Errata Notice (for Doctoral Thesis)

**Digging the Well Deep: The Jewish “Ultra-Orthodox” Relationship with the Divine Explored through the Lifeworld of the Breslov Chasidic Community in Safed**

**Author of Notice:** Dr Zevic Mishor

**Date of Notice submission:** 2nd May 2019

**Errata:**

- **Title page:** Add Hebrew acronym ב”ס (‘With the aid of Heaven”) to top right-hand corner, as per standard practice in the Jewish tradition for written material.

- **Page ix (Table of Photographs):** Amend *Figure 6* entry to: “The Breslov Magen Avot boys school in Safed”

- **Page 86:** Amend *Figure 6* caption to “The Breslov Magen Avot boys school in Safed”

- **Page 287:** Add thesis closing quotation in Hebrew:  
  "כִּי הכל הבל – להד הנשמה הטהורה, שביהו עתידיה לנתן דין וחשבון Launcher вн פ MMI  
  (ברכת השחר)"

  [English translation:  
  “… for all is vain – except for the pure soul that is destined to give justification and reckoning before the throne of Your glory”

  (Morning blessings)"

"
Digging the Well Deep

The Jewish “Ultra-Orthodox” Relationship with the Divine
Explored through the Lifeworld of the Breslov Chasidic Community in Safed

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Anthropology)
at
The University of Sydney
by
Zevic Mishor

October 2016
Supervisor: Professor Jadran Mimica
Abstract

The Jewish Charedi ("ultra-orthodox") community is an example of a contemporary social group whose lifeworld is dictated almost entirely by the tenets of its religious beliefs. This thesis seeks to illuminate the physical, psychological, social and metaphysical structures of that Charedi world, using the Breslov Chasidic community in the town of Safed, northern Israel, as its ethnographic anchor. Following an introductory theoretical background to Judaism, Kabbalah, the Chasidic movement, and the Breslov group, a descriptive account is given of the Breslov lifeworld across many of its facets, including demographics, dress, prayer and study practices, the venerated position of the head Rabbi of the community, various religious practices, connection to and meditation in nature, attitudes towards non-Jews, pilgrimage, and the use of psychoactive drugs.

This ethnographic material forms the basis for subsequent deeper analyses. The Charedi aspiration towards "zero degrees of freedom", in terms of that society’s extreme application of the myriad prescriptions and proscriptions of Halakhic Law, is discussed, as well as Charedi society’s emphasis on constituting its own identity through what it is not; namely the “goyim” (non-Jews) and non-religious Jews. The parallels between Judaism and the anthropological category of shamanism are considered, with the argument made that much of the Jewish tradition is essentially shamanic, yet that this aspect of the religion has been relegated to a relatively minor position in the contemporary Jewish religious (including Charedi) milieu. A functional analysis is then given regarding certain Jewish practices, demonstrating that Judaism contains within it sophisticated mechanisms, acting in affective, cognitive and social domains, to ensure replication of the religion—and specifically its core “template”, the Torah—from generation to generation. This analysis is followed by an exploration of the phenomenology of the religious experience and the Torah lifeworld, seeking to penetrate and document the experience of “being Breslov”. The final chapter ties all of the previous material together, presenting several psychoanalytic perspectives on the Charedi phenomenon.
Towards the end of a long and personally challenging and intense chapter of my life, I would like to express my gratitude to several people. First and foremost, to my supervisor Professor Jadran Mimica—thank you for your trust and support, for sharing your tremendous and inspiring knowledge, and for your warm friendship. You gave me free rein to do as I wished and to truly express myself, and that is a priceless gift. I could ask for no better supervisor nor friend.

To Rabbi Jorai Kopas—you introduced me to a new path, with all its light, wonderment, challenges and suffering along the way. Thank you for teaching me, and for sharing your deep and unique knowledge.

To my family in Israel, not least of all the Yanivim—your love and support for this endeavour were so very important to me, and they warmed and continue to warm my heart, always.

Leo and Zsófie—my friends who are as family to me, thank you for your support throughout, and for sharing your home when I needed one most.

Tim Bakas—you’re a wonderful friend and a rock, who’s been there for the pointy end of this journey for me. Thank you brother. And all the best on the last part of your own journey!

My gratitude and admiration to Dr. Sebastian Job, for opening my eyes to the breadth of the Western intellectual tradition, showing me each time how simple my thinking could be, and affording me glimpses of grander metaphysical vistas beyond.

Evan Yisrael Strauss—you inspired and continue to inspire me, reminded me constantly that the rainbow contains many colours, and you kept me sane in Tzfat. Thank you for being a shining example and a true friend.

Efi Lipshutz—you became a friend and brother to me and made my year of fieldwork so much richer and fuller than it could ever have been without you. With all my heart, toda!

And finally and importantly, to the people of the Breslov community in Safed—thank you for your openness, warm friendships, and willingness to share. You are the backbone upon which this thesis relied, and without you, of course, it would not have been possible. In the course of my writing I have endeavoured to remain respectful yet honest; if there are passages that affront, they were written in the only spirit that should rightfully be accepted as valid—that of a sincere seeking after Truth.

I also acknowledge with gratitude the following scholarships that made my fieldwork and thesis-writing possible: the Australian Postgraduate Award, the Carlyle Greenwell Bequest Postgraduate Research Fund, and the University of Sydney Doctoral Travel Grant Scheme.

The cover-image is a photograph taken by the author at the ancient Jewish cemetery of Safed, located on the border between the city and the forested hills beyond.

See Part V. “Conclusion” for an explanation regarding the origins of the title of this thesis.
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................................................................... III

TABLE OF CONTENTS.................................................................................................................................................... VII

TABLE OF PHOTOGRAPHS ............................................................................................................................................... IX

A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY, STYLISTIC CONVENTIONS AND REFERENCING .................................................XI

I. PROJECT PRELIMINARIES ........................................................................................................................................ 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................................................. 1

1.2 PROJECT CONCEPTION: A PERSONAL JOURNEY ........................................................................................................... 5

1.3 METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................................................................................ 9

II. BACKGROUND: JUDAISM, KABBALAH, AND THE CHASIDIC MOVEMENT .......................................................... 17

2.1 THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE JEWISH WORLDVIEW .................................................................................................. 17

2.2 THE ESOTERIC JEWISH TRADITION: KABBALAH ........................................................................................................ 23

2.3 THE RISE OF THE CHASIDIC MOVEMENT IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EUROPE ........................................................... 29

2.4 THE BRESLOV CHASIDIC GROUP AND SAFED ........................................................................................................ 35

III. ETHNOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................................................................... 41

3.1 DEMOGRAPHICS, LIVELIHOOD AND FAMILY LIFE ...................................................................................................... 41

3.2 DRESS ......................................................................................................................................................................... 49

3.3 SYNAGOGUE, KOLEL AND STATE—PRAYER, LEARNING AND CONTROVERSY ............................................................. 57

3.4 “THE Rav”—THE FIGUREHEAD OF THE COMMUNITY ............................................................................................... 79

3.5 SHABBAT .................................................................................................................................................................... 89

3.6 GENERAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES—FESTIVALS, LIFE EVENTS, AND OTHER ............................................................. 97

3.7 “FORESTS, MOUNTAINS AND FINDING G-D”—THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND HITBODEDUT ......................... 107

3.8 THE “CHosen PEOPLE” AND THE Goyim—ATTITUDES TOWARDS NON-JEWS ............................................................ 123

3.9 PILGRIMAGE TO UMAN, UKRAINE ............................................................................................................................ 127

3.10 PSYCHOACTIVE EXPLORATIONS—FROM PURIM TO PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS .......................................................... 137

IV. ANALYSIS ................................................................................................................................................................. 153

4.1 “ZERO DEGREES OF FREEDOM”—TOWARDS TOTAL PRESCRIPTION AND PROSCRIPTION OF THOUGHT, SPEECH AND ACTION ........................................................................................................... 153

4.2 “BARBARIANS AT THE GATES”—THE CHAREDI CONSTITUTION OF SELF THROUGH OTHER .................................................. 173

4.3 “BRIDGES BETWEEN WORLDS”—JUDAISM AND SHAMANISM .................................................................................... 185

4.4 “THE SHOW MUST Go ON”—THE TORAH AND THE JEWISH RELIGION AS A SELF-REPLICATING ENTITY ............. 211

4.5 “IN THE BEGINNING G-D CREATED…”—THE TORAH LIFEWORLD AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE ........................................................................................................... 225

4.6 TOWARDS A PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHAREDI PHENOMENON ........................................... 257

V. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................................................ 281

VI. REFERENCES ........................................................................................................................................................... 289
Table of Photographs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The classic “Na Nach” slogan, sprayed onto a Safed stall-front in characteristic psychedelic/New Age style. 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The grave of Rabbi Yosef Qaro (the “Beit Yosef”) at the ancient Safed Cemetery .......................... 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The interior of the Breslov Nachal Novea Synagogue in Safed ..................................................... 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A rally in Jerusalem on March 2, 2014, protesting conscription of Charedim into the Israel Defense Forces . 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The “Rav” (Rabbi) of the Breslov community in Safed, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig .............................. 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Breslov Magen Avot boys school in Safed, site of sexual molestation incidents around 2009 ............. 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kitchen benches and cook-tops covered with copious amounts of aluminium foil during Passover ............ 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Typical forested, hilly terrain found on the outskirts of Safed ....................................................... 109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jews milling in the street; a typical scene from the Uman pilgrimage ............................................. 127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Kloyz Synagogue in Uman, Ukraine .............................................................................................. 128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The grave (tsiyun) of Rabbi Nachman, inside a synagogue in Uman ................................................... 132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Food halls, set up for the Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage week in Uman .................................................. 133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>A sign near the tomb of the Ba’al Shem Tov, located in the town of Medzhybizh, Ukraine .................. 179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>A religious Jew cradling a Torah scroll at Ben Gurion Airport ............................................................ 218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Breslov group from Safed enacting a ritual in the nearby city of Meiron ......................................... 242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*With the exception of two photographs (Figure 4 on p. 72 and Figure 5 on p. 79) as stated in their captions, all photographs in this thesis were taken by the author.*
A Note on Orthography, Stylistic Conventions and Referencing

This work draws on ancient texts and makes use of transliterated Hebrew words. In doing so I have endeavoured to adhere to stylistic and referencing conventions that, firstly, are of value and informative in and of themselves, and secondly, represent common practice within the academic community.

Out of respect for the people with whom I worked, the ubiquitous English word for the Divine, “G-d”, has been spelled throughout this thesis (unless it appears as part of a quotation or in a reference) with a hyphen, in adherence to the Jewish practice of not writing the names of G-d unless as part of a holy manuscript or book. This applies even to the Name written in other languages, and is a standard convention followed by many Jewish scholars. In the same vein of respect, I capitalise all nouns or pronouns, such as “Source” or “Him”, referring to G-d.

I have adopted one of the more common transliteration schemes that employs only the standard English letters, and, in my mind, best reflects the original Hebrew. It furthermore does justice to the connection between the Hebrew and Latin (and by extension English) alphabets themselves. The Hebrew letter Chet, ח, is transliterated as ch, whilst Khaf, כ (which is a Kaf, ك, without the dagesh diacritic inside), is transliterated as kh. Both of these sounds, ch and kh, do not exist in the standard modern English language. Kaf, כ, is transliterated as k, whilst Quf, ק, as q1. Tzadi, צ, is written as tz, and Hei, ה, as h. Both Alef, א, and Ayin, י (another letter having no modern English equivalent) are transliterated according to the vowel sound accompanying them (such as a, e, and so forth). An apostrophe is used in some cases in order to clarify pronunciation; for example, the word בעל is rendered ba’al. Aside from several minor issues (including the ambiguities concerning Alef, א, and Ayin, י; v being used to represent both Bet without the dagesh diacritic, ב, and Vav, ג; t being used to represent both Tet, ד, and Taf, ת; and variations in the pronunciation of the latter—as either a “t” sound or a soft “th” sound—depending on certain Hebrew language rules), this scheme produces a fairly faithful rendition of the original Hebrew in English characters.

1 These transcriptions are not arbitrary, but based on a true relationship between alphabets: note that Kaf is located in the Hebrew alphabetical sequence Kaf, Lamed, Mem, Nun (from right-to-left כ,ל,מ,נ), which is paralleled by the English k, l, m, n. Likewise, Quf is followed by Resh, Shin and Taf (ק,ש,ת), paralleled by the English q, r, s, t.
Whilst this scheme has largely been followed throughout, I have deviated from it in some cases, usually with words that have a well-established alternate English transliteration. כבָּלָה, for example, should strictly speaking be written Qabalah. However, this spelling with a q is more unusual, and so the form used by Scholem (1978)—Kabbalah—is employed herein. Note, however, that the second b, presumably inserted to ensure correct English pronunciation, is not representative of the original Hebrew. Similarly, שבת should be written, strictly speaking, Shabat, but the near-universal form of Shabbat (the Sabbath) is used instead. The word חסיד appears in several forms across different works, including Hassid and Chassid; here I have opted for the more faithful rendition of Chasid. Finally, transliterated words (usually from Hebrew but occasionally from Yiddish)—for example, bitul, denoting nullification of ego—are generally italicised, except when they are common and well-recognised terms; the above examples of Kabbalah, Shabbat and Chasid are a case in point.

This work makes frequent reference to the Breslov Chasidic group, Breslov being the name of the town on the Bug River in the Ukraine where the group’s founder, Rabbi Nachman, spent the last period of his life. As pointed out by Levine (2003, p. 1341), there is some variance amongst English scholars concerning the spelling of this Ukrainian name, with forms including Bratzlav (based on a transliteration from the modern Russian), Brazlaw, Braclav, Bratslav and others being used. Kaplan (1980, p. 181, as cited in Levine, 2003) states that “the spelling Breslov is preferred by all English speaking readers of Rabbi Nachman… [t]here is considerable evidence from oral tradition that this was the way the name was pronounced in the time of Rabbi Nachman”. Numerous modern publications and websites produced by various Breslov groups do indeed use this spelling, and therefore Breslov, along with the form Breslover/s to denote an individual/s belonging to the group, is the version that this work has adopted. It should be noted that the use of an –ev ending (Breslev) is also common in the literature.

I have chosen to use neither the more traditional ethnographic term informant, nor the modern one co-researcher, in my writing. The former has about it the ring of a conspiracy or saga, whilst the latter is somewhat self-important, suggesting that the individual in question enthusiastically engaged with the ethnographer in some kind of highly critical research mission. In actual fact, neither is true; members of the community engaged with me, opened themselves up, and shared, out of simple friendship, care and mutual respect for a fellow traveller on the path. I have therefore opted to use the most simple and accurate term to describe this relationship, that of friend.

As with transliteration, I have followed a number of simple guidelines regarding referencing, in order to promote readability, whilst still conveying a maximal amount of information. This work makes
wide use of canonical texts, including the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), other books of the TaNaKH (a three-letter acronym denoting the combined books of the Torah, Prophets [Nevi’im] and Writings [Ktuvim], Perek Shirah, and so forth. As there is no author for these works in the academic sense, they are cited in the text by title (for example, *The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English]*, 2008). The date of publication for such works is shrouded in time, and the date given herein is, of course, simply the publication year of that particular edition. Finally, I have used some texts in the original Hebrew (or Aramaic, as the case may be), some texts in English translation, and some in both. The language in which a particular work of this kind (especially canonical texts) was used is identified as part of its title in square brackets; for example, [Hebrew] or [Hebrew and English].

***
I. Project Preliminaries

1.1 Introduction

What all religions ask of the seeker is... a partial reversal of orientation, a turning inwards and, at the same time, for one cannot be done without the other, a loosening of the fetters which tie him to his surroundings. It is not a denial of the world that is asked, but a partial and temporary withdrawal from it, not a complete stopping of the outflowing energy... but a restoration of balance. (p. 79-80)

...the reversal of man’s whole attitude, is therefore followed by ‘the dark night of the senses’... (p. 81)

At such moments of dire peril, the temptation is clearly and naturally, to give up the venture, to return to the familiar world where it is possible to live ‘by bread alone’, and to resume the old life, one-sidedly turned outwards towards the external world with all its attractions and promises. (p. 87)

Schnapper (1980 [1965])

1.1 Introduction

In this thesis I gaze into the Breslov Chasidic community in the town of Safed (in Hebrew Tzfat), northern Israel, as an ethnographic lens through which to illuminate the Jewish “Charedi” lifeworld. To any scholar interested in the immense varieties of social structures and cultural forms that human beings can and have arranged themselves into, the Charedi world is a remarkable one, in that it serves as an example of the extremes that human experience may become attracted to and caught up in, and that societies ultimately establish as normality. To use the word “extreme” in this context may appear problematic, for it immediately demands clarification—extreme relative to what? But the term is appropriate here, for its meaning should be taken not from an arbitrary world of description (that is, some notion of an “extreme” normality in comparison to what the anthropologist, from his or her secular Western perspective, perceives as being “reasonable” or “moderate”), but rather, from a logical perspective—the precepts, behaviours, and cognitions of the Charedi world are extreme precisely because many of them are situated at the far end of the possible spectrum of intensity along which they can logically occur.

This intensity is observable in several different domains. The declared Charedi ethos is one of absolute attachment—dvequt—to G-d. The path it perceives as the means to achieving this attachment, and which permeates all aspects of its lifeworld, is the one laid out in the Jewish Halakhic code. In its particular Charedi cultural interpretation and application (based especially on the
Shulchan Arukh—literally the “Set Table”; the most widely consulted code of Jewish law, published in the sixteenth century) this path stipulates almost all aspects of correct human behaviour and cognition; from which thoughts whilst sitting on the toilet seat are proper or improper at different times, depending on whether it is the Shabbat or a festival or not; laws regarding clothing and dress; laws of buying and selling; stipulations regarding menstruation and sexual intercourse; dos and don’ts associated with particular festivals; commandments defining correct food preparation and consumption; laws of circumcision, marriage and mourning; stipulations concerning prayer; commandments regarding the cognitive and emotional stances—that a Jew is supposed to cultivate to the utmost degree—of both loving and fearing God; and many more. The comprehensiveness of this very partial list (intended here only to illustrate the astonishing scope of commandments, derived from the Torah, that cover every imaginable aspect of human existence²) is matched in some cases by the zeal of the religious adherents endeavouring to follow them. Thus, the “extremeness” of the Charedi lifeworld is apparent at several different levels of emotional, cognitive and social life.

The Charedi lifeworld is also extreme in its rejection of any other, especially one that threatens its own social structures and cultural forms. This imperative to insularity has defined Judaism since its earliest, Biblical times, yet is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the fact that Jewish communities throughout history have kept themselves distinct—to greater and lesser extents depending, of course, on particular contexts—from surrounding social groups has undoubtedly played a major role in the preservation of Jewish society and culture. Yet on the other hand, in many points in time and space around the world, Jews have been vibrantly involved in their host communities, and indeed, played key parts in shaping them. The contemporary Charedi mindset, and certainly as I experienced it through the Breslov group in Safed, however, is to a large extent defined by insularity; these themes of self and other are taken up in some depth across several chapters of this thesis.

If at the opening of this Introduction the reader was in some doubt regarding the implications of the word “Charedi”, then hopefully a basic sketch is already beginning to take form in his or her mind. In Hebrew the word is related to the root for “fear”, CHaReD, so a Charedi is “one who fears”. Despite

² Soloveitchik (1999, p. 321) expresses a similar idea: “… the Halakhah is a sweepingly comprehensive regula of daily life—covering not only prayer and divine service but food, drink, dress, sexual relations between man and wife, the rhythms of work and patterns of rest—it constitutes a way of life”.
I. Project Preliminaries
1.1 Introduction

the negative connotations of the word “fear”, however, from the Charedi perspective it is in this case a good and wholesome word, for it refers to the fear of not serving G-d properly, in terms of obeying His commandments (see the similar points made by Friedman, 1995, pp. 131-132). One learned and insightful Breslov friend emphasised to me that the essence of being Charedi is “to tremble before Hashem [G-d]”, yet that this is a profound idea, that most (even Charedi) Jews have little true understanding of.

