

Believers, Kabbalah and Hasidic Judaism

How Far Apart Are We?

by C. M. Hegg

Hasidic Judaism began in the 18th century with a man named Israel ben Eliezer, aka the Ba'al Shem Tov. However, to properly understand the Jewish mindset that led the Ba'al Shem Tov to easily introduce this new theological order to a substantial portion of European Jewry, we must begin much earlier.

Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism

Kabbalah was the leading factor that set the stage for the Ba'al Shem Tov to introduce a new movement. In our present day the line separating traditional Kabbalah and Lurianic Kabbalah has been almost erased.

Traditional Kabbalah took some of its biggest strides during the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th century.

“...It reached the height of its classical development at the end of the thirteenth century with the appearance of the Zohar, the main book of Kabbalah, which was to enjoy great authority not only among later kabbalists, but also in broader circles within Judaism.”¹

Kabbalistic theology stemmed from the Jewish mind trying to understand and explain what “was” before God began creating.² Isaac Luria (1534-1572) along with some others, brought a fresh and new perspective to the Kabbalistic tradition.

A Shift in Kabbalah

Before the expulsion of the Jewish people from Spain in 1492, Kabbalah was not popular or wide spread. In his book *Major trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem states:

“The Kabbalists of the time were a small group of esoterics who had little desire to spread their ideas...”³

Scholem goes on to highlight a shift in Kabbalah that took place after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, more specifically, the shift from traditional to Lurianic Kabbalah.

¹ J. H. Laenen, *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction* (Westminster John/Knox Press, 2001), p. 45.

² This is actually not a correct statement. It has been rightly argued that Kabbalah began with the mystical experiences of the Mirkavah literature, which stems back to the 2nd century CE, and perhaps even before. However, the point in this statement is that the traditional date of the “birth” of Kabbalah is the 12th to 13th century and the writing of the Zohar.

³ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1974), p. 244.

Traditional Kabbalah focused on God and what ‘was’ before creation. It was believed that if enough people worked to get back to the state of perfection in the garden of Eden, through a theology called *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), the world could achieve a utopian state. With the world events and the persecution of the Jewish people, this outlook changed. No longer were people looking back at the garden of Eden, but rather were looking forward to the Messiah and the perfection to which he would lead us. It was believed that through the theology of *tikkun olam*, a theology that had previously been used to look backwards, was now used to look forward. If the Kabbalist succeeded in *tikkun olam*, it would help or even force apocalyptic events and the coming of the Messiah.

The concrete effects and consequences of the catastrophe of 1492 were by no means confined to the Jews then living. As a matter of fact, the historic process set going by the expulsion from Spain required several generations—almost an entire century—to work itself out completely. Only by degrees did its tremendous implications permeate ever more profound regions of being. This process helped to merge the apocalyptic and Messianic elements of Judaism with the traditional aspects of Kabbalism. The last age became as important as the first; instead of reverting to the dawn of history, or rather to its metaphysical antecedents, the new doctrines laid the emphasis on the final stages of cosmological process. The pathos of Messianism pervaded the new Kabbalah and its classical forms of expression as it never did the Zohar; the ‘beginning’ and the ‘end’ were linked together.⁴

We see a shift in religious mindset not only within Judaism but also in Christianity.⁵ The Protestant reformation brought a new theology known as “post-millennialism.” This theology teaches that Yeshua’s second coming would come after the millennium was established by Christians. Under this belief, faith, prosperity, love and good-will would prosper. God’s elect would continue to gain a foothold until the majority of the world would be saved. This would establish the kingdom of God, which would in turn trigger the second coming of Christ.

Europe’s political and social landscape

By the 17th century, although the Jewish diaspora had spread all over the world, Poland-Lithuania and the Ukraine were the epicenter for Sephardic Judaism. The Ukrainian Cossacks were not fond of the Jewish people whom they believed were working with Poland to gain financially. In 1648 Bohdan Chmielicki led the Cossacks on a series of campaigns against the Jews. “Chmielicki told the people that the Poles had sold them as slaves into the hands of the accursed Jews”⁶ This uprising, that lasted from

⁴ Ibid, p. 246

⁵ I understand that using blanket labels like “Judaism” or “Christianity” can bring significant problems. However, since I am touching on Kabbalah, a theology that has affected (in one way or the other) the entire face of Judaism as we know it today, as well as the Protestant reformation, which also has affected the whole of Christianity as we know it today, I feel justified in using such blanket terms.

⁶ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/ukraine.html>, last check on 5/22/15

1648-1649, is now referred to as the Chmielnicki Massacre. Some of the Ukrainian Jews fled the persecution, but many stayed resulting in the death of over 100,000 Jews as well as the destruction of over 300 Jewish communities. In 1655 the Russian-Swedish war broke out, which devastated those Jewish communities that had escaped the persecution of Chmielnicki. There is no doubt that the persecution of the Jewish people moved them to hope for the coming of a Messiah to save the Jewish people, coupled with the progressive shift and the quickly growing theology of Lurianic Kabbalah, a new sect in Judaism was on the horizon. This new sect was known as the Shabbatean movement, named after Shabbetai Zevi who lived from August 1, 1626 to September 17, 1676. The Jewish Encyclopedia states:

The central and unifying factor behind the Shabbatean movement was of a religious nature, connected with the profound metamorphosis in the religious world of Judaism caused by the spiritual renewal centered in Safed in the 16th century. Its decisive feature was the rise of the Kabbalah to a dominant position in Jewish life and particularly in those circles which were receptive to new religious impulses and formed the most active sector of the Jewish Communities. The new Kabbalah which went out from Safed, especially in its Lurianic forms, wedded striking concepts to Messianic ideas. It could be characterized as messianism pervading mysticism, thus introducing a new element of tension into the older Kabbalah, which was of a much more contemplative nature. Lurianic Kabbalah proclaimed an intimate bond between the religious activity of the Jew as he performs the commandments of the law and the meditations for prayer and the Messianic message....

