take Life to be the ultimate value, with human life being just one example of ultimate value rather than its only case; see the fullness or *kamah sheleimah* of what is divine not just in the spark, but in what holds the spark.

As an example of what this means, we can reflect on water. A deep respect for water is shown in the fact that water is the symbol for *Chesed*, the quality that was expressed in God's original act of Creation. "Water is Life" was not just a cry of the protest movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Water *is* Life both actually and symbolically. One inference could be that we have an obligation not to remove water from the cycle of life. From a more mystical perspective, not only is water life, if water is *Chesed*, then water wants life, water desires life, water weaves life.

When we divert water to our uses, the rule must be that that water is returned to its ecosystems to nurture life at least to the degree it would have done without our intervention, if not more. The way we use water should nurture the Tree of Life and bringing blessings to the world around us.

This idea could have practical policy implications. For example, every well that gets hydrofracked permanently deletes millions of gallons of water from the biosphere. Certainly, that is an extraordinary deprivation, not just for ourselves and the world, but for the "element" of water itself, contaminated and no longer available to sustain life. Even if the water that gets used up is non-potable, it is wrong from this perspective to remove water forever from the biosphere, unless the reason for doing so is to further life in some concrete, measurable, and permanent way.

We can also apply this standard to organic matter and how we deal with food. When we compost food scraps, we honor the divine life-force, the *chiyyut*, which is in our food, enabling it to contribute again to life. If, as happens in our industrial society, we mix toxic chemicals (from batteries, cleaners, paint, etc.) into our landfills along with food scraps that could have decayed back into earth, then we are poisoning that which was created by Life, so that it cannot safely return to the soil as organic compounds that will sustain future life. This would constitute "sinning" against our food, and in terms the BeSHT would recognize, it constitutes sinning against the sparks in those creatures whose lives have nourished us. The problem is not wasting food per se, but undoing the cycle that turns food back into life-giving earth. And this literally weakens the orders of Creation, just as it dishonors the force of life that courses through the elemental circuits of earth and water.

We can also bring *halakhah* directly to bear on this question, alongside *Chasidut* and Kabbalah, in the form of the *mitsvah* of *kavod la-dam*, "giving honor to the blood." According to Leviticus 17:13, one must bury the blood of a wild animal one has slaughtered. *Kavod la-dam* means that one is required to perform this *mitsvah* in a manner that shows honor – specifically, to effect burial with one's hand rather than one's foot. *Kavod la-dam* as a deeper principle commands us to respect the processes and products of life. God's works are wounded by actions that violate *kavod la-dam*, while properly respecting that which carries the *chiyyut* or life-force can be seen as a halakhically mandated expression of bio- or ecocentrism.

Integrating halakhic, Kabbalistic, and Hasidic ideas can lead us to a robust environmental ethic that will strengthen our ability to live in a good and prayerful and sustainable way. One could even say: “Choose Life” is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.

VIII. THE PERSONHOOD OF ALL CREATURES

Choosing Life is an abstract idea. We also need an ethic that will bring us to choose lives—that is, the lives of the creatures—over our own needs whenever our needs are not essential. We must encounter the lives of other creatures with respect and compassion. We already explored how Cordovero’s ideas can support this ethos. I would like to define this more broadly as friendship with all creatures, and let that lead us to the last teaching of the Ba’al Shem Tov that I will share here.

In a sweet lesson about humility, the Ba’al Shem Tov describes all creatures as *chaverim*, “friends” or “comrades.” As in the first text we looked at, here he also calls to mind a worm:

No one should say in their heart that they are greater than their friend because they serve with more passion (or “connection,” *deveikut*). For they are like the rest of the creatures, created for the need of serving the One, blessed be. And God gave to their friend intelligence, just as God gave them intelligence. For the worm gives service to the Creator with all of his intelligence and strength; and humanity, too, is compared to a maggot and worm, as the verse states, “I am a worm and not a human being.” (Ps. 22:7) If God had not given them intelligence, no one would be able to serve the One except like a worm. A person should think that a worm and the rest of the small creatures are important, like friends in the world, for all are created beings, and none have any ability except what was given to them by the Creator, and this matter should always be in one’s mind.⁶⁰

Friends treat each other with love and awe, with compassion and respect. Friends regard each other with an eye toward what the other needs, and to how one can help the other. To bring in one more Neo-Hasidic element, in the spirit of the saying, “Who is wise? The one who learns from every person,” and in the spirit of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who asked his Hasidism to take turns in the rebbe’s chair, every creature should be seen as a potential rebbe.

It is true that we must use other creatures in order to survive – whether to farm or to eat or to make tools from or use for work. But we can use the other beings well, in a way that nurtures them and supports a world in which all can thrive. Then we can lift up the sparks in a way that is true to friendship, and the divine image can shine more and more through every level of the world in its fullness.

CONCLUSION

⁶⁰ *Tsava’at ha-RIVaSH* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1998), §12, p. 5.

This is the crux of the transformation from Hasidic to Neo-Hasidic spirituality: Can we decisively reinterpret Hasidic teachings to recognize the inherent holiness of the world around us, as a dwelling place of the divine, instead of just recognizing our power to save the sparks that are the traditional Hasidic locus of this holiness? Put another way, if Creation is the result of the “breaking of the vessels,” and if Hasidic *‘avodah*—work or service—separates the sparks from shards of the physical world, Neo-Hasidic *‘avodah* must serve the shards and sparks to help them become whole within the physical world, and must also make the world more whole. In the words of the *Peri Eits Hadar*, everything we do must align with the goal of seeing “the Whole return to its original strength.”

We have no choice but to meet the challenge of our times, to nurture and celebrate the birthing of a renewed world, our world. May we be privileged in so doing to see a flowering of relationship, a flowing of knowledge, to and from the real fields and forests, from the manifold creatures and beings, that encompass our human world and that make up the reality of Being we so often ignore. May this also be a flowering of truest praise for the One whose infinite and infinitely diverse image is held within every being.

“Come my beloved, let us go out to the field ... there I will give you my love”
(*Song* 7:12-13).