In Israel today the term Charedi is generally used to denote what could be translated into English as “ultra-orthodox”. From a historical and sociological perspective, contemporary Charedi society (located prominently in Israel and the United States, and also found throughout the world, including in Europe, South America and Australia) includes three major groups; Chasidic Jews, who belong to one of numerous Chasidic groups originating in Europe (see onwards); Mitnagdim, meaning “those who oppose”—Jews identifying with a tradition, hearkening back to eighteenth century Europe, that rejected (vehemently and violently at times) the rise of Chasidism; and finally, non-Ashkenazic (non-European) Jews, who in their lifestyles and religious practice would generally be described as “Charedi” by mainstream Jewry.

This thesis consists of six parts. Following a description of my personal journey in terms of Project Conception, I describe the Methodology used in the ethnographic work, making several remarks regarding the overall theoretical approach of the project. I have generally assumed little knowledge of Judaism on part of the reader, and accordingly make an effort to clarify and re-clarify key concepts and terms throughout. For this purpose, too, the work includes Part II “Background: Judaism, Kabbalah and the Chasidic Movement”; a concise summary that will aid the reader in better understanding the whole.

Part III “Ethnography” is based on the year or so of fieldwork that I undertook in the town of Safed beginning in March 2012, and also on a briefer return visit there at the beginning of 2014. This part of the work paints a picture of the contemporary lifeworld of the Breslov community in that town, and is arranged according to themes, dealing with subjects such as family life, dress, religious practices and events, pilgrimage, and so forth.

Part IV “Analysis” seeks to use this ethnographic material as a basis for a deeper anthropological and philosophical investigation. As a close friend and anthropologist once said to me (loosely paraphrased), “Anthropology is about saying something useful about a specific group of human beings, from that saying something useful about human beings in general, and ultimately saying
something valuable about *Being itself*” (S. Job, personal communication, 2011). In other words, the anthropological journey is anchored in ethnography but endeavours ultimately to sail into metaphysics. Part IV, then, attempts to at least embark on this journey. It includes ideas and analyses on a social functional level, as well as, importantly, a discussion of the phenomenology of “being Breslov” and of the Jewish religious experience. The final chapter seeks to tie all of the previous material together by presenting several psychoanalytic perspectives on the Charedi phenomenon; that chapter constitutes one of the key contributions of this entire project.

In some parts of this thesis I allow freer rein to what could be described as normative judgements and assertions; they are made not from a superficial, external examination of the subject matter, but from a deeply personal grappling with it that continued for several years (discussed in more detail below). Although some would argue that the anthropologist’s role should not extend to such speculations, I reject those arguments. In the spirit of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995), I hold that the anthropologist is not some automaton who suspends moral judgement in the elusive pursuit of an imaginary “objectivity”, but rather, that he or she is intimately involved in the society and the culture being studied. As a result of this intimacy, the anthropologist comes to grapple with his or her own most essential questions through the very lens of that lifeworld, as they are discovering it. Furthermore, as it shapes them, they too are shaping a tiny part—a minute whorl in the larger fractal that is the whole—of it. The anthropologist is thus not only finding knowledge in the world, he or she is *co-creating* it. As such they have earned the right to speak—respectfully—also in a normative and moral sense. Richter (1978; cited in Richter, 1984, p. xvii) writes in a similar vein, “If, when we *act*, we fail to apply what we *know*, in the end we cease to know how we should *act*”. My production and sharing of the ideas herein, then, is also a part of my acting.
1.2 Project Conception: A Personal Journey

This personal preamble is given here for two reasons. Firstly, because this doctorate and its subject matter are representative of the most personally intense and challenging years of my life to date, and thus this story deserves some form of expression. Secondly, and importantly from an ethnographic perspective, I believe that the fieldwork I conducted within the Breslov community in Safed was somewhat unique for an anthropologist in the Charedi context. During a substantial amount of my time in this ancient city I was—with much inner-conflict and pendulum swings back-and-forth, as will be explained—walking the Jewish religious/spiritual path, in my thoughts, actions, and generally how I lived my life. Thus, the subject-matter of my fieldwork was intimately close to my heart, and to my whole conception of what life and reality were all about. A consequence of this was that many of the themes discussed in this thesis (for example, under Chapter 3.3 “Synagogue, Kolel, and State”, Chapter 3.5 “Shabbat”, Chapter 3.9 “Pilgrimage to Uman”, as well as almost all topics in Part IV “Analysis”), I grappled with and experienced first-hand. Another important consequence of my own searching was that I was received with open arms by the Breslov Chasidim (the plural of Chasid). They were well-aware that I was conducting research for a doctorate—indeed, the venerated Rav of the community, in a rare prolonged conversation I had with him, encouraged and almost admonished me to make sure that I did actually finish the project properly and write this thesis! Yet, I believe that for almost all friends whom I interacted with, this doctorate was just a minor detail; in their eyes a part of G-d’s intricate design to get me to Safed for a year to live a religious life. They saw me absolutely as a fellow traveller on the path, a seeking soul just like themselves, who—since I had been graced with a year in that holy city—was at some kind of pinnacle of that seeking.

Voloder (2008) discusses similar “insider” situations and “autoethnographic” challenges at some length. She points out that a general assumption usually exists (on part of the ethnographer and/or their academic peers and/or their informants) that commonalities between practitioner and subject usually lead to shared experiences and understandings between the two, which in turn give rise to expectations that the anthropologist can use his or her experiences to better understand those of their informants. Although it is important to note that other factors, including education, gender, and class, may actually serve to distance an apparent “insider” (Voloder, 2008, p. 29), in my experience I can decisively say that core common factors served to bring myself and the friends I worked with closer together.
This situation had several important implications from a research perspective, and some of them I discuss in more detail in 1.3 “Methodology” below. Ethnographically I might be called a “semi-insider”, with all the advantages and disadvantages that this entails. However, an “advantage” or a “disadvantage” can only be defined relative to the purpose/final product that the researcher is attempting to produce. I argue strongly that the idea of “objective” research is a fallacy; there is no such thing as “objective”, only the intersection of a given subject with a given object to produce a particular reality. I believe that any deficiencies in “objectivity” on my part, due to my personal agenda, were far outweighed by what that personal agenda enabled me to do; in a short space of time to penetrate the Breslov world to far greater depths and with far greater intimacy, than any complete outsider could possibly have done. It also allowed me to truly participate in the lifeworld of these people; not as an actor (in the theatrical sense), but with, at times, the entirety of my being. This adds an additional dimension when considering the method of “participant observation”; for is participation truly participation when it occurs only to a superficial degree—a going-through-the-motions—and when the so-called participant (the ethnographer) is not really engaged with a particular belief structure/cultural system at all levels of their conscious being? I therefore believe and hope that this thesis is richer in texture, better able to illuminate the Breslov lifeworld, and thereby more capable of saying something of anthropological value, as a result of my fundamental personal involvement in its subject matter.

*Here, then, is a concise version of my story:*

I spent much of the year 2011 preparing for the fieldwork that was to form the basis for this doctoral thesis. In the first half of that year, however, those preparations were directed not at Israel, but at the Peruvian Amazon, for I was to conduct ethnographic work with the indigenous *Shipibo* people of the Ucayali Basin. This work was to focus on their shamanic practices, and in particular, on their traditional use of psychoactive drugs (especially ayahuasca) as a technology for facilitating non-ordinary states of consciousness.

The subject of non-ordinary states and psychoactive (and especially psychedelic) drugs did and still does interest me greatly. Personal experience and intellectual inquiry into this subject suggest that these states may be used as valuable tools for illuminating deep metaphysical questions that humanity has grappled with for thousands of years, and indeed, to reveal new horizons on the very question of asking a question. Through my own experiences in those states, and spurred ever-onwards by that most basic of human desires, to understand the sometimes sublime, sometimes insane, and
ever-mysterious thing called existence—and indeed, not just to understand for the sake of abstracted knowledge, but to understand in order to know how best to act “in” it—I discovered the Jewish tradition into which I had been born.

Until that point, growing up in a secular Jewish family in Sydney, Australia, and then living for seven years (from ages sixteen to twenty-three) in a similarly non-religious milieu in Jerusalem, Israel, I had conceived of Judaism as a dry, robotic, fundamentalist endeavour; a cultural creation, no more, and for me fittingly represented by the very same drab, homogenous, black garb favoured by its Charedi adherents. My most basic cosmo-ontological grasp of the world had been assembled haphazardly and with much oscillation between confusion and understanding (as is the case for any human being), as a synthesis of sorts between Eastern traditions (particularly yoga and Vedanta), shamanic systems of knowledge (especially those employing visionary plants and molecules), and the Western intellectual tradition (including modern science).

In a short space of time, however, the Jewish tradition came alive for me, bathed in radiant colour and light, offering real hope that here was a body of knowledge that could say something true about the nature of existence, as well as providing a tried-and-tested path that would take me to wherever it was that I was supposed to be going. I also began to see in Judaism many elements of both those Eastern and shamanic traditions that I had been so attracted to; indeed, in some cases it became increasingly apparent that those elements—such as meditational practices and the veneration of the natural word and its cycles—were present at the very core of the Jewish religion.

What followed, up until the very writing of this thesis, were the most tumultuous years of my life, as I grappled back and forth in the dizzying spaces of faith/no-faith, belief/no-belief, and embracing religious practice/abandoning it. I was essentially attempting to understand for myself—through cycles of alternating joy and anguish—whether this religious tradition was for me the path to ultimate liberation, or one of ultimate enslavement. During my fieldwork, and up until proper writing of this thesis commenced, my deepest personal experience was characterised by intense back-and-forth pendulum swings between worldviews. This is well-illustrated by some entries from my field diary:

- **30 April 2012**: So I’ve really lived/am living this reality, and in doing so have come to totally question the very paradigm [anthropology] from which I’m supposed to be studying it in the first place → DUALITY.
I. Project Preliminaries

1.2 Project Conception: A Personal Journey

- **23 March 2012**: [In reaction to a Shabbat synagogue service around the beginning of my time in Safed] And complete despair and disgust wells up inside of me. A complete rejection of all this.

- **8 May 2012**: ...the juxtaposition of the different worlds of my life is unceasing.

- **3 July 2012**: I’m still flipping, back and forth, one day enthused with it all, accepting—almost accepting—it all. And the next—like what the hell. Give me my life back. It’s all brainwashing.

In the “Project Conception” section of my Research Proposal, written shortly before travelling to Israel for this fieldwork at the beginning of 2012 and somewhat in the thick of religious enthusiasm, I ended with the sentence, “I remain curious and hopeful regarding the content and tone of the Introduction that I shall write for my thesis, two years or so from now, in comparison to this one”. In that sense, then, I feel like my personal journey has come full circle, through the heady yet often dark and torturous spaces of commitment to a several thousand year-old tradition that is based on faith in something unseen and unknown, and back again to a real-world approach of questioning, open-mindedness, and a basic attitude of “I don’t know”. At the time of this writing I believe that this “I don’t know” attitude is perhaps the most honest that can be adopted—for I certainly don’t Know, and I’ve yet to meet another being who does.

I have come to conceive of all systems of knowledge, including Judaism and modern science, as vibrant metaphors and maps, that each in its own way points to truths. All have their limitations, however; in the case of religions and spiritual traditions, they tend to confuse the act of pointing with the Divine experience being pointed at, and thus the tradition itself—its teachings, precepts, rituals, and indeed, in some cases, human beings associated with it—become deified. This is a grotesque development, for the very tradition that has as its supreme objective union with G-d effectively slams the door in Its face. Close to the conclusion of this doctoral project, there is little doubt in my mind that Judaism contains within it great truths concerning Reality, and that the Jewish tradition offers one of the most insightful and accomplished metaphysical systems known to humankind. It is my hope that through this thesis I will be able to use the material at hand to convey some level of authentic insight into this religion, and into a group of people who practice it with the entirety of their being.

***
1.3 Methodology

Theoretical Considerations

Whilst superficially the conduct of ethnography may appear simple—depart for the field, experience, return, and write—it is, as ethnographers and anthropologists are well-aware, far from being so. As one begins to comprehend the nature of the ethnographic undertaking and to survey it from a theoretical perspective, one realises that ethnography, particularly within the context of its claim to be the basis of a “productive science of human existence” (Mimica, 2009, p. 43), raises deep questions and challenges regarding the ethnographer’s essential understanding of the world, both ontological and epistemological. Furthermore, before he or she can even begin to say anything useful regarding the lifeworld of another, ethnography demands of the anthropologist at least some understanding of their own intellectual lifeworld, and of the very tradition from which their anthropology has emerged.

Two traditions central to this present research project are the phenomenological and the psychoanalytic approaches to anthropology. In accordance with one of their most basic tenets, I take the “psyche, unconscious, and imagination as the generative matrix of human cultural life-worlds” (Mimica, 2009, p. 40). My interest as an ethnographer begins with social structure—which is largely observable from the “outside”—but ultimately extends to phenomenology. Here, the researcher can begin to have any hope of understanding the experience of “being Breslov” only from the inside; the inside of the society, through immersing in and experiencing it, and the interior of its individuals, through ongoing dialogue with them.

Based on this idea that the psyche is the generative matrix of cultural life-worlds, the specific cultural forms experienced during my fieldwork with the Breslov community may be said to have their origins in the minds of the people comprising that community. Clearly, however, the cause-and-effect relationships are more complex than the unidirectionality that this statement implies. A given culture and the minds of the individuals comprising its society are co-creators; on the one hand, the individuals of the Breslov community grew up in—or in the many cases of those moving from a secular to a religious life, voluntarily adopted—a religious Jewish Breslov milieu. On the other hand,
those individuals carry on their own cognitions and processing of the world, form their own innate understandings of it, and feed these back into that cultural milieu.

As would be the case with research regarding any culture that elevates the values of faith and belief to the highest of levels, and that, as discussed throughout this thesis, similarly attaches a holy significance not only to actions in the physical world but also to certain cognitive stances and psychological positions (for example, the love and fear of G-d), the ethnographer must be careful to differentiate on the one hand between an individual’s innate and fundamental beliefs and values, and on the other hand, that individual’s declared beliefs and values. It is not that a particular friend is attempting to deceive the ethnographer; rather (and as I myself acted out at times), the believer is carrying out their spiritual-religious “mission” with such commitment and zeal, that when asked a particular question, it would be unthinkable for them to answer with anything but the “official line”. There are two reasons for this; firstly, to admit that one thinks differently to what the Torah and its tradition stipulates is to admit to oneself that one is far from the path, and that can be a difficult admission indeed. But even for one who is self-aware to the extent that he or she realises that only through such honest admissions, grounded in reality, can they have any hope of truly changing that reality and progressing on the path, they also realise that pretending to believe is a part of his or her arsenal in effecting true change against the forces opposing it (this has also been called “fake it till you make it”). Thus, they answer with (and probably believe that they believe in) that “official line”. In this vein, and regarding the Charedi lifeworld, Soloveitchik (1999, p. 327) writes: “In a text culture, behaviour becomes, inevitably, a function of the ideas it consciously seeks to realize”.

3 In the language of Bourdieu (and others), these dialectical processes of (from the perspective of the individual and their relationship with the sociocultural) being caused versus causing, are called incorporation and objectification respectively (Miller & Branson, 1987, p. 217). The same authors, in a similar vein, write (p. 215): “No matter from what angles the various disputants in the battles that rage within the social sciences may come at it, it is that ineffable reality outside each of us but which acts upon us and is transformed by us, that we seek to trap as social scientists [italics added]”.

4 It is often pointed out in Jewish religious discourse that the same question may have many answers, and thus that Judaism may be (and indeed, is) practiced in different forms, yet all of them being authentic in terms of doing G-d’s will. This is also expressed in the famous Talmudic and Kabbalistic precept that “there are seventy faces to the Torah”. This concept may indeed be true, but it does not alter the fact that the religion stipulates clear divisions of right and wrong, dos and don’ts, Good and Evil, and so forth, across all facets of human existence. Thus, whilst there may not be a single “official line”, there is certainly a series of “official lines” within a narrowly defined range of parameters.
The relevance of this to my fieldwork is that quite rarely, and usually only in moments of intimate connection through intense emotion on the part of a friend, myself, or both, did I feel that I was gaining some understanding of the innate, implicit levels of that individual’s experience. *Those were valuable moments indeed.* Expressing this point through a different metaphor, I have made a constant effort to differentiate between *theology* (or what I have sometimes referred to as the “theoretical”) and *ethnography* (or the “real living world”), for if this thesis were based on the former, then almost every single question it raises, probably down to the minutest of details, could be answered simply by consulting existing texts that stipulate all the “shoulds” of the Jewish religion (this fact in itself says something important about that religion). In contrast, of course, this thesis seeks to illuminate an actual, *real-world* example of the social structures and cultural forms that human beings arrange themselves into, live by and reproduce, and this distinction, as pointed out, is especially important to this thesis, because of the importance placed on faith and its declaration (through speech and deeds) by both the religion and the community upon which the research is based. Interestingly, this distinction between explicitly declared attitudes, and implicit and often unconscious ones, has become salient in the field of experimental psychology since the mid-1990s. Greenwald and Banaji (1995, p. 8), for example, define that “*Implicit attitudes* are introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects”.

In “Project Conception: A Personal Journey” above, I discuss in some detail my personal involvement with the subject matter of this research project. In relation to the place of the ethnographer, Mimica (2009, p. 40) writes: “… anthropological understanding is bedevilled by the practitioner’s own cultural biases and uncritical use of a range of concepts specific to Occidental culture…”. He goes on to explain that this bedevilment calls, therefore, upon the ethnographer—if they are to produce anything of real value—to engage in *self-critique*; “In doing ethnography, one’s character and personality structure are both the limiting and facilitating conditions of the ethnographic project itself” (Mimica, 2009, p. 44). In other words, it is the practitioner’s egoity that permeates their quest for knowing, and actually sets up a parallel project, in close embrace with the quest for knowing, consisting of a drive to *ignorance*. This parallel project Mimica (2009, p. 41) terms “unknowing”, and it occurs as a result of the narcissistic dynamics of the ego as it seeks to protect and perpetuate its own structures. Mimica (2009, p. 41) writes: “Thus, conterminous with the positive will to knowledge, there is a negative will that generates a myriad of intentional modifications of what is seemingly a positive self-projection”.

11
The ethnographer, therefore, must strive to break down-and-through not only his or her informants’ egoic defences and projections, as discussed above, but also and especially his or her own. “Unless one is willing to work self-critically at this level, ethnographic understanding will not break out of the limitations of the ethnographer’s self-idealizations that are rooted in his/her inner archaic-narcissistic position” (Mimica, 2009, p. 44). I am well aware that my own pendulum swings regarding my deepest relationship with Judaism as a personal spiritual path had a major impact on the ethnographic work and subsequent analyses thereof. When I was “on” the religious path, my drive to unknowing was directed at what I felt to be negative or unsavoury aspects of such extreme religious adherence (an extreme adherence that deeply characterises Breslov practitioners) and its resulting social and cultural phenomena; these negative or unsavoury aspects became re-interpreted in my mind—via various cognitive sleights-of-hand, such as the age-old story regarding the inability of a mere human being to understand the will of the Almighty—and affected my very conception of the entire research project. Had this position prevailed, entire sections of this thesis—for example, my discussion, in Chapter 3.4 on “The Rav”, of the problematic handling by the Breslov leadership of a series of child molestation cases at the community’s boys school, or Chapter 4.4 on the “Torah and the Jewish Religion as a Self-Replicating Entity”—would look very different, or would be non-existent. Furthermore, whilst I was “on the path”, my whole (at least explicitly conscious) conception of the truth-value of the Western intellectual tradition—competing as it must with the Jewish tradition—in regards to cosmogony, cause-and-effect in the world, and similar metaphysical themes, was shifted towards the dismissive.