What made Lurianism a dynamic factor in Jewish history was its proclamation that almost the whole process of restoration had been completed and the final redemption was just around the corner. Only the last stages had to be passed through and redemption would be at hand.⁷

Lurianic Kabbalism had taken a significant hold on Judaism. Shabbatai Zevi, a Sephardic Kabbalist and Rabbi who lived in Turkey, seemed to be the rising star for whom everyone was hoping. Zevi proclaimed himself the Messiah and gained quite a vast following that reached all over Europe. In February of 1666 Zevi traveled to Constantinople (now in the NW region of modern Turkey) and was arrested. Constantinople had been controlled by the Ottomans (who were Muslims) since 1453. Zevi ended up converting to Islam. While it would seem only natural to label Zevi a heretic and excommunicate him from the communities, this was not exactly how things went. Louise Jacobs writes:

Even after his conversion to Islam, there were large numbers of crypto-Sabbatians, 'believers' as they called themselves, who kept their faith with Sabbatai Zevi even after his apostasy, on the grounds that the Messiah was obliged to descend into the realms of impurity in order to redeem the 'holy sparks....'⁸

⁷ *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Keter Publishing, 1971), 14.1220-1221.

⁸ Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (Schoken, 1973), p. 8

Zevi died in 1676 at the age of 50. The Ba'al Shem Tov was soon to arrive on the scene. But he was not the only one who would catch the attention of European Jewry. Jacob Frank, a contemporary of the Ba'al Shem Tov was born in 1726. There were still active groups of Shabbatians, and Frank's teacher apparently was part of the group. Frank's story is long and one that goes beyond the scope of this study, but several things should be noted about Frank. 1) Frank gained a following that would eventually find protection under the Catholic Church. What started as a political move by Frank to counter attacks from other Jewish communities later melded into a religious order that looked like a combining of Shabbataism and Christianity. The followers of Frank would eventually be called "Frankists," and affirmed following the Torah. They claimed that Torah could not be understood by common man but needed the light from above to understand it. They rejected the Talmud stating that its interpretation of the Torah was nonsense and falsehood, and was hostile to the Torah of the Lord. To the Catholic authorities this sounded like they were endorsing the authority of "The Church," yet this was not the reality. They also believed the Messiah would be the incarnation of God, and they believed in a perverted form of the trinity.

Due mostly to the presentation given by the Frankists, this sounded great to the Catholic Church. But the wording of these "proclamations" was done in such a way so as to deceive the Church. The Frankists really believed that Shabbetai Zevi was this "God incarnate being." These beliefs were laid out in a debate hosted by the Church between Frankists and Jewish Rabbis. The end result was that the bishop sided with the Frankists and the Talmud was proclaimed worthless. Jewish homes were ordered searched and any and all copies of the Talmud were to be burned in the town square (which took place mainly in November of 1757).

2) Frank proclaimed himself to be a reincarnation of Shabbetai Zevi. So in a way Frank proclaimed himself to be divine, and his followers' belief that Zevi was God incarnate shifted to Frank.

3) Frank was not trained in the Talmud and in later years boasted of this ignorance and of the qualities he possessed as a *prostak* (simple man).⁹

The Ba'al Shem Tov

Israel ben Eliezer lived during the 1700's. Much of what is known about him is shrouded in legend. He had a fairly unproductive life and didn't gain followers until his later years. He was employed as a traveling Ba'al Shem. The Ba'al Shem's were to Judaism as witch-doctors are to VooDoo.

There were also to be found *Baale Shem* ('Masters of the Name'), miracle workers and healers who operated chiefly by the magical use of the divine names.¹⁰

[Ba'al Shem is] one who possessed the secret knowledge of the Tetragrammaton and the

⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Keter Publishing, 1971), 11.571.

¹⁰ Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (Schoken, 1973), p. 8.

other “Holy Names,” and who knew how to work miracles by the power of these names.¹¹

The time for the revelation of his [Ba'al Shem Tov] identity finally arrived in 1736. He became a Ba'al Shem, a healer of the sick and a miracle-worker.¹²

This kind of Jewish “magic,” which was being practiced by the Ba'al Shems, was not something new to Judaism. Chrysostom (349-407 CE) speaks directly about this kind of Jewish spell casting in his work *Against the Jews*.

Suppose he uses the cures which the Jews effect as his excuse; suppose he says: ‘They promise to make me well, and so I go to them.’ Then you must reveal the tricks they use, their incantations, their amulets, their charms and spells. This is the only way in which they have a reputation for healing; they do not effect genuine cures. Heaven forbid they should! Let me go so far as to say that even if they really do cure you, it is better to die than to run to God's enemies and be cured that way. What use is it to have your body cured if you lose your soul? What profit is there that you find some relief from your pain in this world if you are going to be consigned to eternal fire?¹³

It might be argued that Chrysostom was “anti-semitic” and therefore was making such claims up so as to accuse the Jews of witchcraft. This is clearly not a valid argument, as Chrysostom’s claims are supported by the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud. When speaking of what can be carried on the Shabbat the Mishnah states:

A man should not go out with (1) a nail-studded sandal, (2) a single sandal if he has no wound on his foot, (3) tefillin, (4) an amulet when it is not by an expert, (5) a breastplate, (6) a helmet, or (7) with greaves. B. But if he went out [wearing any one of these], he is not liable to a sin offering. (m.*Shabbat* 6.2)¹⁴

Clearly this passage places amulets in a favorable light. It is describing things you can not carry on the Shabbat. If amulets were not being used within the Jewish community, this would not even need to be stated, as amulets would not be allowed at any time. The Talmud expands this thought.

Said R. Pappa, “Don’t imagine that the sense is, the man who made it has to be an expert at making them, and the amulet also must be proved to be effective; but if the man who made it was an expert even though the amulet is not proved, it is still the case. You may note that a close reading of the language yields that conclusion, namely, nor with an amulet when it is not by an expert. But it does not say, and not with an amulet when it is

¹¹ *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Keter Publishing, 1971), 4.5.