Conversely, when I was “off” the religious path—and at times vehemently opposed to it—my project of unknowing was directed at those very same experiences and insights that had brought me to the Jewish tradition in the first place (that is, directed in a denial of them). During such periods, furthermore, I would often actively seek out the particularly negative and discordant elements in the Breslov society and culture, in order to add fuel to the fire, so to speak (or to take it away, depending on how one uses the metaphor). It was from this position that I was also able to assess my ethnographic data through the rational, analytic lens of an Enlightenment-based discipline of anthropology.

It is my sincere belief that this moving back and forth between two worldviews—two often opposing systems of knowing, and two corresponding projects of unknowing—has enabled a coverage of and grappling with the material comprising this research project that would otherwise, in terms of both its scope and depth, not have been possible. Accordingly, I believe and hope that the ethnographic
material and its subsequent analysis presented in this thesis reflects and does some measure of justice to both worldviews, constituting a more colourful, interesting and valuable synthesis as a result.

**Description of the Fieldwork**

I initially undertook approximately one year of fieldwork in Safed, beginning in March 2012, and subsequently returned there for a month or so at the beginning of 2014. In both periods I lived in the heart of the Old City—within walking distance of the central Breslov synagogue/kolel complex, “Nachal Novea”—in a small apartment rented from a Breslov family that I became very close to. My primary ethnographic method was one of immersion and participation in the Breslov lifeworld across most of its facets. In periods when my own religious sentiments were waxing, I took an active part in prayer sessions—in many cases attending all three of the prescribed daily synagogue services—and during my initial year in the field was able to experience the entire Jewish religious calendar, with its associated practices and rituals for each festival. I also accompanied the majority of the men of the Safed Breslov community on their week-long annual pilgrimage to the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, located in the town of Uman in the Ukraine; this event informed an entire Chapter (3.9) of this thesis.

Another significant point of contact with the Breslov community were the study classes that I attended in the kolel; in some cases structured sessions run by a teacher for small groups of students, and in others, one-on-one learning (following the classic Jewish tradition) with partners whom I had formed a rapport with over time. A further important setting for gathering data and pursuing particular lines

---

5 A **kolel**, a word derived from the Hebrew root denoting “inclusion” or “totality”, is an institution of adult religious learning, and is also used to refer to the physical space in which that learning takes place—usually a synagogue (see Chapter 3.3).

6 One such structured session was particularly ongoing and salient for me; it was run mostly in English by a Breslov Chasid who had grown up in America and then moved to Israel after adopting a Jewish religious life. The main subject matter of these classes, delivered as a relaxed discussion between a handful of students and this teacher, was *Likutey Halachot*, the multivolume magnum opus written by Rabbi Nachman’s key disciple, Rabbi Natan of Breslov, and that essentially makes connections (through detailed commentaries and discussions) between Kabbalistic teachings and the most apparently mundane aspects of daily life. This “bringing down” of Kabbalah into the ordinary world is a defining characteristic of the Chasidic approach more generally (see Part II “Background”). A number of the ideas presented in this thesis were conceived of and grappled with (either internally on my own, or in some cases with friends) during those classes.
I. Project Preliminaries
1.3 Methodology

of enquiry was at the homes of Breslov Chasidim, to which I was invited for celebratory meals almost every Shabbat, and also for religious festivals such as Pesach (Passover).

Particularly in those settings—of kolel and home—I experienced a not infrequent dilemma regarding the types of questions that I felt comfortable asking. For members of a community that feels itself constantly assailed on several fronts by the secular world in which it is embedded, certain questions—such as those pertaining to the kolel system, living off charity, lack of productive livelihood and high birth rate; Zionism and military service; and the extremes of Charedi life generally—felt to me confrontational in and of themselves, regardless of how gently and respectfully they were expressed. This was especially the case, for example, when speaking to a Chasid in his home whilst he was surrounded by his five or more children, or in synagogue on the eve of Shabbat, when a palpable sense of qedushah (holiness) surrounded the occasion. I found, however, that in the month or so of my second, return trip to the field—by which time many of my own religious and metaphysical grapplings had been laid to an uneasy rest—my approach was more question- and theme-oriented compared to my original year of research. During this time I was able to broach sensitive subject matter in a far more forward fashion, and received more direct and meaningful answers than previously. Without doubt, the level of rapport, trust and friendship that I had built by this time with certain friends was a key factor in facilitating such depth of communication.

Since I was living in the midst of this community, additional settings for interaction presented themselves almost daily—in the streets of the city; through odd meetings and sometimes one-off discussions with a new friend in a shop; in the forests surrounding Safed with a group of Chasidim, who for a time went out nightly to meditate and pray and whom I briefly joined, and so forth. I also became close to some of the “younger generation” belonging either to the Breslov community or to families who had loose affiliations with that community; male and female friends, from ages sixteen to mid-twenties, almost all of whom were not living a Charedi life, either because they had left that path, or had never been on it. My interactions with these younger people were relatively more relaxed and festive, less formal compared to my relationships with some of the older members of the community. From the very beginning, and certainly by the end of my fieldwork, I did not construe these interactions with the younger generation as being a part of a research agenda; rather, they reflected the formation of real connections and rapport, and several true friendships were cemented during this time. However (or probably due to this), these younger people helped me in fundamental ways to understand various aspects of the Breslov world that I was studying, and to organise many of my own ideas regarding it.
An ethnographer seeks to paint a canvas to reflect, with the greatest resolution and authenticity possible, the structures that he or she experiences in the group they are studying. The ethnographer knows, either a priori or as a result of their fieldwork, that there are regions of that canvas—*although just as relevant and important as the rest of it*—that for a variety of reasons they will not be able to paint in. They may choose, instead of expending large amounts of time and energy to make small inroads into those gaping white spaces, to leave them be (perhaps hoping that somebody better-suited will fill them in one day), and instead focus their efforts in places that will yield the most fruit.

I use this metaphor as an explanation for the fact that most of this thesis, in terms of its ethnography, deals with *men*, whilst women are largely left out of the picture. There is no suggestion that one is more important than the other, simply that—as anybody who has experienced the highly segregated realities of Charedi society will know—in a given space of time, it would not have been possible for me, as a male, to collect anywhere near the same amount nor quality of data from women as I did from the men. Indeed, it is highly doubtful that *any* man could *ever* reach a similar level of familiarity and openness, with as many women as I did men, in a religious Jewish community such as the Breslov group. Thus, I openly acknowledge that my efforts were focused—out of necessity—on the men, and that the ethnographic picture that I paint is consequently incomplete. I would be most interested to see the same themes and ideas contained herein discussed, based on material collected from the feminine, and to explore how that material compares and contrasts with the masculine.

***
I. Project Preliminaries
1.3 Methodology
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

The theological, philosophical and historical material presented in this “Background” discussion is intended to aid the reader in better understanding the sections that constitute the heart of this thesis, namely Part III “Ethnography” and Part IV “Analysis”. This Background gives a basic description of the fundamentals of Judaism, including the Kabbalistic tradition, and goes on to discuss the rise of the Chasidic movement and of the Breslov group itself.

2.1 The Fundamentals of the Jewish Worldview

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1997 [18th century]) set out the ontological foundations of Judaism in one of the most lucid and complete accounts of its type ever written, the revered work called “The Way of G-d”. The RaMCHaL (acronym for Luzzatto’s full name), an Italian rabbi, philosopher and Kabbalist, discusses the fundamentals of the Jewish understanding of G-d; man and providence; the soul and its spiritual world; and the ultimate purpose of a Jew and its achievement. He begins his first chapter with the essential words, “Every Jew must believe and know that there exists a first Being, without beginning or end, who brought all things into existence and continues to sustain them. This Being is G-d” (Luzzatto, 1997 [18th century], p. 31).

The Nature of G-d, Good and Evil, and the Purpose of Creation

According to Judaism, G-d’s true nature is unknowable by any being other than Himself, His existence is imperative (it is absolutely impossible that He should cease to exist), and He is absolutely perfect in every conceivable way and in every conceivable domain (and yet He is simple and unified, not consisting of any actual “parts”). Fundamental to Jewish thought is the understanding that G-d is absolutely one, that He alone is in control, and that every other being in existence is absolutely dependent upon Him; thus, there is only one domain, or one “Root” of all things. This understanding is the essential principle of monotheism, and this belief in the unity of G-d, and by extension in the ultimate oneness of all things, may be taken as the supreme creed of the Jewish religion (Urbach, 1987, p. 19).

As the RaMCHaL (2005 [18th century], pp. 1-5) explains in another of his books, the Kabbalistic exposition titled “138 Openings of Wisdom”, to suggest that there are two independent domains or roots would invalidate the assertion that G-d is absolutely omnipotent, and such a suggestion constitutes the ontological basis for the gravest of sins in Judaism, avodah zarah (literally “foreign
worship”). This sin is the subject matter of the second of the Ten Commandments—on a practical level this commandment constitutes a prohibition against “idol worship”, whilst on a metaphysical level, it deals with the primal struggle, in the human mind, between a non-dualist and dualist conception of the world.

The non-dual nature of the Source of all things has the critically important implication that all “evil” in the world, in whatever form human beings perceive it to exist, also has its source in G-d. If this is the case, why, then, does apparent evil exist in a world created by the perfect Being? The essential Jewish answer to this age-old question runs more or less as follows: G-d wants to bestow the ultimate good upon a creation. Just giving good (essentially, eternal closeness to Him—considered the “delight of souls”) would be good, but it would not be the ultimate good. The ultimate good can come about only if a created being earns that good, and does not simply receive it as a matter of chance. Another way of looking at it is that only G-d is the ultimate good, and His existence, containing every possible perfection, is therefore not a matter of chance either. Since only G-d is the ultimate good, a created entity can achieve the greatest good possible for itself in only one way—by choosing to come closer to Him (Luzzatto, 1997 [18th century], p. 37). In such a belief system there is a strong emphasis on agency and will, both of G-d and of the particular created being in question.

According to Jewish thought, then, the created entity whose destiny it is to earn closeness to the Creator is man. The world (the physical world of time and space as we know it, and the spiritual realms “above” and “below”) exist only for the purpose of enabling man to choose and to earn his place with the ultimate good—that is, with G-d (Urbach, 1987, p. 214). As such, what we perceive to be evil in the world is absolutely a creation of G-d, existing to allow man free will to choose this way or that; in other words, to be tested, and ultimately, to earn his reward. Only in this way, when that reward comes, will it constitute the ultimate good that man can possibly experience. A discussion of the Jewish understanding of free will is quite beyond the present scope, but it is important to note that it is a fundamental and pivotal concept in the religion. The Jewish answer to the “meaning of life” (this present life) could be stated: “to earn the greatest possible closeness to the Almighty—to bond

7 Following the RaMCHaL, I tend to use the term “man” and the pronoun “he” in the present discussion, but in reality the connotation is of a complete soul; in the Jewish conception, a soul is created whole but then separated into male and female aspects, each occupying corresponding bodies in this world (hence, for example, the concept of a “soulmate”).
and cleave\(^8\) to Him—*through the exercise of one’s free will*” (Luzzatto, 2009 [18th century], p. 9). Of course, there is a seeming paradox between an omniscient, omnipotent G-d, and man’s free will; according to Jewish (and indeed, some Western) philosophical thinking, this “paradox” is born out of the human experience itself, and exists only because “we” are discussing it from our present dualistic reality.

**“This World”, the “World to Come”, and the Good and Evil Inclinations**

The idea of *earning* leads to two further essential concepts in Judaism. Firstly, the world as we now know it is called *Olam Hazeh* (This World); it is the place of testing and earning, containing all the necessary elements to allow man to reject evil, to choose to cleave to G-d, to become more “G-d-like” in his attributes, and therefore to earn his true reward—which could not be that same reward were it not thus earned. That true reward is received in *Olam Haba* (the World to Come); the eternal state of rest and delight for souls, each soul according to its own level of earned merit, in union with the Divine (Luzzatto, 1997 [18th century], p. 49).

A second essential concept in Jewish theology is that of the *Yetzer Hara* (the Evil Inclination). The Evil Inclination, often identified with the body (which is considered a “garment” to the soul), is the opposite force to that which naturally draws the soul to the Divine. The Evil Inclination, apparently with cunning strategies, does its best to prevent man from choosing the good, in his thoughts, speech, and actions, and in matters small and large in life, and hence prevents his soul from earning its rightful place. It is precisely at this point of intersection, in the wrestle between the *Yetzer Hara* and its counterpart, the *Yetzer Hatov* (the Good Inclination, arising from the soul), that free will is born and may be exercised. He who eventually triumphs over the Evil Inclination thereby purifies his being, elevates the body (finally eradicating the Evil Inclination within it), and comes closer to G-d not only in *Olam Haba*, but in the time and space of *Olam Hazeh* as well (Luzzatto, 1997 [18th century], pp. 45, 51). In some respects, the *Yetzer Hara* is comparable to the concept of *ahamkara* or the *ego*—that which obscures the true Self—of Hindu (especially Yogic and Vedantic) philosophies. Yet in Judaism, the *Yetzer Hara* is absolutely necessary, for through the choice that it provides, *free will*

\(^8\) The English word “cleave” is a contranym, in that it can signify two opposite meanings; to bind/join, or to divide/separate. Following numerous other authors, it appears—despite, or perhaps because of, its ambiguous meaning—to be the best translation for the Hebrew word *dvequt*, which denotes precisely a bonding, in this context with the Almighty.
springs into being. The ultimate level of service to G-d, and thereby self-fulfilment, is to sublimate the power of the Evil Inclination to the side of Good; to love G-d also with the Yetzer Hara. “Such a religious psychology strikingly softens the stern duality of two opposing yetzers and suggests the possibility of self-mastery” (Fishbane, 1996, p. 5).

**Doing G-d’s Will by Observing the Commandments**

According to Judaism, the means to overcome the Evil Inclination can be stated in three words: *do G-d’s will*. The second chapter of the Mishnaic-era (first-to-third century C.E. [Common Era]) *Pirqey Avot* text (literally meaning “Chapters of the Fathers”, but often translated as “Ethics of the Fathers”) contains the following precept: “Do His will as if it were your own will, so that He may do your will as if it were His will” (*Breslov Pirqey Avot [Ethics of the Fathers]: Based on the Teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov*, 2010, p. 78). This precept is reminiscent of the key Taoist principle of *wu wei*, “non-acting”, often misunderstood and misappropriated by New Age Western audiences as a justification for stasis, but actually referring to (Evola, 1994, p. 18):

> … non-action on the part of the peripheral Ego and the exclusion of “doing” in a direct and material sense… This *wu wei* is the condition for the manifestation of a superior kind of action… which comes into play as “Heaven’s” action… [italics added to English words].

For a Jew, doing G-d’s will means keeping the *mitzvot* (commandments) as they are stated in the written Torah and expounded by the Oral Law (Mishnah). On a basic level there are 613 *mitzvot*; 365 positive commandments and 248 negative ones. These “dos” and “don’ts” are supposed to constitute for the Jew the path to self-perfection; by following it he or she elevates themselves in increasing degrees and earns merit to cleave to the Creator. Many insights may be gleaned from the word *mitzvah* (the singular of *mitzvot*), but one important illumination is that it is related to the word *tzavta*, meaning “companionship” or a “team” (anonymous author, 2009, p. 13); compare to the Sanskrit *yoga*, meaning “union”. Essentially, the entire body of Jewish law known as the *Halakham*, containing (as discussed in the Introduction) a seemingly vast number of rules and prohibitions in matters small to large—ranging from prayer, dietary stipulations, Shabbat observance and religious festivals, through to marriage laws, sexual conduct, financial dealings, dress, and many more—is aimed at ensuring adherence to G-d’s commandments as stipulated by the Torah. This adherence in turn, constitutes, as discussed, the path to attainment, and is said to earn the soul closeness to the Almighty and a place in the World to Come.
These ideas find some expression in Schnapper’s (1980 [1965]) comprehensive treatment of the concept of the Way in the great traditions of the world (including Judaism). She writes (p. 5), “The ‘ladder of the God’ has been set up wherever man has aspired to reach out beyond the plane of material existence, and it has become the ‘scale of perfection’...”. The ladder (although the author does not specifically refer to this) is a key symbol also in Jewish tradition, originating with Jacob’s dream (Genesis 28:12-15) of the ladder, angels ascending and descending, and G-d at the top (The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 67). According to Schnapper (1980 [1965]), the Jewish path is a rectilinear one of continuous progression, as opposed to Eastern conceptions of a cyclical way, congruent with a cyclical understanding of Being. Whichever metaphor is employed, however, and whatever ultimate value resides in such metaphors, it is interesting to note that the word Halakhah (the vast body of Jewish law) denotes “a walking”, or “the path one walks”. Thus, in observant Jewish societies extending into modern times, there was no “mystical” or “holy” path to Olam Haba that one particular Jew walked, whilst another lived out a “mundane” reality of day-to-day observance. According, at least, to Jewish theological tradition, they are both different stages of one and the same ladder.

***
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.1 The Fundamentals of the Jewish Worldview
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.2 The Esoteric Jewish Tradition: Kabbalah

The Kabbalah comprises the esoteric, hidden (nistar) teachings of Judaism. In the Jewish tradition the Kabbalah is said to be transmitted in one or both of two ways; via Divine revelation, or through initiation by a teacher (anonymous, personal communication, 2011). These means of transmission are reflected by the very word itself (Qabalah, meaning “a receiving”), and in the Hebrew term for one to whom Kabbalistic knowledge has been revealed: mequbal. This word is in the passive form (“one who has been received”), as opposed to the active form of the usual English word “Kabbalist”.

The Term “Mystic”

Reminiscent of the comment made in the previous chapter regarding the absence of a delineation in orthodox Jewish tradition between a “mystical path” leading to G-d versus a “mundane” day-to-day life, Dan (2002, p. 7) emphasises that the identification of the Kabbalah as “Jewish mysticism” is quite wrong; the term mysticism, a concept that developed in Christianity from the third century C.E. onwards, does not have an equivalent in Judaism nor in the Hebrew language, nor, incidentally, in the Islamic religion. According to Dan (2002, pp. 7-8), the use by modern scholars of “mystical” as analogous to “Kabbalistic” is an imposition of a foreign category on a vast body of spiritual literature, some of which is mystical and much of which is not. In contrast, Scholem (1978, p. 3), one of the leading modern academic scholars of Kabbalah, does associate “mysticism” closely with that tradition, opening his book with the passage:

“Kabbalah” is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the twelfth century onward. In its wider sense it signifies all the successive esoteric movements in Judaism that evolved from the end of the period of the Second Temple and became active factors in Jewish history.

Of course, the applicability of the term “mysticism” to the Kabbalistic tradition is crucially dependent upon how the former is defined, a matter of much inconsistency and debate amongst scholars (Jacobs, 1976, p. 1; Scholem, 1978, p. 3). Dan (2002, pp. 2-3) suggests that the major divide between a mystic and a non-mystic, whether they be Kabbalists or not, involves their attitude to communicative language, and is essentially epistemological in nature; the non-mystic believes that he or she should be able to understand the truth when it is explained to them in words, whilst the mystic holds “… that language, as spoken by people, cannot serve as a vehicle for the revelation and communication of the
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.2 The Esoteric Jewish Tradition: Kabbalah

nature of G-d and the truth of his message to humanity. Only nonlinguistic means can glean some aspects of the hidden divine truth” (Dan, 2002, p. 3).

Another characterisation of a mystic is one who experiences ecstatic states, yet, who has no control over their parameters—neither over their frequency, their duration, nor over their particular qualities. This is especially typical of drug-induced ecstatic states—experiences that are frequently described as “mystical”—in which the subject (especially in Western contexts) is usually not in control of the drug, but rather, so to speak, the drug in control of him or her. In contrast, the “non-mystic” may apparently ascend to comparable phenomenological experiences through persistent spiritual work—in the Jewish case, for example, through Halakhic observance (and very possibly, without any actual Kabbalistic knowledge/practice)—yet in a more predictable, controlled, and sustained manner (anonymous, personal communication, 2011). Regardless of differences in how the term “mystical experience” is defined, it is importantly “… a revelation that concerns those things that are of supreme ontological significance for that individual’s particular culture and religious community” (Hollenback, 2000, p. 40).

Historical Development of the Kabbalah

In terms of its origins, the Kabbalistic tradition largely denies that it itself underwent any historical development (Scholem, 1978, p. 4). Rather, Kabbalists hold that the tradition was given to Moses on Mount Sinai as the nistar (hidden) aspect of the Torah, complementary to the nigleh (revealed and visible) aspect consisting of the Written Torah, the Oral Law, and later the Talmud, legal codes, and so forth (Jacobs, 1976, p. 2; Scholem, 1978, pp. 4-5). Kabbalistic tradition and knowledge itself is furthermore held to be eternal (like the Torah), and not at all dependent upon its dissemination by human beings. Thus, for example, the highly influential and mysterious Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Formation) is associated in Kabbalistic tradition with Adam Rishon (the Adam of Genesis), Noah, and the Jewish forefather Abraham.

In their scholarly analyses, Scholem (1978) and Dan (2002) paint a very different picture of origins, as they trace the historical development of key Kabbalistic personalities, texts, and themes. Scholem (1978, p. 8) suggests that the roots of the Kabbalah lie in the “esoteric and theosophical currents” that existed amongst the Jewish population in Israel and Egypt around the turn of the Common Era, broadly concurrent with the birth of Christianity. Early forms of Jewish mysticism may well have been influenced by Persian, Greek and Hellenistic elements (Philo of Alexandria is especially cited), although this is uncertain; Scholem (1978, p. 9) writes: “The theories concerning Persian and Greek
influences tend to overlook the inner dynamism of the development taking place within Palestinian Judaism, which was in itself capable of producing movements of a mystical and esoteric nature”.

The first distinct Jewish esoteric movement, according to Dan (2002, p. 16), was the mysticism of the “Descenders of the Chariot” (Yordey Hamerkavah), between the third and seventh/eighth centuries C.E. This ancient school produced a library of some two dozen works (that are known today), collectively titled the literature of the Hekhalot (Celestial Palaces) and the Merkavah (Chariot). These works cover such themes as cosmogony and cosmology (essentially, how G-d created and conducts the universe), magic, Merkavah exegesis (especially regarding the first chapter of Ezekiel), and a particular practice called “the descent to the chariot”, enabling the practitioner to ascend through the palaces and heavens until he reaches the supreme Throne of Glory and faces the Almighty Himself (Dan, 2002, p. 17). Around the same period, yet distinct from the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, emerged a small composition that was later to prove very influential in the Kabbalistic tradition; the aforementioned Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Formation). This treatise was of uncertain authorship, although probably (based on its content and style) written by a devout Jew in Israel, with neo-Pythagorean and Stoic influences (religious Jewish tradition, of course, rejects situating this revered, sacred work in such a historical context). The Sefer Yetzirah deals with many esoteric themes, including G-d’s creation of the universe through language; a science of formation based upon the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and their permutation; and the concept of the first ten numbers (1-10) as constituting the Sefirot (Emanations) and playing essential roles in the creation of the world (Dan, 2002, pp. 21-22; Kaplan, 1997).

In the millennia or so between the Chariot period and the inception of modern Chasidism, the Kabbalistic tradition underwent numerous developments and innovations, across Sephardi (Iberian Peninsula), Mizrachi (Middle East and North Africa) and Ashkenazi (broadly speaking, European) Jewish circles. The Kalonymus school in the Rhineland, for example, of the late twelfth century, appears to have introduced the concept of emanated powers, in addition to the distinct G-dhead. It also emphasised the sanctity of prayer, especially the composition of individual prayers to the Divine (reminiscent of the Breslov emphasis on hitbodedut—secluded meditative prayer; see Chapter 3.7), and a rigorous system of ethics and piety. The Kabbalistic tradition entered a new phase in schools in Provence in the south of France, and in northern Spain, at the end of the twelfth/beginning of the thirteenth centuries. In both regions, each containing small circles of Kabbalists, the concept of emanated Divine powers became central, and apparently for the first time, the arrangement of the
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.2 The Esoteric Jewish Tradition: Kabbalah


The central work in the literature of the Kabbalah, the Zohar (“Splendour” or “Radiance”), was published at the peak of the Kabbalah’s flourishing in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century, by Rabbi Moshe de Leon. According to Kabbalistic tradition, however, authorship of the Zohar is attributed to Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochay, the second century C.E. sage of the Holy Land. This work contains within it a number of discrete books and statements, dealing with a wide variety of topics, including Torah exegesis, Divine Creation, the soul and the body, the structure of the four Worlds (Emanation, Creation, Formation and Actualisation), gematriyah (numerical manipulations of the Hebrew letters), and many more. The importance and influence of the Zohar on future Kabbalistic developments cannot be overstated, and today it is still considered—even by many Jewish streams and groups that have little overt interest in the Kabbalah—as a profound and holy text.

The Holy Ari and Lurianic Kabbalah

The greatest transformation experienced by the Kabbalistic tradition in modern times occurred in the city of Safed, Israel, in the sixteenth century. It was precipitated by Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (known as “the ARI”, meaning “the Lion”, and also an acronym either for Elohi Rabi Yitzchaq [Divine Rabbi Isaac] or Adoneinu Rabeinu Yitzchaq [Our Master Our Rabbi Isaac]. This acronym is sometimes also written Arizal, denoting the “ARI of blessed memory”). Luria was born in Egypt in 1534, but whilst still a child his father died, and soon after he and his mother moved to Cairo, Egypt. He received a comprehensive Jewish education—throughout which he is believed to have been an outstanding student—and then as a young man applied himself to various commercial activities. Within a short time, however, he was to devote his fulltime attention to esoteric pursuits, withdrawing from family and public affairs, and essentially entering a life of intense seclusion. He spent only the last three years of his life in Safed (arriving from Egypt in 1570 at the age of 36, and remaining until his death and burial there in 1572), yet during this short period touched off a Kabbalistic revolution, providing the tradition with an innovative new system that came to be called Lurianic Kabbalah, and a large circle of brilliant and influential disciples (Dan, 2002, pp. 33-36; Scholem, 1978, pp. 420-422).

Lurianic Kabbalah consists of a novel and intricate cosmological model, a redefined paradigm of man’s place and the Kabbalist’s purpose in the world, and new core concepts—or substantial modifications of existing ones—and terminology. According to the Lurianic model, the cosmos in its
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.2 The Esoteric Jewish Tradition: Kabbalah

primordial, original state was completely filled with the Divine Light of Ein-Sof (the Infinite), although there is debate concerning whether it was absolutely simple and undifferentiated, or whether it contained differentiated elements—“powers” (or potential “powers”), in particular Rachamim (Compassion) and Din (Judgement). In order to fashion the four Worlds (of Emanation, Creation, Formation and Actualisation), the Divine had to withdraw partially, to make space in the midst of his Light and thus enable the finite to manifest within the Infinite. This withdrawal is called the tzimtzum (“contraction”), an idea existing prior to the Lurianic system, but now granted increased sophistication and impetus. Luria went on to expound upon the concept of the Vessels (Kelim), that contained the Light of the Sefirot but which were shattered in a cosmic, catastrophic rupture, thereby producing the impure shells (qlipot). This process in turn formed the basis for another important idea (again, that was always central to Judaism, but now gained greater primacy and sophistication), tikkun olam—the repair of the world, beginning with the Actualised world and progressing through all four Worlds, by means of personal human action. Other themes prominent in Lurianic Kabbalah include Adam and the Original Sin (very much related to tikkun), medicine—based on the fundamental concepts just mentioned and corresponding practices for healing (including prayer and esoteric gematriyah manipulations), and the transmigration of souls (Fine, 2003).

***

---

9 Considering one of the RaMCHaL’s basic principles, as discussed above, that G-d is absolutely simple, having no parts to Him, the postulation of any pre-existing differentiation in the primordial state suggests that such a state could not be the Original, non-dual Absolute that is being sought. In the context of such metaphysical discussions, however, the words being used to make this very point grow increasingly far from any hope of truly containing the concepts they are trying to enclose. In other words, as Wittgenstein (2007 [1921]) sought to show, the ability of language to describe reality—a reality that language itself is a subset of—is limited.
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.2 The Esoteric Jewish Tradition: Kabbalah
2.3 The Rise of the Chasidic Movement in Eighteenth Century Europe

Modern Chasidism originated in mid-eighteenth century Eastern Europe with Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, also known as the “The Master of the Good Name” (the Ba’al Shem Tov; this name can have several translations depending on how the three Hebrew words are grouped, but the one just given is quite common). The Ba’al Shem Tov was born in 1698 in Okopy, a small village that has variously belonged to Poland, Russia and the Ukraine, and died in 1760 at the age of 61. Prior to publicly revealing his spiritual insights and expounding his teachings, the Ba’al Shem Tov worked as a teacher’s assistant, an arbitrator and mediator in Jewish civil law suits, a labourer, and a ritual butcher. During time spent living in the woods and apparently coming into contact with local peasants, he learned how to use plants for healing purposes. As a general ba’al shem (a term for a Jewish Kabbalist who through direct channels to the Divine is able to induce theurgical effects) he made use of amulets, prescribed cures, performed exorcisms, and conducted related activities (Dynner, 2009, pp. 5-6).

Meijers & Tennekens (1982) emphasise that Chasidism was not a revolutionary movement—it did not seek to loosen the bonds of legalistic Rabbinic authority (quite the opposite), nor was it particularly Messianic in character, any more or less so than the Jewish norm of the times (today this is still largely the case, with the conspicuous exception of the distinctive Chabad movement and its messianic agenda). Epstein (1959, p. 270, as cited in Meijers & Tennekens, 1982) explains:

Its [Chasidism’s] twin parents were Rabbinism and Kabbalah, and it is in these progenitors that is to be found all that Chassidism thought and taught. The important contribution of Chassidism lay rather in the emphasis it gave to certain ideas, whilst relegating others to the background.

The Spread of Chasidism and Scholarly Explanations Thereof

According to Dynner (2009, p. 6), it is unlikely that the Ba’al Shem Tov deliberately set out to create a mass-movement, nor did he intend to subvert existing social hierarchies or directly challenge the authority of the Rabbinic Talmudists, whose religious emphasis was on Jewish law and Talmudic exegesis. Rather:

… the Great Maggid [one of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s key disciples, and considered his successor] could not fail to appreciate that now the Kabbalistic genie was out of the bottle, with secrets of the G-dhead having circulated in cheap pamphlets for over a century, it was pointless to continue to attempt to confine Kabbalistic study, prayer and practice to
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.3 The Rise of the Chasidic Movement in Eighteenth Century Europe

a small segment of the Jewish elite… Thus, instead of conceiving Hasidism as a reaction to “Talmudic aridity” (a formulation akin to Christian anti-Jewish polemics), scholars now regard it as a result of a groundswell of Kabbalistic enthusiasm.

(Dynner, 2009, p. 6)

Whatever the Ba’al Shem Tov’s original intentions, however, the movement did become a powerful sociopolitical force from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. It was propagated by the Ba’al Shem Tov’s disciples and descendants, beginning in the Podolia region in the present-day Ukraine, and spreading to Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, and other parts of Eastern/Central Europe. The movement made inroads into Western Europe and the United States as well, and certainly after the Second World War, remnants of Chasidic groups who had survived the Holocaust moved largely to the United States or to Israel. The names of Chasidic groups (such as “Breslov”) are usually based on the town or city from which the group originated. In terms of its size and influence, Chasidism emerged as the most important cultural development in European Jewish history, up until the rise of the new “Jewish” politics (such as Zionism and Socialism) at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century (Dynner, 2009, p. 7).

A defining feature of the Chasidic movement is the pivotal role fulfilled by the leader, called the Rebbe, of each Chasidic group. Typically, the Rebbe is both spiritual and political figurehead, regarded with great awe and respect by the group’s members, and conceived of as a tzadiq—a righteous man who exemplifies the fulfilment of G-d’s will as expressed in the Torah, embodies absolute dvequt (cleaving to G-d), and walks with the Divine Presence resting upon him10 (Meijers & Tennekens, 1982; Schochet, 1995). The position of Rebbe was often inherited down through the generations by close kin, but this was not (nor is presently) always the case. Furthermore, for various reasons, not all Chasidic groups today have a Rebbe; Breslov is an example of such a group. The great emphasis with and fixation upon the often charismatic Rebbe-tzadiq figure is unusual in Jewish tradition, which overwhelmingly discouraged (with a few notable historical exceptions) anything even resembling a “personality cult”. Yet by and large, according to Kaplan (1989, p. 6), despite their

10 The term tzadiq has long existed in Jewish tradition, delineated into different types and levels. The Chasidic movement appropriated it in a specific way, however, and consequently in mainstream usage it has lost some of its more particular nuances. Today, for example, Chasidic mothers often call their children “tzadiq” as a term of endearment.
“power and influence… being virtually unlimited… instead of becoming tyrants the vast majority [of Chasidic Rebbes] deported themselves in accordance to the Platonic ideal of the philosopher king”.

Since the Rebbe-tzadiq had attained a lofty spiritual state, his adherents (who were not yet “there”) could partake of that state—of his holiness and dvequt to the Almighty—simply by attaching themselves to him; by being in his presence, by associating with him, or even by handling or possessing physical objects that he had touched (Schochet, 1995). On the one hand this statement connotes a degree of “worship” of Rebbes by their followers, however on the other, it must be taken in the context of Judaism’s especially severe prohibitions against anything approaching avodah zarah (“foreign”/idol worship). The variations of Rebbe-follower relationships, across different Chasidic groups and through different time periods, constitute an entire and complex topic of their own.

There exists a popular conception (and anecdotally, amongst many Chasidic Jews themselves) that Chasidism expanded so quickly because the dry, legalistic landscape of eighteenth century Eastern European Jewry, with serious Talmudic study confined largely to an intellectual and economic elite, was fertile ground for a new movement that emphasised a personal connection to G-d, attainable by poor and rich alike, and joyful enthusiasm—as opposed to sombre piety—in serving Him (this conception was mentioned above, although described by Dynner, 2009, as “Christian anti-Jewish polemics”). Kaplan (1989, p. 1) writes: “The entire thrust of Jewish thought had turned away from the spiritual, and was engaged in legal, sociological and historical aspects of Judaism. If there was any mention of the spiritual, it was about the fires of Gehenna which awaited those who did not follow the exactitudes of the law”. In a mainstream sense, this turning away from the spiritual was due in large part to the disastrous chapter of Shabbetai Tzvi (1626-1676) and his false messianism, scarring Jewry the world over, although during the post-Sabbatean recuperation small and secret Kabbalistic circles (the Ba’al Shem Tov belonged to one such circle) continued to exist and practice as they always had. Based in part on the writings of Gershom Scholem, Zwi Verblowsky (1973, pp. 307-308) suggests that Chasidism sought, by drawing deeply from Lurianic Kabbalah, to reinvigorate the “burnt child” of eighteenth century Judaism, but purged of the “fire of mystical enthusiasm and of the messianic dynamite…” that had characterised the catastrophic Sabbatean chapter.

Whatever truth there is in ascribing the rise of Chasidism to a lack of Jewish spirituality, this conception offers only a simple and primarily psychological explanation. Clearly, any given event is situated in an intricate web of cause-and-effect, and certainly the birth and growth of an entire religious and sociopolitical movement is grounded in extremely complex causes. The value of any
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.3 The Rise of the Chasidic Movement in Eighteenth Century Europe

Explanation that purports to pinpoint those causes, therefore, is not that it has “solved” the mystery, but rather, that it illuminates one or more feasible and legitimate aspects of the total web of causation. Dynner (2009, p. 12) points out that several academic historians have begun to question the simple explanation given above (the spiritual/mystical allure of Chasidism) as the primary reason for the movement’s great success, and to put forth various sociological explanations of their own.

**Sociological Theories for the Rise of Chasidism**

Simon Dubnow, for example, attributes Chasidism’s success to the effects of the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648, including the increase in poverty and absence of civil rights amongst Jewish populations that followed. Benzion Dinur cites disenchantment by a secondary intelligentsia (including preachers, schoolteachers, ritual butchers, and cantors) with the Jewish leadership of the times, whilst Chone Shmeruk proposes that the Chasidic movement filled a vacuum created by the abolition of the Council of the Four Lands, the central body of Jewish authority in Poland, in 1764. Jacob Katz suggests that the threat of the spreading Enlightenment caused orthodox Jews to embrace a vigorous, ecstatic new religious movement, whilst Dynner, after considering all of these explanations, chooses to focus on the weakened state of Jewish communal leadership at the local level, as providing a particularly receptive milieu for the Rebbe-oriented Chasidic movement (Dynner, 2009, pp. 12-15). Dynner also cites Gershon Hundert, a Jewish historian, who draws attention to the similarities between Jewish Chasidism and certain Christian spiritual movements that gained some prominence in the eighteenth century, including Pietism, Quietism, the Great Awakening and the Old Believers. Hundert does not suggest that the Jews imitated those movements, but rather, that a common zeitgeist may have animated them all (Dynner, 2009, p. 16).
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement
2.3 The Rise of the Chasidic Movement in Eighteenth Century Europe

The Chasidic Worldview

There are several themes and elements that constitute defining features of Chasidism. The Chasidic movement, it must firstly be emphasised, is absolutely a part of orthodox Judaism (despite at times—historically and at present—encountering intense opposition from Mitnagdim to some of its practices), and therefore, the fundamentals of the Jewish worldview, as explained above, are still at its heart. Similarly, Chasidic philosophy grew out of Lurianic Kabbalah, and almost all of the principles found therein still hold.

One of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s essential emphases was the idea that G-d should be served with joy—that in fact, the more joyful one is, the closer he or she brings themselves to the Almighty, whilst the more gloomy, the more they distance themselves. The asceticism that had previously characterised many Kabbalistic circles was thus rejected in favour of positive emotion and religious fervour, and this attitude applied (or rather, the devotee was to make an effort to apply it) not only to prayer, but in the fulfilment of all mitzvot (Meijers & Tennekens, 1982). Schochet (1995) explores this concept in greater philosophical detail, pointing out that atzvut (dejection, depression, melancholy, sadness), which is the opposite of simchah (joy, happiness, cheerfulness), is rooted in self-centredness—since the ego is not being gratified with that which it considers itself entitled to have. Intense atzvut without good cause (such as intense mourning beyond the stipulated period), therefore, is actually considered by Judaism to be a form of avodah zarah, for it is purely selfish; the subject gives themselves up to the emotion completely, cannot serve G-d with joy as is commanded, and apparently is often incited to harbour idolatrous thoughts. The emotion of anger is held in similar regard.

The Chasid, therefore, must do his utmost to serve G-d with great simchah, and in doing so he begins to merit the ultimate reward—dvequt, a cleaving and tangible closeness to his Lord, as described earlier. The concept of dvequt, being fundamental to the Jewish tradition, is not a Chasidic innovation, but the movement did place a new and enthusiastic emphasis upon it. In this context, it is interesting that Kaplan (1989) draws a parallel between the goals of Chasidic practice, and the “drug culture”. He writes (p. 5):

In this light [of love for G-d and dvequt], the goal of all worship and observance is to attain a high. It may seem strange to borrow the term “high” from the drug culture, but it seems to be the only term that adequately expresses the feelings involved. It is a high that comes from one’s attachment to the Source of all sources, and worship and observance are the primary means of attaining it. Rather than being a dry formalism, the law [that is,
the Halakhah] now becomes the precise opposite—a handbook on how to attain the highest ecstasy.

Kaplan (1989, p. 5) goes on to translate “Mochin DeGadlut”—a frequently encountered term in Chasidic literature that literally means “Large Mind”—as “expanded consciousness”, borrowing again, he explains (“much to the concern of our editors!”), from the drug culture. An additional Chasidic ideal, that may be understood as both a cause and an effect of dvequt, and that is closely related to “expanded consciousness”, is the annihilation of individuality (bitul hayesh). Scholem (1978) points out that few Kabbalists had previously sought this goal, yet it became prominent in Chasidic discourse, especially in association with the hitbodedut seclusion practice (see Chapter 3.7) (Hitbodedut: Secluded Meditative Prayer, undated).