¹² Joseph Fox, *Rabbi Menechem Mendel of Kotzk* (Bash, 1988), p. 28.

¹³ Chrysostom (349-407), *Adversus Judaeos*, Book Eight, Homily 8.

¹⁴ English translation from Jacob Neusner, *Mishnah: A New Translation* (Yale, 1988).

not proven effective.” (b.*Shabbat* 61a)¹⁵

Thus the Ba'al Shems and their practice was not an invention of the 16th century, but rather were a continued tradition of Jewish mystical practice.

The Jewish communities themselves had a rift between them. It was believed that the way to come close to God was through study of the Torah, Mishnah and Talmud. If one wanted to be closer to God he entered the Yeshiva and studied under a rabbi. This posed a problem for most Jews. A significant amount of Jews were peasants, farmers, folks who lived in small villages. Access to a Yeshiva or even sacred books seemed a universe away.

... a rift ensued between the learned city Jew and the ignorant village Jew, to whom all sources of a formal book education were inaccessible.

When on the High Holidays the villager came to the city to join in the community services, he quite often sensed that he was unwelcome, and felt out of place. The rabbi's sermon was not intended for the education and spiritual uplift of the masses, but directed, instead, to the learned part of the audience, which was able to appreciate his erudition and clever juggling of quotations.¹⁶

As a traveling Ba'al Shem, the Ba'al Shem Tov (from now on referred to as the Besht) understood the common man. Like Jacob Frank, the Besht was not well learned in the Talmud.

As a child he disliked the gloomy atmosphere of the Cheder (religious school)... Israel Ba'al Shem attained his spiritual maturity not in the house of study, but in the woods and wild ravines of the Carpathian Mountains. He had no celebrated rabbi as his master, and never claimed distinction in Talmudic learning.... He was his own teacher.¹⁷

The Besht's revolutionary concept was that the true way to experience God was not through study of the Torah and the Talmud, but rather through personal experience. This was to be achieved through prayer as well as other means. Personal experience took center stage and placed knowledge on the back burner.

In his teaching the Besht adapted and emphasized several older kabbalistic concepts, such as *let atar panui minch* (the idea that all creation contains the divine presence) and that one can therefore worship God through *'avodah be-gashmiyut* (material methods). Food, work, and even sex could be means toward establishing a relationship with God. On the other hand, a person should practice *hishtavut* (indifference) to the exigencies of material fortune. One must focus perpetually on contemplation of the divine and never lose sight of the real goal of life: achieving *devekut* (communion) with God in order to be graced with the *ruah ha-kodesh* (divine spirit).

¹⁵ Neusner, Jacob, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: a Translation and Commentary* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2005).

¹⁶ Joseph Fox, *Rabbi Menechem Mendel of Kitzk* (Bash 1988), p. 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid* p. 28

The Besht's technique for attaining this state of communion centered on ecstatic prayer, which entailed spiritual attachment to the holiness inherent in the letters of sacred texts. Communion attained via the letters could induce the *shefa* ' (divine light) to descend through the various worlds and shed its splendor on human existence. The sounds created by pronouncing the letters of prayer or of sacred texts in a state of ecstasy, with the proper intent and concentration, would become virtual sanctuaries for housing the divine light in this world. Moreover, the Besht utilized the divine light in the holy letters to see beyond the here and now—"from one end of the world to the other"—and to hear the metaphysical and the supernatural. The aforementioned ascents of his soul, which he accomplished in his ecstatic state, brought the Besht up to the *hekhalot* (heavenly sanctuaries). In addition to teaching techniques for achieving an ecstatic mystical experience leading to divine communion, the Besht gave moral instruction, provided explanations of divine decision making and mystical doctrines, and imparted theurgic skills.¹⁸

The Besht's main focus was the omnipresence of God. "The idea of the constant living presence of God in all existence permeates his every word and deed."¹⁹ This new outlook spoke volumes to the common man who felt ostracized from the Jewish community. The common farmer was able to experience God through prayer and other means. He no longer needed a Yeshiva, texts or a rabbi to come close to God. While the common man found this theology refreshing and exciting, the rabbis and community leaders were not impressed. This was not surprising as Europe was still dealing with followers of Shabbatai Zevi (even though Zevi had passed almost 100 years prior).²⁰ Now they were seeing the rise of unlearned country men who were trying to push new theology. Frank was making waves in the Jewish communities and friends with the Catholic authority, and here was a Ba'al Shem who was claiming that knowledge does not rule but experience does (a doctrine that was also being preached in the Christian Church). Strong opposition came against the Besht and his followers in the form of two groups. The Mitnaggedim who were led by Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-97) and the Maskilim who were attempting to integrate Western culture into European Jewry. These groups were opposed to the Hasidic movement for different reasons. The Maskilim rejected this new theology arguing that the Hasidim:

fed on the credulity of the masses, opposing secular learning of any kind, believing in

¹⁸ Moshe Rosman, *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, "Ba'al Shem Tov" http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Baal_Shem_Tov. Last checked 6/12/15.

¹⁹ Joseph Fox, *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁰ It is important to understand the impact that Shabbatai Zevi had on the Hasidic movement as a whole. While it might seem as though this leader was simply a reason for European Jewry to be leery of the Besht and his new movement, the theological implications are far greater. In his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (pp. 330–34), Gershom Scholem makes a very strong case that the Besht's reference to a mystical book that he leaned on strongly was actually a work from the Shabbatai movement. This teacher/book which was so strongly a part of the Besht's theology and understanding of Kabbalah was actually directly linked to the followers of Shabbatai Zevi. Thus, the kabbalistic understanding of the Hasidic movement has direct links to Shabbatai Zevi. It was not only a push back from orthodox Judaism that was handed down to the Besht's movement, but was direct theology as well.

reincarnation,²¹ demons, amulets and other forms of superstition, encouraging mystical flights as an escape from the pressing social and economic problems the Jews had to face if they were to survive.”²²

The Mitnaggedim, on the other hand, were more concerned with the Hasidic view of “experience” versus Torah study.