Chasidic thought and practice are focused on the immanent aspect of G-d, as opposed to the transcendent. This is an important observation, for it provides a basis for better understanding other features of the Chasidic worldview. Kaplan (1989, p. 4) writes: “While the earlier Kabbalah tried to bring man into heaven, the main idea of Hasidism was to bring heaven into man”. Thus, whilst it acknowledged the transcendent nature of the Almighty, “Hasidism committed itself to His immanence”. Consequently, the world of Actualisation—the physical world as we know it—is not to be rejected, but rather embraced, as both a means to G-d and as a very manifestation of Him. This extends to the physical body, that through circumcision and G-d’s covenant enables (or potentially enables) the soul to permeate it completely, cleanse the said body of the Yetzer Hara (the Evil Inclination), and thereby elevate and connect it to the Almighty (Boteach, 1996). Furthermore, in a distinctly Chasidic departure from previous Jewish precepts, an immediate worldly joy, and not only the eternal rest and delight of Olam Haba (the World to Come), is the true reward for fulfilment of the mitzvot and dvequt to G-d (Meijers & Tennekens, 1982).

***
2.4 The Breslov Chasidic Group and Safed

The Breslov Movement Past and Present

The Breslov Chasidic group of the twenty-first century is a loose-knit organisation, with no Rebbe-izadiq at its head nor any centralised leadership. What unifies its adherents is their shared identification as “Breslovers”, certain esteemed rabbinical leaders residing primarily in Israel (especially Jerusalem and Safed) and the United States, and the awe and respect with which they regard the founder of the movement, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Rabbi Nachman (1772-1810), a great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, was born in the same house that the Ba’al Shem Tov occupied whilst he lived in Medzhybizh, Ukraine. It is said of Rabbi Nachman that even as a child he spent hours speaking to G-d in the fields and mountains, and yet (like his great-grandfather before him), kept his piety and brilliance concealed until the time was appropriate to reveal them (Kaplan, 1989, p. 103). The “Breslov” appellation comes from the town of the same name located on the Bug River, Ukraine, about 200 kilometres south-west of Kiev. Rabbi Nachman arrived there in 1802, and it was only then, in the last eight years of his life, that he came into his own as a Rebbe, teaching and guiding a growing circle of followers.

Rabbi Nachman’s major disciple, who wrote down most of his surviving teachings and thereby perpetuated his legacy (since the Rebbe recorded relatively little himself), was Rabbi Natan of Nemerov (later known as Natan of Breslov). His most important work was the Likutey Moharan (The Anthology of Moharan—a Hebrew acronym for “Our Teacher The Rabbi Nachman”), a collection of carefully recorded discourses that Rabbi Nachman gave dealing with a wide range of religious themes. Rabbi Natan also recorded and published a host of informal conversations that he and other disciples had with Rabbi Nachman, as well as his own commentaries and writings (Kaplan, 1989, pp. 105-106; Rabbi Natan of Breslov, nineteenth century).

An unusual and striking feature of the Breslov movement is that historically they were one of the most disliked and persecuted groups within the entire Chasidic movement itself. Several reasons for this rejection by the wider Jewish community have been put forward; Kaplan (1989, p. 106), for example, suggests that the followers of Rabbi Nachman were able to see through the “sham” that had begun to pervade the Chasidic movement, and thus came to represent a mirror of sorts held up to it, to its own discomfort. In addition, some Jews held that Rabbi Nachman associated with the irreligious; he would, for instance, hold chess playing competitions with noted Ukrainian atheists. And furthermore, the Breslov Rebbe rejected hereditary dynasties, teaching that each Jew must find
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.4 The Breslov Chasidic Group and Safed

his or her own tzadiq for and within themselves. As such, he left no successor—in terms of an actual Rebbe—to lead the movement, and the Breslovers consequently became known (and possibly still are known, in certain contemporary Chasidic circles) by the derogatory term, “dead (or orphaned) Chasidim”—followers of a Rebbe-tzadiq long since buried.

Despite general Chasidic antagonism towards the Breslovers, Rabbi Nachman was acknowledged by Jews from many different streams as a Chasidic master, a profound teacher, a great mystic, and a righteous and holy man. A contemporary Breslov publication (Tzaddik: Healthy Jewish Living for Body and Soul, Fall 2011, p. 27) writes of him:

His message speaks to both Jews and non-Jews, yet describes in practical as well as mystical detail the unique mission of a Jew in the world. Unity and tikkun olam—repair of the world—flow as an undercurrent of his teachings… Dancing through the Zohar, Talmud, Bible, and halacha, his teachings testify to a profound grasp of the entire revealed and hidden Torah.

Rabbi Nachman had, on the one hand, a gift for connecting with the most lowly-educated, ignorant stratum of Jewish society, primarily through his famous stories and parables, yet on the other hand, those same stories were apparently infused with such complex spiritual symbolisms and esoteric meanings, that they were sometimes described as “much too deep for ordinary mortals” (Kaplan, 1989, p. 103).

In contrast to these glowing descriptions, however, Green’s (1992) quotations of the Breslov founder’s own words reveal a man obsessed, at times, with his own greatness, and wallowing in his own narcissistic fantasies. Rabbi Nachman wrote of himself, for example (Green, 1992, pp. 426-427):

The world has not yet tasted of me at all. If they were to hear but a single one of my teachings with the melody and dance that belong to it, they would simply pass out: their souls would just leave them in this great and wondrous joy. Even the animals and the blades of grass would be affected: everything in the world would simply pass out of itself.

In terms of the Breslov group today, Dan (2002, p. 239) gives the following description:

In the last few decades they are undergoing a new transformation: As they do not have any organisation or clear-cut norms, they attract people who wish to get closer to Jewish life, who seek a spiritual existence, and who do not take kindly to authority and structure.
II. Background: Judaism, Kabbalah, and the Chasidic Movement

2.4 The Breslov Chasidic Group and Safed

It is becoming now a loose network of anarchic groups, among whom there are many artists, poets, architects, and “bohemians” in general—but also drug addicts, criminals, and fanatics. The one constant characteristic that did not change in more than two hundred years is their marginality in Jewish and Hasidic society, together with very high visibility and openness.

Corroborating these accounts of marginality in Jewish Chasidic society—even to the present day—is a brief conversation related by Salzman (1996, Introduction, p.2). Describing an encounter in the course of his ethnographic research on the Breslov group in both Jerusalem and Safed, he writes:

The fear and anger toward this group, however, was not limited to the secular world. In fact, one man who had grown up in an orthodox Jewish home told me, “I don’t care if you become ultra-orthodox, just stay away from Breslov. Their Rebbe was a madman, and his Hasidim are crazy.” He described the insanity of their religious practices (e.g. going out to the forest alone in the middle of the night and crying out to G-d) and warned me to stay away from them.

Witztum, Greenberg, and Buchbinder (1990) describe their psychiatric treatment of nineteen young Breslov men, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia or related personality disorders. This group was admitted to a Jerusalem clinic across the space of one year, comprising over seven percent of all new male referrals, and thereby representing an admission six times greater than the average rate expected for any given population. Of the nineteen cases, fifteen were newly religious, and only one was actually a Breslov Chasid from birth. Thus, Witztum et al. (1990, p. 126) make an important qualification to their paper, “… that it is not the effect of Bratslav Hasidism that is being described, but its appeal to men who subsequently become mentally ill”.

The somewhat stereotypical image, however, of the Breslovers just painted—a motley group with strange religious practices verging on madness and schizophrenia—on the one hand indicates how some people conceive of them, yet on the other, speaks largely of the ignorance of those—religious and non-religious Jews alike—subscribing to such a conception. For every story of unusually obsessive religious practice or divergence from mainstream Chasidic customs, may be found ten accounts of stable, enlightened religious observance (insofar as it is considered as such by Charedi society), close-knit families brimming with love, and warm and supportive communities. Indeed, it may well be that those whom Dan (2002, p. 239) labels “drug addicts, criminals, and fanatics”—and who may more essentially and accurately be described as human beings experiencing a dark chapter
of their very human journey—are drawn to Breslov precisely because of its warmth, support and acceptance of difference.

As mentioned above, the Breslov movement, with adherents around the world, possesses no centralised international leadership. In this (political) sense, the Breslov Chasidic group may therefore be described as a fragmented one. Members would argue, however, that they are united at a level far more fundamental to the political/organisational one; that of a personal, spiritual connection to the soul of Rabbi Nachman himself (see Chapter 3.1).

This political fragmentation, nonetheless, must lead to divergences across different Breslov groups, in their minutiae of religious belief and practice. Situated within the orthodox Jewish milieu, however, those divergences would be expected to fall still within the purview of the *Shulchan Arukh* (code of Jewish law) and its stipulations. The Safed Breslov group—forming the ethnographic basis for this entire research project—possesses, of course, its own particular idiosyncrasies of religious belief and practice.

![Figure 1](image.png)

Figure 1: The classic “Na Nach” slogan, sprayed onto a Safed stall-front in characteristic psychedelic/New Age style

The slogan consists of the name “Nachman” spelled out in cumulative syllables, with the word “Uman”—the burial site of Rabbi Nachman—appended at the end:

*Na Nach Nachma Nachman Me-Uman*

There is an additional issue, that I encountered many times during the course of my ethnographic work; that those unfamiliar with the Breslov group often confuse them with a relatively minor, yet highly visible, Breslov subgroup, colloquially known as the “Na Nachs” (see Figure 1 above). The origins of this subgroup lie in a note (*petek*) that a young Breslover, Rabbi Yisroel Ber Odesser, discovered in the early twentieth century within a book in his possession. The *petek* became known as the “Letter from Heaven”, and has since been the subject of much religious and mystical
interpretation. One well known activity undertaken by the Na Nachs is to drive through the streets of Israeli cities in cars or vans equipped with large external speakers, playing music (sometimes traditionally Jewish, but often modern trance; in both cases, fast-paced and loud) overlayed with religious messages. The vehicle will often stop, and young Na Nach men will jump out and form impromptu dancing circles in the middle of the street or intersection, encouraging (or coercing) random passers-by to join in. Some secular and religious Jews alike immediately identify these activities as “Breslov”; however, in comparison with the classically Chasidic mainstream Breslov group in Safed discussed herein, that identification (perhaps excepting a general Breslov emphasis on joy and merry-making) could not be more mistaken.

**The Breslov Community in Safed**

One of the current geographical epicentres of the Breslov movement is the city of Safed, nestled in mountains approximately 200 kilometres north of Jerusalem. Safed is one of the so-called four holy Jewish cities of Israel, and across several hundred years was home to some of the great scholars and spiritual leaders of the religion, including the renowned Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordovero; Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari); Rabbi Yosef Qaro, author of the code of Jewish law the *Shulchan Arukh*; Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, composer of the *Lekhah Dodi* Shabbat hymn; and others. The graves of these four men, well-signed and painted “Kabbalist-blue”, are located in the Safed Cemetery (see Figure 2 below) and serve as sites of pilgrimage and prayer, in which the buried *tzadiq* is typically asked to intercede in the Heavenly realms on behalf of the supplicant. The landscapes surrounding this small city, including rolling hills, forests, and the Sea of Galilee (*Yam Kineret*), highlight and are especially conducive to the Breslov-nature connection (see Chapter 3.7).

In the last fifty years or so, Breslov Chasidim have been instrumental in rebuilding and rejuvenating the previously earthquake-devastated and dilapidated Old City of Safed, and establishing themselves within what came to be called *Qiryat Breslov* (the “Breslov District”). The man credited with the vision and practical implementation of this project, at least in its initial stages, was the Breslov Rabbi Gedaliah Kenig (1921-1980), and his mission was continued by his three sons, Elazar Mordechai Kenig, Ephraim Kenig, and Yitzchaq Kenig, all three of whom are today leaders in the community.
In this thesis I use the phrase “the Safed Breslov community” to denote the present-day social group that has formed around Rabbi Gedaliah Kenig’s eldest son, Elazar Mordechai Kenig, as the Rav at its head (see Chapter 3.4 for a detailed discussion of this leadership role). This is the social community that constituted the basis of my ethnographic work. As discussed earlier, the contemporary Breslov Chasidic group is a loose-knit organisation, and there are certainly Jews in Safed who consider themselves Breslovers, yet who do not identify with Rav Kenig’s leadership and community.

The Safed Breslov population (that is, Rav Kenig’s community) was estimated in 1997 at 130 families (The Breslov Chasidic Centre for Spirituality and Inner Growth, 1997), and a Breslov website (Nachal Novea Mekor Chochma, undated-a) reflexively describes its own community with the following words:

After years of difficult work, the vision of Rav Gedaliah has become a reality. Tsfat is a vibrant Torah community. The Breslev Synagogue is filled with visitors every Shabbat. The Kollel supports over 130 full time students. The waiting list for the Talmud Torah is growing every year. The beautiful, modern mikveh is open and functioning. The nursery holds over 70 babies and toddlers. And now, the newly opened girls school is making a mark. Every year the community’s influence is felt more and more in Tsfat, the Galilee, and throughout the whole world.

***
III. Ethnography

3.1 Demographics, Livelihood and Family Life

... the sages have provided us with a most pointed and seminal caveat when they declaimed (in Talmud Berachot 45a), “Go and see how the people are behaving,” suggesting... do not presuppose an outcome on the basis of abstract logic or convention. “Go,” rather, and “see how the people are behaving.”

Sobel (1993, p. xix)

3.1 Demographics, Livelihood and Family Life

Demographics

Chapter 2.4 quoted an estimate made in 1997 from an official website of Rav Kenig’s Breslov group in Safed, setting the number of families in that group at 130 (The Breslov Chasidic Centre for Spirituality and Inner Growth, 1997). A friend who is closely involved in the administrative running of this community kindly re-estimated for me this and other demographic information correct to 2014. Given this friend’s intimate knowledge of these people, and in lieu of a quantitative survey by an outsider (an exercise that might well not be possible to conduct successfully due to religious, social and logistical reasons), the figures they gave represent the most accurate information readily available concerning the demographics of the group that formed the ethnographic basis for this entire study.

The total number of members was estimated at 1100, spread across 180 families, whilst the average number of children per family was approximated at six. These numbers are slightly incongruous, in that an average of six children gives eight persons per family, which multiplied by 180 families yields about 1,500 members (and this figure does not yet take into account lone, unmarried individuals in the community). However, whether 1100 or 1500, the order of magnitude is the same, and gives a good idea of the general size of the group. About 110 men are enrolled in the kolel, a word denoting both the institution of adult learning as well as the physical study hall itself in which that learning takes place, located in the main Breslov synagogue named “Nachal Novea” (see Chapter 3.3). 350 children study in the community’s boys school, “Magen Avot”. It is estimated that approximately fifty percent of the community were born into the Breslov world, whilst the other half are ba’aley tshuvah—previously secular Jews who have voluntarily taken on a religious, Torah-observant lifestyle. My friend further approximated that seventy-five percent of families are at least second-generation Israeli, whilst twenty-five percent came from overseas. When asked, through electronic correspondence, whether there was any other information of this (demographic) nature that they
considered good and useful to record, this friend responded with the following (minor corrections and words in square brackets added):

Perhaps that the Kenigs [Rav Kenig, the leader of the community, and his two brothers] themselves are Yerushalmi—meaning born and bred in the heart of Jerusalem and were transplanted to Tzfat [Safed] by their father’s mission to rebuild Tzfat. Breslev in general used to be a completely closed world to the “outside” so when they began building this community it was a strong conscious decision to open the doors for a certain time. The emphasis was never on “numbers” but on shayakhut [belongingness]—quality versus quantity. Today of course the concept of ba’al teshuvah has reached every corner of the frum [Charedi] from birth world. There is much more to say on this.

The definition of “belongingness” to, or “membership” in, this group is not easily articulated, neither by myself as an ethnographer nor by members of the group itself. Indeed, in a more general sense, the question of what it means to “be Breslov” was not infrequently discussed by Breslov Chasidim, and sometimes posed directly to me, as a trick-question of sorts to the budding anthropologist. There is no single, established answer, that is able to distinguish with exact precision who is Breslov and who is not; rather, the emic answers most commonly given revolve around the theme of one’s own heart, and its connection to the teachings of Rabbi Nachman. In other words, most Breslovers the world over would accept others as being similarly Breslov not because of how they dressed, where they prayed, this or that contemporary rabbi they attached themselves to, or which particular religious practices (such as reading the Tiqun Ha-Klali or doing hitbodedut—see Chapters 3.6 and 3.7 respectively) they performed, but rather, due to their love for and commitment to the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov.

The question of belongingness to Rav Kenig’s community in Safed is a more concrete and tangible one, however. As with any social group, there are core adherents and fringe participants, and all gradations in between. Core adherents may generally be described as those who have lived in the community for a long time (decades), identify closely with and venerate Rav Kenig, send their children to the community’s schools, themselves pray in the synagogue and study in the kolel daily, and possibly have other involvements; for example, the wives of some of the families may work—either on a volunteer basis or paid—for one or more of the group’s institutions or projects. Conversely, at the fringes of the community are those who may pray at the Breslov synagogue only on Shabbat, and attend a few classes—Talmud, Rabbi Nachman’s teachings, and others—during the week. One
non-Breslov friend, for instance, initially fitted this pattern as an outlier. A year after my initial period of fieldwork he told me that he no longer associated with the community, however, as he found the classes and teachings “too Breslov”; that is, there was too much focus and emphasis for his liking on the teachings of Rabbi Nachman in particular, and not enough, presumably, on Judaism in a more general sense.

As is the norm in Charedi society, men and women in the Breslov community tend to marry young—in their early twenties or even prior—and usually through arranged marriages (see Chapter 3.6 for a more detailed discussion of marriage practices), although such arrangements are by no means the norm with ba’aley tshuvah (secular Jews who have become religious). The large number of children that I observed in most Breslov families—as estimated above, about six on average, although larger families certainly exist—and typical of Charedi society in general, are the result of two precepts in Judaism that are zealously observed by the faithful. Firstly, the very first commandment of the Torah stipulates “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28; The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 5). Secondly, male contraception is forbidden by Halakhic Law since it involves the “wasting” of seed, which is proscribed by the Torah. One Breslov friend, the head of a large family with new grandchildren being born almost every year, expressed to me with much emotion one of his core principles regarding children; “Our answer to the Nazis [of the past], to our enemies [who hate Jews today], is to have children”. He went on to explain that Jews do not need to speak out against their enemies, nor to fight them physically, but rather, to just go on having more children.

The two religious precepts just cited, and Charedi cultural norms around the first one in terms of just how much one actually needs to “multiply” in order to fulfil the commandment, have a direct bearing on the entire social structure of the community. A large number of children generates, as they marry, numerous and diverse affinal relationships (although by no means all within the same—Safed Breslov—group). The size of educational institutions—from infant pre-schools to the adult kolel—are directly related to the community’s birth rate. And the financial position of individual families, and ultimately the community as a whole, is closely bound up with the number of children being supported.

Livelihood

In financial terms, the Breslov community in Safed may be described, relative to other Charedi communities and certainly to the secular norm in Safed, as being a fairly poor one. This became clear through first-hand observation, as well as from general conversation and discussion with community
members. Time spent in the houses of various families revealed that some are only just able to fulfil their basic needs, including housing, food, utilities, clothing and similar, although of course, there are other families who are substantially better-off. I was on occasion asked—directly by friends, and not in the context of general charity-raising but specifically for their own families—whether I was able to help with a monetary donation in order to buy food for an upcoming event, most usually Shabbat. Several times at various Shabbat tables I noticed that food was allotted in precise portions, and that a child wanting, for instance, another piece of chicken, was not able to get one. This kind of rationing on the holy Shabbat, during which it is decreed to the Jew that he or she must be “saturated with delight”—eating the best possible foods and wearing one’s finest clothes (see Chapter 3.5)—is unmistakably indicative of financial difficulty. A member of the community remarked to me that sometimes when they visited other Breslov households, in order to bring them handouts of food prior to Shabbat or a major festival, they found a near-empty fridge with “nothing but a bag of flour in the freezer”. This is an extreme example, but one that serves to illustrate the level of financial hardship that some Breslov families endure, undoubtedly with their own ebbs and flows. It is important to emphasise again that although I estimate that a majority of the Breslov families in Safed live a physical standard of life below, and experience financial hardship to extents greater than, the Israeli secular (and possibly even Charedi) norm, there are clearly other Breslov families who would be considered relatively well-to-do, and even wealthy. Many times I sat at Shabbat and festival tables laden with sumptuous feasts served in fine silverware.