The anathemas published by the Mitnaggedim against the Hasidim urge that none should intermarry with the Hasidim and that they be driven out of the communities until they repent of their evil ways. The alarm felt by the Mitnaggedim was due to attacks on scholars in works like *Toledot* so that the Hasidim were accused of lack of respect for Torah learning and its practitioners. The Hasidic emphasis on constant attachment to God was held to demote the study of the Torah from the prominent place it had occupied in the Jewish life. Could one really study if, instead of concentrating on the passage studied, one’s mind was on God? The ruthless Hasidic stress on Torah study ‘for its own sake’ and the contempt expressed in Hasidic works for scholars who studied in order to acquire fame and the like was suspected of leading eventually to indifference to Torah study as the supreme religious value.²³

The opposition came against the Hasid for several reasons. Maimonides was (and still is) sighted by the orthodox who opposed Kabbalistic magic. He (i.e. Maimonides) “wrote vehemently against them [i.e., amulets]”²⁴ and the Maskilim are said to have openly mocked the use of amulets and other forms of spell casting. The Yivo encyclopedia states:

Belief in magic was widespread among both the broad populace and the enlightened elite. It was not uncommon for distinguished halakhic scholars, such as Naftali ha-Kohen Katz (d. 1719) and Yonatan Eybeschütz (d. 1764), to practice forms of magic. Not only did most of the Jewish intellectual elite not object to magic, but it was they who preserved and passed down knowledge of it to succeeding generations.²⁵

While it might be suggested that these kinds of practices have passed away with time, the use of amulets and charms to keep evil away is still strong within modern Judaism and has begun to make its way into modern culture. The use of the *hamsa* can be found on many Jewish doors, walls, and perhaps

²¹ While reincarnation is taught within the Zohar, Luria took this theology and greatly expanded it.

²² Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (Schoken, 1973), p. 14.

²³ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Avriel Bar-Levav, *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jew in Eastern Europe*, “Amulets and Talismans” http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Amulets_and_Talismans (last checked 6/12/15).

²⁵ Avriel Bar-Levav, *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jew in Eastern Europe*, “Magic” <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Magic> (last checked 6/11/15).

most often on a necklace around the necks of Jews and Gentiles alike. This protection amulet has made its way into modern culture.

Thus it should be well noted that Orthodox Judaism was opposed to Hasidic belief in the 18th century. Although today the vast amount of Judaism has been affected by Kabbalistic theology, there is still a large distinction between orthodox Judaism and Hasidic Judaism. To understand this difference we must turn to the Kabbalah itself.

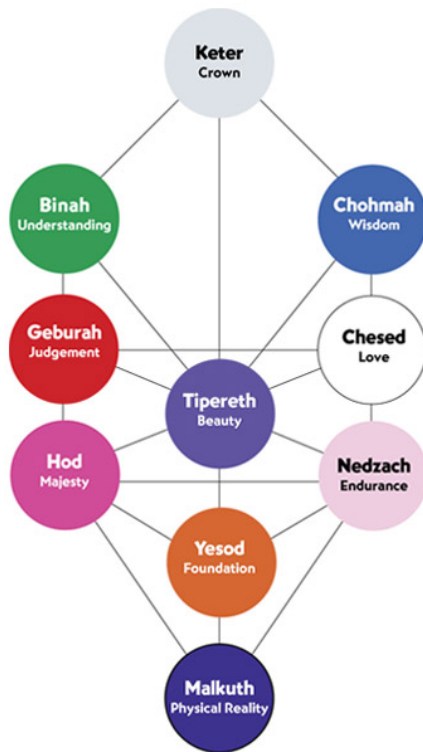
En Sof

Kabbalah begins by focusing on God's infinite attributes. These are the aspects of God that can not be comprehended by the human mind. For example, God is eternal not only in time, but also in all human attributes which we attempt to attach to Him. Thus, such attributions inevitably fall short. God is not just "love," God is the infinite form of love and therefore our human understanding of love can not comprehend what is meant when it is said "God is love."²⁶ Thus the term *En Sof* (which literally means "without end")

refers to that aspect of God that cannot be comprehended by us humans and which lies beyond anything we can imagine. This aspect of God has no attributes, that is to say that nothing can be said about it. No name can be given to this aspect of God; the divinity in his highest aspect, in *En Sof*, simply cannot be named.²⁷

²⁶ I use a passage from the Apostolic Scriptures not to try to correlate Kabbalah with the teaching of Yeshua and His disciples, but rather because I feel that this example is one that my audience will understand.

²⁷ J.H. Laenen, *Jewish Mysticism* (Westminster/John Knox, 2001), p. 48.



It is believed that from the *En Sof*, ten “sefirot” emanate and “display ten different aspects, qualities or attributes of God.”²⁸ These ten emanations make up what can be termed the godhead. Emanating from the *En Sof*, each sefirot becomes lower and lower until the tenth sefirot which is the closest to the human realm that we live in.

The first and highest of the sefirot is “Keter” sometimes called “Ayin” (nothingness), and is considered the closest to the *En Sof*. “Hokhmah,” the second of the sefirot, is the divine will to create and our entire visible reality comes from Hokhmah. Through this sefirah a human can know the divine will.

The third *sefirah* is Binah. In this *sefirah* the still undifferentiated model of creation, contained in Hokhmah, is distinguished in all its components. Here all things gain a more or less distinctive identity. The kabbalists saw Hokhmah as an active, masculine power, by contrast with which Binah stood as a passive feminine power within the deity. Thus they created two powers which were opposed to each other, a principle which comes to the fore also in the *sefirot* which still remain to emanate.”²⁹

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49. It should be noted that there is an entire aspect to hasidic Kabbalah that brings a sexual nature to this theology. While I did not want to dive into the perverted nature of this theology, it should be understood that hasidic belief states that before the braking of the vessels, the male and female aspects of the *En Sof* were interlocked in a sexual position. Once the vessels broke this sexual union was broken, and the male and female parts of the *En Sof* were turned away from each other. Louis Jacobs also talks about a debate that raged about motion within prayer. Some hasidic rabbis believed that prayer actually was a form of compilation with the Ruach. (see Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, Schoken, 1973 p. 60-61)

The lowest of the *sefirot* is Malkhut. The belief within Kabbalism is that this emanation is the Shekinah, since it is the emanation that connects to our physical world.