The relative poverty of the community is related to several factors, foremost among them the fact that in many Breslov families both husband and wife do not work to earn money. Typically in such families (and traditional to sizeable, although by no means all, parts of Charedi society more generally), the husband studies at the kolel, whilst the wife devotes most of her time to taking care of the children. In some cases one partner does work, either on a full- or part-time basis; this work may include teaching at the kolel (see below), other employment associated with the community’s institutions, waged labour in various jobs in Safed, or—in rarer cases—running a business. I cannot provide accurate, quantitative data regarding employment, but would roughly estimate that in at least half of the core households of the Breslov community in Safed, both husband and wife either do not earn money at all through employment, or earn only a very meagre wage through part-time work.

Given this state of affairs, the question arises as to how such large families survive financially. For despite the incessant poverty threatening just beneath the surface, by and large families and their children appear decently fed, dressed and housed. One basic source of income for these families is
the monthly stipend that the husband receives from the Breslov kolel at which he studies. This money comes mostly or entirely from the State of Israel, as part of its longtime policy of supporting Torah scholars (see Chapter 3.3 for further discussion of this topic). The stipend, however, is a small one; friends explained to me that it can range from 1,000-1,500 shekels per month, depending on whether the Chasid has taken on additional kolel duties, such as teaching. Anything over 1,500 shekels per month from the kolel is considered excellent. Correct to the time of this writing, the average monthly income in Israel was in the order of 9,500 shekels per month (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Thus, despite all the controversy over, and secular antagonism towards, the stipend arrangement, the amounts themselves are fairly small. To further place this amount into perspective, in Safed the monthly rent for a basic two bedroom apartment starts at about 1,500-2,000 shekels.

The Israeli National Insurance Institute (Bituach Leumiy), the official government body that dispenses welfare payments in the country, makes available a range of welfare payments to residents meeting appropriate criteria. Two of these payments are especially relevant to the Breslov (and the Charedi) community—low-income allowance, and child support payments. The former is aimed at assisting very low income earners, and depending upon a number of eligibility factors, may pay in the order of approximately a couple of thousand shekels per month (National Insurance Institute of Israel, 2014a). Child support payments, correct to the time of this writing, consisted of 140 shekels per month for every child under the age of eighteen11 (National Insurance Institute of Israel, 2014b). A very poor family, therefore, with six children, might receive at a rough estimate a total of 2,000-3,000 shekels per month in government assistance. Finally in terms of financial aid, some Breslov friends told me that they receive ongoing monetary help from their or their spouse’s parent/s. In one case, the parent in question was entirely secular; in another, the parents were quite religious.

Given the ongoing financial hardship that many Breslov families experience, livelihood becomes emphasised as an arena in which man’s faith is tested and G-d’s Providence revealed (see Chapter 4.5 for a more general discussion of these themes). One friend addressed this subject by first asking me, “Why do we need those material things?” He then stated that, “Logically, the average Charedi family should have come undone long ago, but G-d sustains them”. Interestingly, he also explained

11 More accurately: prior to 2003, child allowances were paid on a sliding scale, such that slightly greater amounts would be paid per each additional child. This policy was changed in 2003, to the effect that for children born since that year, a single, set amount is paid per each child (currently 140 shekels), unaffected by the total number of children.
that the main reason why many Charedi men do not join the general workforce is not because doing so would detract from their Torah study (although that too is a major motivation, or more accurately, lack thereof); rather, it is to prevent their exposure to the “impurity” (*tum’ah*) of the outside world, impurity that would threaten their faith and their Judaism. This points to one of the central themes of this thesis, discussed in detail in Chapter 4.2 “Barbarians at the Gates—The Charedi Constitution of Self through Other”. Another Breslov friend expressed the opinion that it is difficult to explain to secular people—and indeed, even to religious people who are employed—about not working for a living; why one does it, what it feels like, its intense challenges at times, yet spiritual merits and rewards at others. Sometimes, he explained, living this way is amazingly easy, although at others it is very difficult. This Chasid felt that financial miracles were constantly occurring in his life, very often at the eleventh hour. He remarked that they could not be explained by ordinary means (“*al-pi hateva*”—according to the natural order), but were a sign of G-d’s Providence. He said that he therefore trusts G-d, and that “it’s so uplifting and awesome to see how He provides livelihood”.

**Family Life**

The family unit is often referred to as the heart and soul of Jewish life, and this certainly appears to be the case amongst the Breslov community in Safed. One indicator of this in day-to-day spoken language is that in many Breslov households—and more so than in any secular family I have come across in Israel—husband and wife usually refer to one another as *ima* (“mum”) and *aba* (“dad”) respectively, even when their children are not around. This appears to suggest that the role of being a parent is considered the foremost one, and not, for example, that of being a partner or lover. Raising a single child may be considered a fulltime job, and this and more is certainly the case considering the large number of offspring found on average in Breslov homes. It is quite the norm for older children, and especially girls, to take an active part in helping with their younger siblings and with the general running of the household; such assistance typically includes changing babies’ nappies, taking younger children to school or out of the house to play, and cooking and cleaning duties. By and large I observed (although, of course, with much variation between families) that parent-child relationships are more permissive than authoritarian; at festive meals (such as Shabbat, Passover, or upon many other religious occasions), for example, the younger children generally run about at will, with only a token effort made by the parents to “control” them. Overall, and despite the incessant material poverty that many face, the typical Breslov home is a warm, cheerful and welcoming one.
Whilst it holds very strong ties with—and indeed, constitutes much of its identity through—the wider Safed Breslov community, the *individual household* is usually a strong and coherent unit in and of itself, and is undoubtedly one of the prime sources of strength and continuity for the community as a whole. A similar idea is expressed by Shatil (1993, p. 37), a secular psychologist who spent two years immersed in a Breslov yeshivah (similar to a *kolel*) in Israel, who writes (translated from Hebrew): “The family unit is the cornerstone of the yeshivah’s lifeworld”.

***
III. Ethnography

3.1 Demographics, Livelihood and Family Life
3.2 Dress

To an external observer, the clothing worn by most male members of typical Charedi communities is probably those communities’ most distinctive and defining physical marker. This clothing is essentially a black or dark-blue Western-style suit, including a black hat and shoes, jacket and trousers, usually a white shirt, and underneath the tzitzit, a religiously proscribed piece of cloth knotted with four-thread fringes at each corner. A long dark coat is often worn over the suit. Some Chasidic groups have distinct elements in their clothing, usually hearkening back to the particular village, town or region in Europe from which they originated; Gur Chasidim, for example, are known to tuck their trouser-legs into the tops of their socks. The Breslov group, however, exhibits no such feature; one would not be able to distinguish the Chasidim in the Breslov Nachal Novea kolel (study hall)—on the basis of their dress alone—as being anything other than typically Chasidic Jews.

Individuals occasionally diverge in their dress from the above description in a distinct, although again general and not specifically Breslov, manner. A rare few in the community wear their tzitzit over (rather than under) their shirt, in a conspicuous style. Also rare, but occasionally seen, is a Chasid wearing tefilin (small, scroll-containing boxes that are temporarily bound to the body with leather straps) at various points and for various lengths of time during the day, as opposed to only during the shacharit morning prayer service as is customary. Whilst clearly not clothing per se, tefilin worn in such a manner (and indeed, worn generally) are a striking physical marker, with strong connotations of faith and religious commitment. Most of the Breslov men do not wear a wedding ring; a Breslov friend explained to me that the custom of a man wearing such a ring is not a traditional Jewish one, and has become popular amongst secular Jews only in modern times. Furthermore in this context, he cited the Torah proscription against a man wearing women’s clothes. This friend acknowledged the uncertain status of a ring as “clothing”, but implied that the men in his community avoid it in order to stay, so to speak, on the “safe side”. It may also be the case that wedding rings are rejected by men for the sake of convenience, necessitated by the hand washing ritual—netilat yadayim—that is undertaken at repeated points during the day. These points include upon arising in the morning, before the minchah afternoon prayers, prior to eating bread, and on several other occasions. For a proper netilat yadayim, the hands must be bare of all ornaments, and thus a wedding ring would require constant removal and replacement.
Women’s Dress

The overarching principle dictating women’s clothing choices—and a principle that is regularly cited in day-to-day conversation and generally venerated—is *tzniyut*, which may be loosely translated as “modesty”. At its most essential level it appears that *tzniyut* refers to an abnegation of any overt sexuality as a factor in a woman’s relationships with all people in her life excepting her husband. It is unlikely, however, that typical Charedi individuals regularly think about this concept in such an abstracted manner (although the religious literature today does contain entire books devoted to the topic); rather, *tzniyut* is first and foremost associated with standards of physical dress, and then more generally with appropriately “modest” behaviour. Accordingly, Breslov women dress in an austere fashion, always wearing dresses or skirts; under no circumstances are trousers worn, as they are considered a “man’s garment”. Arms and legs are covered, at minimum, below the elbows and knees. In the Breslov community in Safed I observed that most of the women typically favour black, grey, brown and white tones, avoiding brighter colours (especially red) in their attire.

Along with its obvious association with physical beauty, a woman’s hair bears key Kabbalistic and symbolic importance in Judaism. As such, hair has become subject to a number of binding customs and social norms, not unlike other traditions that originated in the Middle East. Foremost among these customs is that a married woman must cover her hair in public. The particulars around this precept, however, and the variety of legal opinions regarding it, are myriad (Bronner, undated). For example, may only her husband see her hair, or also men who are primary blood relatives (father, brother, son)? Is the proscription on a married woman showing her hair taken directly from the Torah, or is it Talmudic in origin? And an especially contentious and immediately-practical dilemma for contemporary Charedi society—may a married woman wear a wig in public, thereby ticking the box requiring her to cover her actual hair, but perhaps (as many religious authorities argue) defeating the original purpose of that proscription, in that some wigs serve only to increase her attractiveness? Different religious communities express their answers to these questions—answers often constituted and evolved across several generations—as behavioural norms particular to them. During the course of my fieldwork I observed that married Breslov women in Safed exclusively wear head coverings, and do not use wigs. On the streets of Safed more generally, however, wigs are not an uncommon sight, worn by women from Charedi communities who accept such a practice.

Children and young adults belonging to the Breslov group are dressed or dress themselves in fashions similar to their parents, with some exceptions. Unmarried girls, whilst from an early age dressing as
austerely and modestly as their mothers, do not cover their hair, since the proscription on revealing hair in public applies to married women only. Thus, naturally revealed versus covered hair is an immediate and prominent marker of the marital status of a woman, although the use of wigs (in the wider Charedi community) may confound its reliability. Children sometimes are seen in bright colours, but by adolescence tend to be clothed in the manners described above for adult men and women.

**Festive Dress on Shabbat and Holidays**

On Shabbat and religious festivals the men’s dress takes on conspicuous new elements, each laden with Kabbalistic symbolisms. Firstly, most Breslovers add a long, striped gown/coat that they figuratively refer to as a “zebra”, and secondly, a fur hat called a *shtreimel* is worn. A Breslov friend explained to me that the custom of wearing the “zebra” gown/coat originated in Jerusalem, later spreading to most groups in the Chasidic world. In Safed, some Breslovers do not wear this garment at all on Shabbat, choosing instead to wear only the customary suit (although presumably one of higher quality than usual, set aside for the holy day) or to dress almost entirely in white; long-time, core members of the community, however, usually do don the “zebra”. The garment is made of a faint-yellowish cloth (that may appear as white from afar), with either beige or black closely-spaced vertical stripes running through it. Many Breslovers wear their “zebra” under their suit jacket, rather than over it. During the High Holidays—between and including Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) and Yom Kippur—and on the festivals of *Pesach* (Passover) and *Shavuot* (the Festival of Weeks), the faint yellow coloured “zebra” is replaced by an extra-special one, bearing the same dark stripes as before but upon a striking, pure white background.

The “zebra”, it was explained to me, is comprised of twenty-six parts stitched together; this is an important number, representing the *gematriyah* (numerical value) of the four-letter tetragrammaton (name of G-d) *yud-key-vav-key*. A further symbolic feature of this garment is that a reinforcing thread sewn densely along each of the vertical front hems of the “zebra” extends substantially further down on the right compared to the left side. This symbolises the Kabbalistic concept of the “right” (representing G-dliness and the straight path, or on another level, giving and compassion) ruling over the “left” (the Inclination and the deviant path, or on another level, strength and discipline), a concept symbolised in other daily and mundane elements and acts, including, for example, the sequence in which the right and left shoes are to be placed on the feet and their laces tied. This last practice is stipulated in the *Shulchan Arukh*, the sixteenth century code of Jewish law.
The *shtreimel*—the fur hat—is traditionally made from the pelts of small mammals, such as martens or foxes. Due to the high cost of these pelts, however, many modern-day *shtreimels* are constructed of synthetic materials. A Breslov friend explained to me that the original use of *shtreimels* and the forms they took were the result of a Cossack decree, yet Chasidic Jews maintain the tradition to this day in order to “set themselves apart” (presumably from non-Jews and/or non-religious Jews and/or non-Chasidic Jews)—the particular Hebrew verb he used was the reflexive “lehitbadel”, denoting to “separate oneself” or to “set oneself apart”. He also explained that in authentic, non-synthetic *shtreimels*, the number of animal pelts used bears a significance; twenty-six (the *gematriyah* of the four-letter tetragrammaton, as explained above for the “zebra”) or ten (the number of *Sefirot* or Emanations, also of Commandments, and an important number in Judaism generally) are common.

**Charedi Explanations for Their Own Clothing Customs**

The clothing typically worn by Charedi men is one of their most striking external physical markers. I asked a number of friends, including one of the brothers—known by his first name as Rav Ephraim (see Chapter 2.4)—of Rav Kenig, the head of the community, about the continued use of such dress; it originated in Europe, it is not how the Israelites originally dressed in the Land of Israel, and it is unsuited to the Israeli Mediterranean summer. The answer given by Rav Ephraim and the themes he drew upon were representative of responses that I typically received on this topic from other Charedi adherents. Firstly, Rav Ephraim asked me, “How do you know that that’s not how the ancient Israelites dressed? How did they dress, then?” After responding with an “I don’t know” to both questions, yet pointing out that it was a fair assumption regarding the first one, the Rav referred to an important guiding principle in Judaism; that his community (and indeed, the Charedi world as a whole) dress as their parents, and as their parent’s parents, dressed before them. This apparently simple statement points to a core tenet of the Charedi ethos—that every act has a good and right, and conversely a “bad” and incorrect, way of performing it. In contemporary Charedi society, the religious texts are the primary source of guidance for the individual in elucidating the good and right way (Soloveitchik, 1999). In lieu of clear guidance from the texts, however, one turns to custom (*minhag*)—to what has always been done. These themes are taken up in more depth in Chapter 4.1.

Secondly, on the question of the Charedi insistence on their particular and striking manner of dress, Rav Ephraim referred to an oft-quoted Talmudic teaching; that during their time of bondage in Egypt, the Children of Israel preserved their identity as a nation and were eventually led out by the Almighty due to the fact that they retained three things—their names (that is, original Hebrew names), their
language, and their *dress*. This latter point was used to emphasise once more the importance of Charedi Jewish men dressing as their fathers did, thus explaining their current fashion norms. It also highlighted again for myself as an ethnographer the Jewish imperative, as discussed above, of separation or setting oneself apart from surrounding non-Jewish groups.

*The Sociocultural Importance of Dress*

The use of clothing is a uniquely human endeavour, encapsulating within it and broadcasting to fellow community members fundamental biological and social facts pertaining to an individual, as well as that individual’s self-perceived or *desired* version of those facts. Domains that clothing may testify to include sexuality, age, standing in the social hierarchy, religiosity, and many more. As has already been emphasised, the clothing favoured by Charedi men is their most striking physical marker\(^{12}\), immediately and clearly setting them apart from surrounding social groups, whether those be secular or religious. Indeed, in a direct reference to clothing, non-Charedi religious Israelis, who in contrast to their ultra-orthodox peers are almost always Zionistic and usually serve in the armed forces, are often referred to—both by secular Israelis and also by one another—as *kipot srugot*, meaning “knitted head-coverings”. This appellation (although an admittedly large generalisation for what is itself a heterogeneous social group) refers directly to the knitted and often colourful head-coverings (*kipot*) that tend to be favoured by this group, in contrast to the black fabric *kipot*, further topped by black hats, that are typical of Charedi men.

At a glance, then, a religious Jew is placed—whether rightly or wrongly—into the Charedi or the *kipah srugah* social segment (although, of course, additional categories and variations exist) based on features of their dress. A further striking consequence of the “Charedi uniform” is that it gives rise to the impression—particularly to outgroup individuals—of Charedi homogeneity. Many, if not most, Charedi individuals would protest the use of the term “Charedi uniform”, for several different reasons. One of these is that there are some systematic differences between how contemporary Chasidic Jews dress compared to *Mitnagdim* (especially on Shabbat and festivals). In addition, as mentioned above, some Chasidic groups have clothing features particular to them. Furthermore, in a more general sense

---

12 It might be argued that in fact, beards and sidecurls (*peyot*) are just as striking as the garb typically worn by Charedi Jewish men. This may well be the case; however, beards may and probably are worn by men of all societies. Prominently displayed sidecurls are usually limited to specifically Chasidic (as opposed to more generally Charedi) men, and even then, not all grow their *peyot* in such a conspicuous manner.
and as with all social groups, different communities (either on the level of a neighbourhood, a town, a city, and so forth, or on the level of a shared identification that is not geographically contingent—for example, “Breslov Chasidim”) tend to develop minor variations in clothing that are immediately recognisable to an insider. These qualifications aside, however, it is still the case that the average secular Jew in Israel and indeed the world over (especially one who has little knowledge of religious Jewish societies), and certainly the average non-Jew, would regard any group of Charedi-looking Jews as homogenous. Such regard would probably often extend to the very individuality (or rather, lack thereof) of the persons comprising that group, in terms of their personality, behaviour, opinions, life choices, and so forth. This outgroup homogeneity effect, as it pertains to any outgroup generally, is a well-studied and reported phenomenon in the social psychological literature (see, for example, Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). Even after a year of immersion in the Breslov community, I myself was still guilty of and subject to it; interestingly, however, and as the experimental psychological literature predicts, the effect appeared to be inversely proportional to my personal level of religious sentiment (in other words, to my own level of identification with the “outgroup”) at the time.

A final interesting observation on the topic of dress relates to how the Breslov community views non-religious (or non-Jewish) women who walk through their streets dressed in “standard” Western-style clothing. It is difficult to make any single statement on this topic encapsulating the entire range of feelings and views of a community made up of numerous individuals, including some who were born into it and know no other, and yet others who came to it from very secular backgrounds indeed. Furthermore, “standard” Western clothing—depending on the weather and season, on fashion, on personal taste, and so forth—may range between being barely or almost acceptable according to the Charedi standards of tzniyut (modesty), through to being in that community’s eyes outrightly brazen and lewd. Regarding the latter, some religious individuals may make a direct attribution concerning the moral fibre of the woman in question, whilst others may recognise that their own cultural biases regarding standards of dress cannot be used as a basis for making such moral judgements. Without doubt, however, Chasidim at both ends of the spectrum—as well as those in between—would deem such clothing to be inappropriate and shameful.