The three ‘higher’ Sefirot have to do with the divine thought; the seven ‘lower’ with the divine emotions, as it were, as manifesting that thought. Malkhut, or the Shekhinah, is the link between the Sefirotic realm and the worlds beneath.³⁰

Lurianic Kabbalah asked a new question. How did God create the world? Lurianic Kabbalah answered this with the concept of Tzimzum. Since the *En Sof* is eternal, this leaves no room for creation. In other words if the *En Sof* were to create something, and this object took up space, this would limit the *En Sof*, since the *En Sof* would no longer be taking up that space. In order to create, the *En Sof* took part in Tzimzum, i.e. the act of contraction. God withdrew or contracted into Himself, thus leaving room for creation.

Shattering of the Vessels

One of the major jumping points within Lurianic Kabbalah is the “shattering of the vessels.”

Adam Kadmon [אָדָם קַדְמוֹן] is nothing but a first configuration of the divine light which flows from the essence of *En-Sof* into the primeval space of the Tsimtsum—not indeed from all sides but, like a beam, in one direction only. He therefore is the first and highest form in which the divinity begins to manifest itself after the Tsimtsum. From his eyes, mouth, ears and nose, the lights of the sefirot burst forth. At first these lights were coalesced in a totality without any differentiation between the various sefirot; in this state they did not require bowls or vessels to hold them.

... Since, however, the divine scheme of things involved the creation of finite beings and forms, each with its own allotted place in the ideal hierarchy, it was necessary that these isolated lights should be caught and preserved in special “bowls” [vessels] created-or rather emanated-for this particular purpose. The vessels which corresponded to the three highest sefirot accordingly gave shelter to their light, but when the turn of the lower six came, the light broke forth all at once and its impact proved too much for the vessels which were broken and shattered. The same, though not to quite the same extent, also occurred with the vessel of the last Sefirah.³¹

According to Lurianic Kabbalah, as the pieces of the broken vessels fell, they trapped and retained some of the divine light. Some of these shards (also referred to as “sparks”) fell through the cosmic void into *Sitra Achra* (the Other Side) and became shrouded in darkness. Our world is made up of these

³⁰ Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (Schocken, 1973), p. 27.

³¹ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1974), pp. 265-266.

sparks. According to this belief, our world is “the worst of all possible worlds in which there is still hope.”³²

The theology of Tzimzum was a new take on Kabbalistic teaching by Luria. This doctrine is important for our study as it is one of the foundational doctrines of the Hasidim. Tzimzum is not only the Kabbalistic theology in which God created the worlds, it is also how evil was created. Luria brought a provocative new spin on the *En Sof*. While traditional Kabbalah taught that the *En Sof* (made up of the sefirot) existed in perfect harmony, Luria taught that the powers of Din were able to exist disharmoniously. This disharmonious power within *En Sof* was capable of turning from disharmony to evil.³³

The withdrawal of the deity has been called one of the most revolutionary ideas in the history of Kabbalah. Although Luria’s originality in this regard cannot be disputed, he was still inspired by ideas that had been developed earlier. Already in a tractate of the Iyyun circle from early Kabbalah, we read that in the creation of the world God withdraws into himself, like someone holding his breath, after which a darkness arises in which the emanation process takes place. Isaac Luria adopted the idea and elaborated it into the theory of *tsimtsum* as a fundamental principle of his teaching.³⁴

Nothingness

Within Kabbalah and Hasidic Judaism there is a specific teaching that is somewhat hard to grasp. It is the concept of ‘*Ayin*’ or ‘nothingness.’ The kabbalistic philosophy of nothingness comes from Jewish and pagan philosophers. This philosophy turned theology, states that God created out of nothing. Nothingness in this respect is not devoid of ‘thing,’ but rather is aspects of God that are unattainable to the human mind. Much like the concept of *En Sof*, *Ayin* is the aspects of God that a human mind can not grasp. *Ayin* is in fact one of the ten Sefirot (Keter) and is therefore an emanation of the *En Sof*. In an article by Daniel Matt, he writes:

The word nothingness, of course, connotes negativity and nonbeing, but what the mystic means by divine nothingness is that God is greater than any thing one can imagine, no thing. Since God’s being is incomprehensible and ineffable, the least offensive and most accurate description one can offer is, paradoxically, nothing.³⁵

Thus, ‘nothingness’ is the emanations of the *En Sof* that are beyond comprehension. Literally ‘*nothing*’ can be said about them because they are beyond the scope of human comprehension.

Panentheism and Bittul ha-Yesh

³² Quoted from <http://www.newkabbalah.com/newkabbalah.html>, last checked on 6/2/15. This site is actually quoting Adin Steinsaltz from *The Mystic as Philosopher* but neglects to give a page number, and therefore I was unable to verify this quote.

³³ See J.H. Laenen, *Jewish Mysticism*, (Westminster/John Knox, 2001), p. 168.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 169.

³⁵ Lawrence Fine, ed. *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, Daniel C. Matt, “*Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism*” (NYU, 1995), p. 67.