A fascinating and telling moment for myself occurred during a period of relative personal religious immersion and observance. Strolling through the market in the Artist’s Quarter of Safed, I saw a girl, clearly a tourist, skimpily clad in summer clothing. This is a very common sight in Sydney, Tel Aviv, or in myriad other locations throughout the modern world, yet at this particular time and place its overt sexuality jolted me strongly. In that moment I realised that this girl dressed herself the way she
III. Ethnography
3.2 Dress

did not only because she wanted to do so, or in accordance with the weather conditions. I perceived, rather, objectified in the particular uniform that she was wearing, an entire structure of meaning and expectations, inherited from the dominant culture of which she was a part. I also had a strong—and disturbing—intuition that she dressed that way in order to “fit in”, and to “feel good about herself”. These ideas remain at the level of hypothesis, of course, but they are congruent with what Judaism—with its call to tzniyut—suggests on the matter (and indeed, congruent with the agenda of other traditions, such as Islam, in their similar calls for modesty in clothing). The easing of and permissiveness in standards of dress that Western modernity boasts so highly of as being a step towards personal liberation, is shunned by these traditions as being, in fact, its precise opposite. For if the message that a girl receives from her society, since puberty and even prior, is that she must meet some culturally-determined standard of sexual attractiveness—at all times in public—in order to justify a sense of her own self-worth, then she will be forever enslaved to an obligation that becomes perpetually more elusive (and indeed, may be so from the very start). The Charedi approach to dress, however, with its explicit renunciation of sexuality, is—in terms of personal liberation—no better.

These ideas are nothing new; what was striking for me as an ethnographer was the confirmation that only by stepping outside of my own dominant cultural paradigm—the same modern Western one cited above—through real immersion within another lifeworld, was I able to perceive and assess certain aspects of my original one with any clarity. My conclusion is that any excessive obsession with female sexuality, culturally objectified into a uniform of either grey clothing, long sleeves and head coverings on the one hand, or skimpy skirts, bare skin, and revealing breasts on the other, can only lead away from liberation and freedom for authentic expression of self. The reasons for this excessive obsession with female sexuality in a given culture, of course, constitute a different and multifaceted topic in itself.

***
III. Ethnography

3.2 Dress
3.3 Synagogue, Kolel and State—Prayer, Learning and Controversy

The Physical Heart of the Breslov Community in Safed—the “Nachal Novea” Building

The beating heart of the Breslov community in Safed is the “Nachal Novea” synagogue/kolel complex, perched on the western slope of one of the hills on which the Old City is built, and overlooking Safed’s ancient cemetery. The vicinity immediately surrounding Nachal Novea, known as Qiryat Breslov (the “Breslov District”), was pointed out to me several times as the exact neighbourhood in which the revered Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (the Ari) himself lived almost half a millennium ago, in the sixteenth century (see Chapter 2.2). This co-location is no coincidence, for as the Nachal Novea website explains, Rabbi Gedaliah Kenig (1921-1980), the father of the current venerated Rav of the community, was instructed by one of his elders—as a religious and spiritual imperative—to establish a new Breslov community in that very neighbourhood (Nachal Novea Mekor Chochma, undated-b). The phrase “Nachal Novea” means “emanating river”, and is a Biblical term (Proverbs 18:4) frequently used both to name and to describe Rabbi Nachman of Breslov.

The Nachal Novea building consists of several storeys, the largest room within it being the synagogue hall itself. This hall bears ornate decorative features, including a beautifully carved wooden Torah ark (aron ha-qodesh) housing several sacred Torah scrolls, an array of large windows that allow light to stream into the room, an ornamental central chandelier, and wooden tables and benches also decorated with carvings. A substantial proportion of the walls of the synagogue are lined floor to ceiling with book cabinets and shelves, filled to the brim with religious texts (see Figure 3 below).

The synagogue hall is used for prayer, and—as is common practice in the Jewish world—also doubles as the physical home of the kolel. Kolel is a word derived from the Hebrew root denoting “inclusion” or “totality”, and refers to an institution of adult religious learning for men; the term may be used to signify the institution itself, or the physical space in which it is housed. Unlike a yeshivah (from the Hebrew root “to sit”), whose young men are generally unmarried and frequently live in dormitories onsite (making it a senior boarding school of sorts), members of a kolel are usually older, married, and live in their own family houses. This was the case regarding the Nachal Novea kolel, and whilst the complex did contain some beds for guests, it was not designed as a full-time boarding facility.
III. Ethnography

3.3 Synagogue, Kolel and State—Prayer, Learning and Controversy

Figure 3: The interior of the Breslov Nachal Novea Synagogue in Safed

This synagogue has been described as the largest and most ornate of its kind in the northern Galilee.

From top-left going clockwise: the carved wooden Torah ark (*aron ha-qodesh*) housing several sacred Torah scrolls; carved wooden tables and chairs, as well as plainer temporary ones, used during prayer and study; cabinets filled with religious books lining the walls; and the ornate central chandelier, with decorative windows in the background.
The Breslov community also runs a second synagogue, called “Trisk”, located in another part of the Old City of Safed. This synagogue consists of a very small building, essentially a single room, although a fully-functioning \textit{miqveh} (a pool for ritual purification; see Chapter 3.6) is also attached to it. Trisk was previously a dilapidated and apparently abandoned synagogue, but remarkable in terms of its elaborately decorated Torah ark and several other ornamental features. It was acquired by the Breslov community, and renovated and restored to a fully functioning house of worship. Because of its proximity to the \textit{Rav’s} (the head of the community, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig; see the following chapter) house, he usually prays and gives sermons there; accordingly, Chasidim who are particularly attached to him also tend to pray at Trisk, as a far smaller and more intimate venue compared to the main Nachal Novea synagogue. Trisk is closed on Shabbat and other major religious days—on these occasions the entire community gathers at Nachal Novea.

\textit{Prayer in Synagogue}

Formal Jewish prayer as laid down by the Rabbinic tradition consists of three daily services—morning (\textit{shacharit}), afternoon (\textit{minchah}) and evening (\textit{ma’ariv}). Morning prayers constitute the longest practice, whilst the afternoon and evening services may be timed in such a way that they can be undertaken consecutively, in one single session. Many Chasidim frequently choose this arrangement, although others prefer to pray the afternoon service earlier, in the middle of the day. The Jewish tradition specifies precise times, regarding not only when prayers may commence, but also stipulating certain beginning and cut-off times for especially sacred elements within each service. For example, \textit{tefilin} (the small boxes that are temporarily bound to the body with leather straps, customarily during morning prayers) and the prayer shawl (\textit{talit}) may be donned only after (and not before) a certain time following dawn, as determined by the angle of the sun below the horizon. One of the holiest prayers of all, the \textit{Shema}, must be recited by a certain time each morning, and only after a certain time each evening. The afternoon prayer service has an earliest start time, usually around midday, and a cut-off time closer to the evening. All these and other times are dependent on sunrise, sunset, and the length of the day, meaning that all these times change from day to day, gradually shifting across the seasons of the year. Accordingly, tables are produced (widely available online now; for example, http://www.myzmanim.com/) that give the appropriate prayer timings (to the minute and even second), for a given location on Earth on a specific day of the year.

One custom common especially in the Charedi world, and practiced on a regular basis by a small cluster of men in the Breslov community in Safed, is the \textit{vatikin} (“elders”—so named because usually
the older members of a congregation, with little or no responsibility for small children, are able to persist at it) practice. It is also known as netz—“sunrise”. Vatikin/netz involves beginning the holiest part of the morning prayers, the amidah (“standing”—because congregants stand during this part) at precisely the point when the sun crosses the visible horizon as it rises in the morning. This moment is correctly known as “sunrise”, as opposed to “dawn”; the latter occurs when light is perceived at an increasing rate but the leading edge of the sun still lies below the horizon, whilst at sunrise an observer may actually see the sun. At least an hour of prayer traditionally precedes the beginning of the amidah; in the summer, therefore, when the sun rises early, morning prayers for those practicing vatikin may begin at 4:30am or thereabouts. Adding to this the fact that most Breslovers immerse in a miqveh prior to shacharit prayers, the day begins very early indeed for those attending the dawn service. The dawn congregation at Nachal Novea is not large, with perhaps ten to twenty men arriving on average each day. They are usually done by 7am, after which a second communal shacharit service commences, at the more pedestrian hour of 7:30am.

The amount of time spent by Breslov Chasidim on prayer is remarkable. They pray on every single day of the year, the only regular exception being when a man is in mourning over the death of a close relative (parent, spouse, sibling or child; between the death and the funeral, such mourners are exempt, according to Jewish tradition, from almost all religious obligations). On a normal weekday the devotee might spend—across the morning, afternoon and evening services combined—approximately three hours on formal prayer (“formal”, to distinguish from individual/personal prayer, such as undertaken during hitbodedut; see Chapter 3.7); on Shabbat five hours are typical, whilst on seminal occasions such as Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) or Yom Kippur, almost the entire day, well into the evening, is utilised praying in synagogue.

In the Jewish tradition women have very minor prayer obligations compared to men, and these are often undertaken in the home. There is a gallery at Nachal Novea, on a second floor overlooking the main synagogue hall, for female congregants; however, it is generally used by women only for Shabbat or festival services, and lies empty (or is used for other purposes) during the week.

Prayer as it is practiced today is said to have been instituted by the post-Biblical/pre-Rabbinic men of the Great Assembly, who took this course of action after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Following this event the epicentre of the Jewish religion became diffused, shifting from its devastated Sanctuary in Jerusalem to the altars of individual synagogues. Whilst the basic structure of the three daily prayer services—in terms of the prayers included, their particular order, and how they are
performed—was set almost two thousand years ago, many modification and additions have been made since (including in recent times), resulting in the sequences familiar today to religious Jews the world over.

Any Jewish prayer may be classified into one or more of four broad categories; thanksgiving (in which the devotee thanks G-d for what He has provided), praise (of G-d’s attributes and greatness generally), repentance (asking forgiveness for deeds done, words uttered, or even thoughts thought) or supplication (requesting from G-d things that one feels he or she needs). A typical prayer service consists of several different stages and elements incorporating these four categories, all arranged according to an exacting overall logic. In a classic example of the fractal\(^\text{13}\) nature of the Jewish religion and its symbolisms, the main prayer service—morning/shacharit—is said to consist of four phases, each corresponding to four definitive physical structures of the Biblical Temple in Jerusalem, and each in turn corresponding to the four Worlds as set out in the Kabbalistic tradition. The first stage includes morning blessings and the reading of “Offerings” or “Sacrifices”—words that describe the sacrifices as they used to be performed in the Temple and that are themselves offered in their place. This stage of the prayers corresponds to the Temple Mount, and to the lowest World, of Actualisation (asiyah). The second stage consists of the “Psalms of Praise”, corresponding to the Courtyard of the Temple, and to the World of Formation (yetzirah). The third stage contains the reading of the venerated Shema prayer together with its blessings, symbolising the Holy Chamber of the Temple, and the third World, of Creation (briyah) (\textit{The Roadmap to Prayer: Lesson 2}, 2005, pp. 14-16).

By this point, the focused, disciplined and faithful devotee—if they are performing the practice as it was intended—has ascended through the three aforementioned spiritual worlds, and is ready to enter the highest level attainable on that particular occasion (whether it be a weekday, Shabbat, or a religious festival); recall also that at this moment in the vatikin/netz service the first rays of the directly visible sun are spilling over the horizon. The Chasid stands for the amidah (also called the shemonah esrey—“eighteen”—because it consists of eighteen prayers), the synagogue goes silent, and each man whispers—or just moves his lips and imagines—the words. This silent method of praying is said to

\(^{13}\text{A fractal is a natural phenomenon or mathematical object, in which increasing levels of resolution reveal increasing repetitive detail, as if the structure of the object is based on some fundamental abstract template. This theme, of Judaism as a fractal structure, is taken up in the conclusion to the final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 4.6.}\)
be the highest spiritually, for apparently spoken words may be impeded on their journey to Heaven by entities belonging to the Dark Side, but silent prayers cannot (anonymous, personal communication, 2011). The *amidah* corresponds to the Holy of Holies—the Inner Chamber of the Temple, that the High Priest entered only once a year on Yom Kippur, apparently risking his life to do so because a single word uttered wrongly meant instant death—and corresponding also to the highest World, of Emanation (*atzilut*). Several sets of prayers conclude the service, understood to take the devotee back down through the worlds of *briyah*, *yetzirah* and *asiyah*; back into the ordinary world and the flow of his day (*The Roadmap to Prayer: Lesson 2*, 2005, pp. 14-16).

Regarding how a typical prayer service may appear to an outsider in terms of its visual and auditory elements, Salzman (1996, Chapter Five, p. 2) describes a scene from the same Breslov group in Safed that I studied, very likely as they prayed at the same Nachal Novea synagogue:

> During a given prayer service, everybody read the same prayers as the ritual progressed, but nobody said them in unison or in the same way. Some whispered the words of the prayer text, others sang them or chanted them, and still others screamed them. During a part of the daily prayer ritual known as the Amidah (the standing prayer), everybody says the blessings in silence. However, even amidst this unified silence, I could hear at different times, throughout the room, a sigh, or an “Oyy!”, or hands clapping. The fact that room was given for these improvisations to take place during an organized service demonstrates one way in which Breslov culture negotiates the oft-perceived rigidity of the traditional liturgy.

My observations regarding prayer at Nachal Novea are somewhat congruent, although at many points in services prayers *are* said or sung in unison, and certainly proper practice of the service overall is contingent upon the Chasidim progressing more or less in harmony (see below). Over decades and indeed centuries, different Jewish communities have developed specific customs regarding the practice of each prayer; whether it is recited aloud, sung communally, or uttered silently. Regarding the singing, melodies—some of which are hundreds of years old—have emerged for certain tracts of the *sidur* (the prayer book; the Hebrew word literally means “arrangement”). Many of these prayer customs may be said to belong either to the Sephardic (Iberian Peninsula), Mizrachi (Middle Eastern and North African) or Ashkenazic (European) Jewish worlds, although differentiation has also taken place at the level of countries, regions, and even individual synagogues. The structures and forms of services at Nachal Novea, therefore, represent long lines of cause-and-effect, culminating in the
III. Ethnography

3.3 Synagogue, Kolel and State—Prayer, Learning and Controversy

particular order of prayers and the manner in which the Breslov Chasidim practice them at their synagogue. As with most Chasidic communities, the Breslovers use the Sefarad version of the prayer book, a version that seeks to incorporate Kabbalistic elements—based on the customs of Rabbi Isaac Luria—together with the classic European Ashkenazic sequence of prayers.

A striking characteristic of Jewish—and especially Charedi—prayer is the back and forth swaying, that may be sustained for hours, on part of the devotee. One esoteric Jewish explanation for this movement is that the Jew is akin to a candle-flame, flickering and swaying as he worships. At key points in prayer services the voices of the Breslov men rise together in triumphant song, although in other parts each Chasid progresses at his own pace until the next such key point, when all come together again (the cantor, standing at the front altar, pauses until the congregants more or less catch up). Overt displays of emotion are common; in one field note I accordingly described the Breslov congregation as, “Moaning and groaning, mumbling and swaying”.

Judaism emphasises—as did several Breslov Chasidim to me—the importance of looking at the physical letters on the pages of the sidur; the letters themselves are understood to be holy and powerful, and just seeing them, even by one who cannot read Hebrew, is said to be beneficial to the soul. The importance to Judaism of the Hebrew letters, not only as signifiers of sound and meaning, but as actual conduits to the Divine Mind, or alternately, as blueprints of the same, cannot be overstated. Uffenheimer (1993, pp. 169-170), in the context of early Chasidism around the time of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his immediate successors, writes:

> The starting point of prayer is a kind of taking hold of its most concrete component, the letters themselves, in order to ascend within them and through them to the spiritual inwardness of the infinite chaotic lights shining there, stripped of all defined contents. This chaos exists within the orderly and stable framework of the revelation of G-d. Every unambiguous, external “revelation” of Divinity [in this case, the letters of the prayers] contains within itself the infinity of G-d… during the course of the person’s meditation, the letters are gradually disembodied of their concrete form and the Divine spiritual attributes hidden within them are then revealed.

Like most individual synagogues and broader groups within the Jewish world, the Breslov community in Safed has developed a number of idiosyncratic customs around synagogue and prayer ritual. One of the most distinctive of these is the formation of a brief, small dancing circle at the conclusion of every prayer service (on Shabbat these circles tend to be much larger and maintained for longer; see
Chapter 3.5). Even at the conclusion of a service with a small congregation—for example, the vatikin/netz dawn service that typically consists of ten to twenty men—the Chasidim gather around the central altar of the synagogue, link hands, and perform a few circuits (always moving anticlockwise). Depending on the people present, the general mood, and individuals’ energy levels, some circles involve congregants mumbling or saying the words to a song and shuffling around, whilst other circles consist of displays of genuine joy and merriment amidst enthusiastic singing and dancing. I understand this post-prayer dancing circle custom to be characteristic of Breslov communities the world over; I am not aware of any other Jewish religious group that practices it regularly.

Another practice undertaken at Nachal Novea is a brief session of communal learning, for five-to-ten minutes only, at the conclusion of the early morning vatikin/netz service. This session is led by Rav Ephraim Kenig (the brother of the Rav of the community, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig), who is a regular at the dawn service. Not all congregants stay for it; those who do sit around a table, and Rav Ephraim nominates one man to read a passage from a canonical Chasidic book written by the Maggid (“preacher” or “teacher”) of Mezeritch, a common appellation for the famed disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch. This learning session comes to fulfil the custom that learning Torah after prayer is meritorious. It may also be understood in the context of the seminal Jewish emphasis on book learning generally, discussed under “Kolel Study” below.

An additional practice undertaken in the Breslov congregation is an iluy nefesh, an “elevating of the soul”, in honour of one’s deceased father on the anniversary of his death. This is a custom only, and not all Chasidim whose father is deceased enact it. For those who do, it is usually a simple affair, involving a small spread of food and drink laid out by the son after shacharit prayers. Congregants partake of the refreshments and make polite conversation about the deceased. It is also customary to raise a shot of whisky or vodka in his honour, and thus we found ourselves consuming such liquors at seven in the morning!

During the week the children (from mid-teenagers and below) of Breslov Chasidim do not usually attend synagogue with their fathers, for they have their own prayer services in their school. On Shabbat, however, the entire community—including many women—gather at Nachal Novea. Prayer practices on Shabbat and on certain religious occasions are discussed in Chapters 3.5 and 3.6 respectively. Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) is covered in Chapter 3.9, whilst some aspects of the synagogue ritual during the commemorative/harvest festival of Sukot are described in Chapter 3.7.
The commandment to become highly inebriated on the festival of Purim, and the manner in which it is faithfully observed by Breslov Chasidim at Nachal Novea, is discussed in Chapter 3.10.

**Kolel Study**

Regarding the seminal emphasis that Judaism places on *learning*, Soloveitchik (1999, p. 335) suggests that:

> Study of primary sources is a slow and inefficient way to acquire information, but in traditional Jewish society, the purpose of study (*lernen*) was not information, nor even knowledge, but a lifelong exposure to the sacred texts and an ongoing dialogue with them. *Lernen* was seen both as an intellectual endeavor and as an act of devotion; its process was its purpose.

The *kolel* (along with the *yeshivah* for younger men) is accordingly the prime institution underlying the Jewish paradigm of *lernen*. About 110 men are enrolled at the Nachal Novea *kolel*, and—as discussed in Chapter 3.1—consequently receive a stipend of approximately 1,000-1,500 shekels per month, funded mostly or entirely by the State of Israel as part of its increasingly contentious policy of supporting Torah scholars financially (see below). As with all *kolel* institutions, enrolment at Nachal Novea is contingent upon a selection process, presumably taking into account the applicant’s commitment to Judaism as well as to the Breslov ethos, their previous study experience, and other factors.

The *kolel* is physically housed in the Nachal Novea synagogue hall. The “standard” (as opposed to the dawn *netz/vatikin*) *shacharit* morning prayer service usually concludes at about 9am; from this point onwards the synagogue gradually fills with Chasidim, arranging themselves around the tables and benches that are laid out in a grid in the main hall. Almost all men take a break around midday—walking to their nearby houses to eat and possibly sleep—and then return to the *kolel*, continuing their study up until the evening and its *ma’ariv* prayers. One Chasid described the *kolel* experience as “The best job in the world—to study Torah all day long!”.