From the understanding of *En Sof*, the Kabbalist believes that there are, truly, only two things in the universe, the *En Sof* and Ayin. This world was a “reflection” of the *En Sof* before the fall of man, at which time the *En Sof* was put at odds with itself. Now that the vessels have broken, we are still a reflection of the *En Sof*, but we have had “The Other Side” penetrate, thus bringing in darkness. This theology reeks of eastern religion. Hinduism, as an example, is pantheistic (believes that god is in everything). Hasidism twists this around. God is not in everything, rather, Everything is in God:

The particular doctrine of the Baal Shem Tov and his followers has sometimes been called ‘pantheistic’. This is a misnomer. No attempt was ever made by the hasidim to identify the universe with God. The more correct description of the doctrine is ‘panentheism’, the belief that all is in God. Such ideas were certainly not the invention of the Baal Shem Tov (nor, except in the hasid group³⁶, were they developed by the Hasidim in a systematic way), but he and his followers gave them fresh emphasis and applied them in their daily life. Since all things are in God and ‘there is no place empty of Him’, the Baal Shem Tov taught that rather than practice asceticism in order to find God, man should use the things of the world to bring him nearer to God. ...Hasidism teaches that the worship of God is to be realized in the concrete forms of the ‘here and now’. The Hasid is not normally in favour of asceticism (though some of the Hasidic masters were ascetics), nor is he a hermit. But the things of the world are, for Hasidism, only the means by which he can grasp divinity. The true aim of the Hasid is to penetrate beneath appearances to see only the divine vitality which infuses all things. His ultimate aim is the attainment of what Hasidism calls *bittul ha-yesh*, ‘annihilation of the self’. The ego is left behind as man’s soul soars aloft through his contemplation of the tremendous theme that all is in God. The Neoplatonic element in Hasidic thought (which came to Hasidism through the Kabbalah), and the striking resemblances to Far Eastern views on the illusory nature of the world of the senses cannot be overestimated.³⁷

Plato’s famous philosophy of idealism, that what we perceive in our world has no real substance but is in reality the prime ideal projected upon the world by the *demiurge*. Plato’s famous “Cave” illustration offered a vision explanation. There were people chained to a cave floor and able only to look at the cave wall. Above on a ledge was a fire and a person casting shadows from the light of the fire onto the cave wall. Those chained to the floor were unable to see the fire, or the person, and could only see the shadows on the wall. Plato taught that we are in fact those people chained to the floor. This world was nothing more than a shadow on the wall. When we see a table, it is not really a table, it is just a shadow of what a table really is, that is, like an emanation of the ideal which is the reality.

Hasidism does the same thing with the *En Sof*. We might look at our arm or our leg and say, “this is my arm” or “this is my leg.” This however is not the case. Everything is simply a reflection of the *En Sof*.

The difference between the philosophical and the kabbalistic vision is thus a question of the point of departure. The philosopher takes the “arm” as a human concept; “arm” is something human, something that really exists in our human world. When we then use this human term for God, this is only a metaphor in the divine world, since God does not

³⁶ This is a reference to the Tanya, a systematic writing of kabbalistic mysticism according to the Lubavitch Chabad.

³⁷ Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (Schocken, 1973), p. 9.

have human arms in real life. For the kabbalist all this is precisely the other way round. He takes the “arm” as a divine concept, an aspect within the divine, which really exists there. If we use this divine term for humans, this is merely a metaphor (or better: symbol) in the human world itself, since with all their physical limitations humans do not really have this divine arm.³⁸

With the belief that everything is made up of the *En Sof* or *Ayin* (which is also another name for emanations of the *En Sof*), the Hasid attempts to practice דְּבִקּוּת (*devekut*), i.e. becoming attached to God. It is believed that through prayer, the Hasid can engage in דְּבִקּוּת using it as a “ladder” to climb the rungs of the Sefirot. Such prayer that will take a person on the journey of דְּבִקּוּת is not average, but rather takes much preparation including the moving of ones bowels before prayer begins, an hour of preparation, and deep concentration on *nothingness*. If a Hasid is able to concentrate on nothingness enough, placing himself in what could be described as a trance state, he can attain to *bittul ha-yesh*, a level of being where the ego and self is left behind.

The Hasid is expected to attain to the state described in Hasidic thought as *bittul ha-yesh*, ‘the annihilation of somethingness,’ that is, an awareness that God alone is true reality and that all finite things are, as it were, dissolved in His unity. *Bittul ha-yesh* includes the annihilation of selfhood, the soul soaring to God with the ego left behind. This attitude is especially to be cultivated at the time of prayer, so that in Hasidism prayer is essentially an exercise in world-forsaking and abandonment of self.³⁹

Tikkun Olam

As the pieces of the Hasidic and Kabbalistic puzzle come together, we are now able to better understand the concept of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world). There is no doubt that as believers in the Messiah Yeshua we are charged to make the world a better place, to help repair this world of the darkness sin has brought by spreading the light of our Messiah Yeshua. But when the Hebrew term *Tikkun Olam* is used this is not what is meant.

According to the Hasid, this world is made up of broken pieces of the vessels. These vessels were originally pieces of the *En Sof*. When the vessels broke the *En Sof's* emanations were turned against each other. Thus, evil, according to the Hasid, is actually manifestations of the Shekinah.

As Dov Baer, the Maggid (Preacher) of Mezeritch, the Besht's successor as leader of the rapidly expanding Hasidic flock, explained it, since the evil once resided in the Godhead itself, it must have been good at its origin; if we can return it to the source, it will not only be cleansed of its evilness but its force will be added to the goodness of the Divine.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid p. 71-72

³⁹ Ibid p. 21

⁴⁰ This quote originally comes from an article in *Essential Judaism* published by Pocket Books. However, I did not have this book so I reference the website that has posted this article. From

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hasidic-mysticism> last checked 6/11/15

It is the Hasidic understanding that when the vessels were shattered, most of the light of the *En Sof* went back to its original source, but some became attached to the broken shards of the vessels. These broken light shards are the source of evil. Adam was created to restore the divine shards back to their original source. He (i.e. Adam) was intended to do so through mystical exercises. However, Adam's sin got in the way and he was unable to complete this task.

As a result, good and evil remained thoroughly mixed in the created world, and human souls (previously contained within Adam's) also became imprisoned within the shards. The "repair" that is needed, therefore, is two-fold: the gathering of light and of souls, to be achieved by human beings through the contemplative performance of religious acts.⁴¹

Since each person is a reflection of the *En Sof*, we are able to help repair the broken vessels. From this understanding, each person is responsible to help repair the broken Shekinah back to unbroken status. In so doing we are taking evil out of the world while at the same time repairing God Himself. Without the help of the righteous, the forces of good would not be able to prevail within the seven heavens, and the *En Sof* would not be able to be repaired. When the Hasids succeed in enough *Tikkun Olam*, and the world has become pure enough, it will trigger the coming of the Messiah. Thus *Tikkun Olam* is not only helping the *En Sof*, but is the tool to bring the Messiah.

Hasidic Prayer

Prayer is an intricate part of the Hasidic theology. Not only is the hasid responsible for *Tikkun Olam*, but the cosmic process that brings blessing to mankind is affected through the acts and deeds of the righteous.

Since, in the Kabbalah, it is man who can affect the cosmic processes by his deeds and thoughts, it follows that if man has these divine names and their combinations in mind when he prays he performs the tremendous task of sending upwards those impulses which help to promote greater harmony in the Sefirotic realm, and by so doing he succeeds in bringing down the resulting flow of divine grace and blessing.⁴²

The Hasid took this responsibility very seriously. So seriously that the Mitnaggidim believed the Hasids were promoting breaking Torah. Since prayer was so important, the Hasidic practice was to prepare for prayer over long periods of time. As stated above, one was to discharge the bowels before prayer, one could not wear wool, one was to be fully concentrated on the task at hand, and nothing should interfere. According to Hasidic theology, if one was able to attain a high level of *Kavanah* (concentration) during prayer, he could attain *devekut*, and thus would be in the literal presence of God. The Hasid would go to unbelievable lengths to reach such a state in prayer, and thus the Mitnaggadim

⁴¹ <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world/> (last checked 6/11/15)

⁴² Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, Schocken 1973, p. 36.

realized that the set times for prayers were being broken by the Hasids. To the Mitnaggadim, this was a direct violation of Oral Torah and therefore a violation of Torah itself. To the Hasid, reaching a level of *devekut* in prayer, surpassed such commands. It was also believed that when a person transcended this world through prayer and was taken to one of the other worlds, he was taken out of time. Thus, prayer times were irrelevant.

Prayer was no longer a conversation between God and man. It was no longer the unrighteous man approaching the Holy God. Rather, it was each man's duty to help the Shekinah. Without this prayer and devotion, much would be lost, and this world (not to mention the *En Sof* itself) could fall deeper into darkness. Prayer had now become the duty of every Jew for the sake of God and the World.

Due to the practice and belief of the Ba'al Shems, the Kabbalists wanted to change the traditional prayer book so that the one praying would be able to properly arrange the names of God during prayer so as to have them properly in mind. They did this by altering the Sephardi prayer book.⁴³ This was beyond offensive to the Mitnaggedim and brought even more spite between the groups. The Mitnaggedim argued that the prayers within the prayer book were handed down in words as well as arrangement from Sinai. To counter, the Hasids put forth the belief that every tribe was given its own gateway in which to enter higher worlds. Since no one knew which tribe they were from, the Lurianic prayer book was seen as the 13th prayer book, one in which anyone from any tribe could use as a gateway.⁴⁴ This did two things for the Hasid. 1) It gave them an answer to the question that if the prayers were handed down from Sinai, why do we have different versions? and 2) it gave them the ability to use their own Lurianic prayer book.

Reincarnation

Some might be surprised to find out that reincarnation is a central part of Hasidism. It is not specific to Hasidism, but is found in the Zohar and is a belief of kabbalists in general. Chabad.org explains this clearly:

Consequently, many Jews are surprised to learn, or may even wish to deny, that reincarnation—the “revolving” of souls through a succession of lives, or “gilgulim”—is an integral part of Jewish belief. But this teaching has always been around. And it is firmly rooted in source-verses.... The holy Ari explained it most simply: every Jew must fulfill all 613 mitzvot, and if he doesn't succeed in one lifetime, he comes back again and again until he finishes.⁴⁵

While this might seem like an odd shift for Judaism, it is actually quite logical. A belief in reincarnation does two things for the kabbalist. 1) It takes away the need for a suffering Messiah, and makes the

⁴³ Ibid p. 36-37

⁴⁴ Ibid p. 38

⁴⁵ Taken from Chabad.org http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380599/jewish/Judaism-and-Reincarnation.htm (last checked 6/11/15)

Messianic expectation only apply to the nation of Israel as a whole. This is convenient when debating Christians, as those with faith in the Messiah believe He took away the sin of His elect. If reincarnation is believed, it takes the need for payment of sin away (at least in their minds). 2) Reincarnation solidifies the shift that began in the Talmudic era away from the sovereignty of God and moves Jewish theology completely in a free will direction. No longer is it God who chooses Israel, or God who directs a Jew's life, but rather it is the Jew who seeks after God and directs his own life in a random ordered system.⁴⁶

Reincarnation has made its way into the everyday life of Jewish practice, particularly within Israel. Kosher slaughter is extremely stringent in Israel, much more so than in the U.S. One of the reasons this has taken place is that kosher slaughter of animals has become much more than what a person can or cannot eat. The slaughter itself has become a ritual and if this ritual is not performed correctly, it can directly affect souls.

A dimension of magic whose spread was aided by the Kabbalah was the concept of reincarnation of the soul: the belief that the souls of the deceased return to this world in different forms—as a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object. Kosher slaughter and eating in accordance with Jewish law (incorporating, e.g., washing of hands and recitation of blessings) acquired an additional magical aura because of the notion of reincarnation. Thus, if an animal were slaughtered according to the laws of *kashrut*, then the soul that had been reincarnated in that beast was set free and able to improve its spiritual level.⁴⁷

While the scope of this study is not kosher food and its slaughter, this does raise the question, if we as believers are not to eat food that has been used within pagan ritual, should we be eating kosher food that has been slaughtered according to hasidic halacha, as it is believed to release reincarnated souls and bring them back as humans? If this is truly a ritual that is done during the slaughter process, should we as believers support and eat such food?

The Tzaddik

Perhaps the central aspect of hasidism is the theology of the Tzaddik. Each hasidic movement has its own Tzaddik or Rebbe.⁴⁸ Each rebbe is believed to have reached a level of perfection and is able to enter the very throne room of God. Such a Tzaddik is responsible for the people under his charge. He is the

⁴⁶ I have not been able to find evidence of a “free-will model” in rabbinic literature before the story of the Torah being offered to all nations, in which only Israel responded positively to accept the Torah. However I am willing to see evidence of an early shift in such a theology. Interestingly, the debate over predestination within the Church came to blows in the 5th century between Pelagius and Augustine. Since at this time the Talmud was still being edited and redacted, one cannot help but wonder if the Talmudic rabbis were being drawn into a similar discussion by the on-going theological debates among the Christian authorities.

⁴⁷ Averiel Bar-Levav, *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Easter Europe*, “Magic” <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Magic> (last checked 6/12/15)

⁴⁸ There could be several noted exceptions such as the Breslav who have not had a Rebbe since Nachman, but I am focusing on the rule not the exceptions.

intermediary between God and the people. He is responsible for the well being of his followers along with providing them with children. This is done through prayer and intercession with the Almighty.

In his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem gives strong evidence that the theology and writings of the Shabbatians were integrated into the Hasidic theology.⁴⁹ Shabbatai Zevi clearly had a semi divine status among his followers, and it is not surprising to see such theology transfer (even if it took some time) over to the hasidic movement.

Rabbi Dov Baer did not add anything of his own to chasidic theory. He merely repeated the teachings of his master. Only in one aspect did he make a contribution: he expanded vastly the position of the tzaddik. Basing his claim upon the verse: “The tzaddik (righteous man) is the foundation of the world” (Proverbs 10:25), he ascribed to him dominion over the spiritual and material world. The tzaddik is not only symbolic of the ideal life, but is also invested with the power of extracting the will and favor of God. As the seed draws its sustenance from the earth, so does the tzaddik derive his spiritual authority from the Heavenly Throne. The tzaddik is the pillar between heaven and earth, through which all the profusion from the upper world descends to this world. By his intercession with God, he can secure forgiveness for sins. The Divine sparks inherent in matter reveal to him their secrets, and by his touch profane things become sanctified. He has the power to confer or withhold material blessings. The chasid should, therefore, cling to his tzaddik as a child cleaves to its mother.

The theory of “tzaddicism” was still further enlarged by one of the Maggid’s disciples, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk (deceased 1786). Rabbi Elimelech claimed that the tzaddik is a peer to the angels, and through the touch of his hands the bitter becomes sweet. The tzaddik knows how to combine the letters and words of the prayers in such a way as to reflect through them God’s will. Through the powers of his prayer he can, therefore, cure the sick and also prolong a man’s life, even if it were God’s will that he should die. To the tzaddik was granted the secret knowledge of investing worldly occurrences with the holiness of the Ineffable Name, which constitutes their inner essence. Thus, when a chasid asks the tzaddik for a cure or for a livelihood, his request will be fulfilled because the tzaddik has caused the name of God to penetrate into these things. The word of the tzaddik is obeyed by God; the tzaddik decrees and God puts the decree into effect. In every generation God obeys the tzaddik, as the servant listens to his master. The tzaddikim are the holy ones to whom God commanded the children of Israel to bring their offerings.⁵⁰

The theology of the tzaddik is a man-made perversion of our Messiah Yeshua. It shows the longing the Jewish people have to be engaged in a personal relationship with God, the kind of relationship Christians have been teaching since our Master was on earth with us.

Conclusion

⁴⁹ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1974), pp. 330-334.

⁵⁰ Joseph Fox, *Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk* (Bash, 1988), pp.36-37.

This short survey of kabbalistic and hasidic beliefs only scratches the surface of such a theology. Clearly this paper is not exhaustive and much more could be included. Yet I believe that even from this very small glance we can take several things away. In the Messianic movement today we see people coming out of the Christian church who feel like they have been lied to. But they have also found something new and exciting. A life rooted in ancient belief and practice. Many people glamorize Jewish belief and without knowing the full story, attempt to emulate what they believe is orthodox Judaism. Much of the time people begin to emulate various hasidic movements, perhaps none more than the Chabad. About a year ago someone on Twitter was discussing with me. He was bringing up rabbi Nachman and I made the comment that I believed much of Hasidic theology was demonic. He wanted to know what I meant by that. Here is my answer to that tweet.

Hasidism grew out of mysticism. Magic and dark arts were a central part of Jewish mysticism. The person responsible for bringing these theologies to the masses was himself a performer of things the Torah clearly teaches against. He used amulets, spells, and other means to control his god and other spirits. Through the Besht and the Kabbalah, belief and practice quickly became prevalent, teaching theology that is nowhere to be found in Scripture. The theology of *En Sof*, nothingness and the breaking of the vessels, makes God out to be the source and continued problem of sin. It also puts man on an equal plain with God. Instead of being created in the image of God, we are created out of God.

Tikkun Olam says that man was created good, that God is the source of evil, and that God is unable to do it without us. It puts the salvation of the world into the hands of man, and takes it away from the Messiah Yeshua.

Reincarnation takes away the need for the Messiah to die for His elect. It minimizes sin to something that does not jeopardize our relationship with the Almighty, but rather teaches that we can do it again if need be.

Hasidism teaches a form of transcendental meditation. This theology is a way to control God, lifting a person beyond this world through concentration and trance-like states of prayer in which the person leaves self behind in order to be more connected to God.

Today within hasidism, amulets, spells and necromancy are still prevalent.

Finally, the tzaddik is a perversion of the true Messiah Yeshua. It gives divine status to man, while at the same time rejecting the true Tzaddik. They replace Emanuel with a mere man.

It is my belief that we should not try to emulate or mirror the hasidic sects in any way shape or form. This theology is a counterfeit. It is the dark side that has deceived much of orthodox and hasidic Judaisms into integrating demonic theology into their everyday lives. When people see me, when they hear me, when they watch my life, I don't want them to think I am in anyway associated with such theology. Rather, I want them to see the Messiah Yeshua and the Torah shining through my life.