Several key principles characterise the *kolel* study environment. Firstly, there is no syllabus nor set daily regime; the program of study is up to each individual to define for themselves. Sometimes Chasidim take advice regarding their study programs with more experienced peers or with the *Rav* himself; ultimately, however, what each individual does in the day-to-day is up to him. In a similar vein there are no exams nor marks, and very little other externally motivating elements; the intrinsic
spiritual value of studying is supposed to be the prime impetus inspiring each Chasid’s learning efforts. The second principle characteristic of kolel work involves the harmonious balance of the types of religious materials that are being studied. It must be noted that the term “Torah study” refers not only to the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) itself, but to the entire array of Jewish religious literature, all of which is ultimately understood to be derived from the Torah anyway. This literature includes the full TaNaKH (Bible), Mishnah and Gemara (collectively known as Talmud), Rabbi Nachman’s books (occupying a central place in any typical Breslov study program), the Shulchan Arukh (the sixteenth century code of Jewish law), and many other books, ranging from those written hundreds of years ago, to the most recent themed works by religious Jewish authors.

All of this material may broadly be divided—and this division is often cited and emphasised by Breslov Chasidim—into two categories: Or—“light”, and kelim—“vessels” (the very same concept was discussed in Chapter 2.2, although on the level of cosmic events at the Creation of the world). Or refers to mystical, esoteric material, which tends to enthuse the heart and lift the spirit, whilst kelim denote the Halakhic/legalistic aspects that generally govern action in the ordinary world. As the Chasidic movement in particular emphasises, each individual must strive to balance the light and the vessels within themselves, for only then may they come closer to G-d. Too many vessels filled with too little light yield a dry, frigid and robotic religious practice, devoid of emotion and heart. This

14 In later chapters—3.10 and 4.3—I make reference to the indigenous DMT-containing psychedelic brew ayahuasca, that has its origins in the rainforested lowlands of South America. The brew consists of two main ingredients: a DMT-containing leaf (typically Psychotria viridis) and the ayahuasca vine (Banisteriopsis caapi). The vine contains compounds (harmala alkaloids) that are pharmacologically active in the human, inhibiting the actions of endogenous human enzymes on DMT; instead of being metabolised, consequently, the DMT from the leaf is able to cross the blood-brain barrier and mediate its radical psychoactive effects. Thus, it is the action of leaf and vine combined, each fulfilling different functions, that enables the sacred-ecstatic ayahuasca experience to unfold. Interestingly, considering the Jewish concepts of “light” and “vessels” that must be balanced and harmonised in the study of the sacred and ultimately in oneself, many indigenous South American groups that use ayahuasca refer to the DMT-containing leaf as the “light”, and to the vine that provides the inhibitors (thereby rendering the DMT orally-active) as the “force”. Only when the two are in synergy may the seeker enter the sacred ayahuasca experience. “Mother” ayahuasca, as the plant and its deity are often anthropomorphised, is almost without exception considered a teacher amongst all groups—indigenous and modern Western—who visit her (see Chapter 3.10). The idea, therefore, that there is a “light” that requires some kind of containment or amplification in order to convey the sacred, seems to be common to different traditions, whether at a pharmacological, psychological, or metaphysical level.
is the state of affairs typically attributed by classical scholarly accounts to European Jewry just prior to the rise of Chasidism in the eighteenth century. Too much light with not enough or not strong enough vessels, conversely, yields *ribuy orot*, meaning “multiplicity of light”. This is a term used within the Charedi and especially Chasidic world to refer to an overabundance of mystical immersion and rapture, whilst at the same time implying some level of loss of grounding and connection to reality. Such a state represents the typical conception generally of Breslov Chasidim held by secular Israeli society, and is discussed again in the following Chapter (3.4) in the context of a specific Chasid from the Safed community.

Material that typically falls into the *or*—“light”—category may include *The Zohar* (“Splendour” or “Radiance”; the central work in the literature of the Kabbalah), the seminal Breslov *Likutey Halachot* (that brings Kabbalistic explanations to almost every contour of the ordinary, day-to-day world of Jewish ritual observance), teachings passed down from Rabbi Isaac Luria (the great progenitor of Lurianic Kabbalah), and various other philosophical and/or inspirational works, both old and new. The often dry, legalistic and logically complex Talmud is the archetypal example of *kelim*—vessels. This does not apply in all cases, however, because some parts of the Talmud are quite the opposite, being very *or* in their flavour. Tractate Gittin of the Babylonian Talmud, for example, whilst primarily concerned—as the Hebrew name implies—with legal matters involving writs of divorce and other documents, also gives an account of the travails of King Solomon with the Prince of Demons, Ashmedai.

Shatil (1993, p. 38), a secular psychologist who spent two years of immersive participation in a Breslov *yeshivah* in Israel, describes how the rabbi of that institution navigated his Chasidim through the sometimes conflicting demands of *or* and *kelim* (translated from Hebrew):

> The general framework of study is defined by the *Rav* [head Rabbi of the *yeshivah*]. The essential point is to maintain a proper balance between the mystical study topics of spiritual uplifting [*or*—light] and the cognitive-restraining topics of Gemara [*Talmud*] study [*kelim*—vessels]. They [the men of the *yeshivah*] say: “This year the *Rav* perceived that the young men are becoming disconnected from reality, and becoming distant from the daily observance of the *mitzvot* [commandments]; therefore, he decided that we need to focus on lucid and factual learning”.

The final principle to be mentioned regarding *kolel* study relates to the method of the study itself. A core practice in Judaism in this regard is to study in *chavruta*, an Aramaic word denoting a
“friendship” or “partnership”. Whilst larger groups are possible and frequently do form, the classic Jewish study chavruta consists of a pair of scholars, sitting either opposite one another or side-by-side. The text at hand is read out loud, and then analysed, discussed and often debated. Very rarely did I see Chasidim at Nachal Novea taking notes of any sort as they studied; the focus is on verbal discourse and on the recall of previous insights and lessons from memory. On the other hand, these scholars place great emphasis on looking up specific items and points in their original sources; if, for example, a chavruta studying the principal Breslov work Likutey Moharan—“The Anthology of Moharan (a Hebrew acronym for ‘Our Teacher The Rabbi Nachman’)”—enters into debate over a particular Psalm, Talmud excerpt, or similar passage that was referenced or quoted therein, they will very often find the original amongst the books lining the kolel’s walls, and incorporate it into the discussion. The Chasidim tend to have different chavrutot (the plural of chavruta) at different timeslots in the week; these give their week some form of definite structure, and ensure that they study a range of topics with different peers and corresponding points of view.

The above depiction of daily kolel life is fairly congruent with the descriptions of Shatil (1993, pp. 38-42), although it would appear that the learning syllabus was a little more pre-defined and structured in his yeshivah compared to the Nachal Novea kolel. This is logical, as the former contained mostly younger, unmarried men, whilst older and more experienced Chasidim study at Nachal Novea. The above depiction is also reflective, I suggest, of the state of affairs that exists in most Charedi kolelim the world over. To their credit, and in response to some of the typical secular Israeli criticisms levelled at the kolel world (see below), my impressions regarding the integrity and commitment of the Breslov Chasidim of Nachal Novea, in terms of their engagement with their obligations, was a very positive one indeed. Whilst, as a result of the largely unstructured nature of the kolel enterprise, the system appears open to much abuse—in terms of even, for example, basic attendance—by and large I did not perceive this to be occurring. My observations were very superficial, of course, and limited to anecdotal impressions, nor am I qualified in any way to presume to pronounce such “judgements”. A majority of the time, however, I observed dedicated men striving to do their best on an often difficult and demanding scholarly path.

My most striking insight into kolel study occurred whilst I myself was participating in a group session at Nachal Novea, studying the seminal Breslov Likutey Halachot, a work mentioned above. The subject under review was profoundly metaphysical (as many of the topics in this multivolume work, discussing amongst other subjects Kabbalistic interpretations of daily Jewish life, are), and I found myself gazing around the kolel hall. Clusters of Chasidim—most in chavruta pairs, but also in larger
groups and occasionally solo—sat around the tables, bent over texts, reading, discussing and arguing. I realised with some wonder that here is a religious tradition that conceives of the all-day study of mystical and metaphysical texts as amongst the holiest and highest spiritual undertakings of all. Arrayed in front of me was essentially an “ecology of minds, mediated by egoity” (J. Mimica, personal communication, June 2014); they are an “ecology of minds” in the sense of being a tight-knit community, and also because their chavruta groups bring them into close intellectual and emotional interaction with one another on a daily basis. Indeed, I hypothesise that a simple network diagram of study groups at any given time at Nachal Novea—with each Chasid symbolised by a node and each chavruta relationship a line between them—would reveal a highly interconnected arrangement. And this ecology is “mediated by egoity” in that its structure—and, in fact, its very existence—is a product of the psychological landscapes of the persons comprising it.

Secular Conceptions of the Kolel World

The establishment of the kolel system in Israel has its roots in the “Status Quo”—a term used today in an almost mythological vein—that the first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, established with the leaders of the then small and fragile Israeli Charedi community, around the time of Israel’s sovereign declaration of independence in 1948. Whilst the socialist Zionist pioneering founders of the State of Israel were secular almost down to the last man and woman, Ben Gurion consented—because, some accounts suggest, he thought that the issue would eventually fade away and become irrelevant—to exempt young Charedi men from military service in the newly-established Israel.

15 As previously discussed, clearly not all texts being studied are explicitly mystical nor metaphysical; many deal with legal matters, the minutiae of Torah observance, and other Jewish religious topics. In order to truly understand such topics—their ultimate rationale and how they are derived from the Torah—however, one must eventually delve into the Kabbalistic/mystical/metaphysical level. The seminal code of Jewish law the Shulchan Arukh, for example, stipulates the hand washing ritual—netilat yadayim—as the first action upon arising in the morning. This is a faithfully observed ritual across the entire Jewish religious world, and the hands are washed in a particular prescribed manner, preferably using a jug as opposed to water coming directly out of a tap, and repeatedly pouring the water upon the right and left hands in a certain sequence. This apparently mundane act of morning hand washing may only be fully understood in the context of Jewish Kabbalistic theory regarding the departure of the soul from the physical body during the night, the “impurity” (tum’ah) that consequently enters the spiritual vacuum left behind, and the reasons (constituting a further delving into the Kabbalah) for why the return of the soul pushes out the tum’ah from all parts of the body but the hands. The details of the hand washing ritual, furthermore—for example, why the right hand is always washed first, or why each hand is washed three times—may similarly be understood only with recourse to “mystical” theory.
III. Ethnography

3.3 Synagogue, Kolel and State—Prayer, Learning and Controversy

Defense Forces (IDF). These young men, instead, would study Torah. At the time the concession applied to only a few hundred men; within several decades, however, these became thousands, and today hundreds of thousands of Charedi adherents. These religious Jews do not serve in the military, as most of the rest of the population—bound by conscription—are obligated to do. The issue of military service and Charedi conceptions thereof are discussed more fully in the next section below.

Mainstream secular Israeli thinking tends to portray the kolel world in a very negative light indeed. This is not only because most (although by no means all) men in kolel institutions have not undertaken military service—and subsequently also do not bear the burden of ongoing reserve duty—but also because of the stipend they collect from the State of Israel for studying at a kolel, the relatively high (as a result of large families) child support benefits they tend to receive, and the fact that—having no salaried income—they do not pay taxes. The phrase okhley chinam, literally meaning “free eaters” and connoting “freeloaders”, is a derogatory term used by some secular Israelis in regard particularly to Charedi society. Shatil (1993, p. 33) points out that this secular critique was very familiar to students in his Breslov yeshivah, and that they were accustomed to hearing criticisms along the lines that they are “leaches living off State benefits and also not serving in the army”. There is also a mainstream secular conception that Charedi men tend to abuse the kolel system, either by not attending daily as they should, or by attending but not really studying. Furthermore, I heard many secular Israelis express the opinion that some kolel institutions themselves defraud the system by reporting students on their books who do not even exist, thereby drawing surplus government funds. As stated above, my (very) superficial observations at Nachal Novea were quite contrary to such accusations, indicating an institution conducted largely with honesty and integrity.

I discussed such topics with a knowledgeable and insightful religious (non-Breslov) friend in Safed, who was also a Jewish teacher, although not within the Charedi kolel system. He pointed out that traditionally the Jewish world, in centuries past, did have an established custom for financing Torah scholars; in a given community a small number of scholars, called batlanim, were supported by the voluntary charitable contributions of the wider population. The spiritual merit earned through these scholars’ study efforts, therefore, was understood to be conferred equally upon the entire community. This is reminiscent of the arrangement, postulated by the Jewish tradition based on Biblical interpretations, between the two sons of Jacob, Issachar and Zebulun. The former was a great Torah scholar, devoting his life to study, whilst the latter a successful merchant. The two established a partnership, wherein Zebulun would provide for Issachar financially, and would accordingly partake of his brother’s metaphysical reward.
The word *batlanim* may be translated as “men of leisure”. Historically, however, it was an honorific, referring particularly to those aforementioned scholars, who actually spent their time not in leisure but in study. Today, in contrast, the term is used by secular Israelis in an entirely derogatory sense, denoting “freeloaders”, “wastrels”, or similar. The same religious friend also pointed out that in the past the *batlanim* were almost always the most brilliant Torah scholars in the community—*talmidim chakhamim*, “wise students”, denoting those well-versed in the religious texts, and who also lived exemplary *Halakhic* (Torah-observant) lives. In contemporary times, however, all Charedi men are entitled to enrol in a *kolel* and draw a stipend, irrespective of their scholastic merits. Furthermore, the community at large—in other words the Israeli taxpayer—has no direct say in the matter of their support of these scholars, in contrast to the voluntary contributions in days of old. Thus, whilst zealously supported and politically guarded by the Charedi world, the *kolel* system is seen as a historical aberration—hearkening back to the “Status Quo” of Ben Gurion—by probably the majority of secular, and also by some Zionist religious (so called “kipot srugot”; see Chapter 3.2), Israeli Jews.

**Charedi Conceptions of Torah Study and Military Service**

Interestingly, on a visit some years ago to Israel, the supervisor of this doctoral thesis recalls that one of the very first discussions he had with a “native” person—his taxi driver—concerned the issue of Charedi military service. In his conversation the taxi driver essentially reproduced the entire secular critique of Charedi society as described above, focusing especially on its avoidance of national service (J. Mimica, personal communication, January 2014). During my second fieldwork period, conducted in the first half of 2014, political initiatives by Knesset (the unicameral national legislature of Israel) parties opposed to the Status Quo brought this issue to the forefront of Israeli current affairs, culminating in a Charedi rally—reported by some sources to exceed half a million people—that all but shut down the city of Jerusalem (see Figure 4 below). The secular conception of the matter, with its emphasis on injustice and unfairness, and its portrayal of Charedi society as consisting of “leaches” or “freeloaders”, has already been discussed, and this conception is probably a fairly easy one for the typical secular reader to understand.
The Charedi position is, of course, a very different one. Embedded in the “Torah lifeworld” (see Chapter 4.5), and in a manner that is genuinely difficult for the average secular observer to assimilate, the Charedi view well and truly understands its approach to be the correct and wholesome, moral and ethical one. Clearly some individual Charedim (the plural of a single Charedi), faced with the daily realities of Israel’s precarious security situation, may find it challenging to integrate their own stance—of Torah study over military service—with what is occurring on an almost daily basis around them. In the past decade these occurrences have included, for example, suicide bombers who detonated their explosives in public places inside of Israel and the efforts of the security apparatuses devoted to stopping them; rockets fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip or Lebanon and the Israel Defense Forces systems that attempted to intercept them; and Israeli soldiers—young men—killed in ground operations. The very human need to feel that one is “doing one’s part”—and the accompanying guilt when one is not, especially in adverse circumstances—are universal and powerful emotions. One Breslov friend, therefore, upon my enquiry regarding his attitudes to the aforementioned mass Charedi rally in Jerusalem, responded with a somewhat incongruous answer: “The Charedim aren’t really against conscription. They just want to do their part, which is Torah study… Actually, all of Am Yisrael [the nation of Israel] look out for one another”.

This kind of answer appeared to be an attempt to smooth over fundamental differences in the worldviews of different sectors of the Israel population, and had little connection to what was occurring “on the ground”. A far more representative Charedi view, I believe, was given by another Breslov friend during a long and frank discussion on this topic. During this conversation I attempted to suspend my own views and judgements, and to truly grasp his position from the “inside”; in the
III. Ethnography

3.3 Synagogue, Kolel and State—Prayer, Learning and Controversy

rare moments when I “got it”, I realised clearly that here is a group of people who truly believe that their way is right, in the same way that secular Jews—who by and large do undertake national service—believe in theirs. Each side cannot understand the other, for each is embedded in a radically different world of meanings and action, along with a very different understanding of cause and effect in that world (see again Chapter 4.5). The following discussion attempts to capture some of the “flavour” of the archetypal Charedi position regarding military service; it is based on conversations with this particular Breslov friend, on material gathered from other Charedi friends, and on exposure—over many years—to television and radio interviews, as well as to the general Israeli Charedi zeitgeist.

The first Charedi objection to military service was explained by this Chasid as follows: “If Jews kept the mitzvot [commandments of G-d] and if we all studied Torah, we wouldn’t need an army of this sort”. In other words, the woes of Israel are seen as stemming from the fact that it is a country founded by, and still largely consisting of, secular Jews who have abandoned the ways of G-d, thereby allowing evil into their midst. Since G-d is a good and perfect Being, who wants to bestow only the ultimate good upon his creations (see Chapter 2.1), the afflictions of Israel are understood to be His message and His punishment—meted out to those who have left the path—in order to bring them back into His loving fold. “The practical solution”, continued the same Chasid, “is that everyone [i.e. all Jews in Israel] will return in teshuvah ['returning' to a Torah-based life]. Then there’ll be an army, but it will play backgammon [that is, there will be no need to fight because G-d will arrange it so]”.

This principle—that following G-d’s commandments will bring goodness and prosperity, whilst abandoning them will lead to horrific consequences—is attested to several times daily by the faithful through the recitation of one of the holiest of Jewish prayers, the Shema. After promising rain, grain, wine, oil, grass in the field for cattle, and abundant food, all for diligently obeying the ordinances of G-d, the prayer warns (The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Nusach Sefarad [Hebrew and English], 2005, p. 97):

Beware lest your heart be seduced and you turn astray and serve gods of others and bow to them. Then the wrath of Hashem [G-d] will blaze against you. He will restrain the heaven so there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce. And you will swiftly be banished from the goodly land which Hashem gives you.

The Shema was often cited by Charedim in conversations regarding the modern State of Israel and its woes, as well as the afflictions of the Jewish people more generally. It is the clearest and most direct
formulation in the Jewish religious texts of the fundamental principle of Divine Providence. This passage, as predictive “writing on the wall”, was also cited to me by Charedim specifically in the context of the Jewish Holocaust during the Second World War.

The same Breslov Chasid with whom I was conversing sought to present evidence of Divine Providence at work by citing incidents from the Israel-Arab Six Day War of 1967, and the First Gulf War of 1990. He spoke of the “miracle” of bombs, dropped apparently by hand from Israeli fighter planes, successfully hitting Arab aircraft (presumably Syrian and/or Egyptian) sitting on the ground in 1967, and of a Torah scroll deflecting a Scud missile fired upon Israel from Iraq in 1990, in such a way that apparently saved lives. Thus, he concluded, it is G-d who runs the world, and He who decides the outcomes of wars. An Israeli army that is strong, yet does not keep the commandments, will forever be poised on the brink of disaster and defeat.

The second Charedi objection to military service concerns who is drafted into the military, and the environment that they are subjected to within that organisation. This point moves from the metaphysical concerns of the previous objection, and into very real-world anxieties regarding manipulation and interference—potentially on a massive scale if conscription were to be applied across the board—in the highly sheltered and segregated lives of young Charedi men. My Chasidic friend firstly explained that in Biblical times, only those with a truly strong faith in G-d went to war for Israel; those who were afraid through lack of faith were sent home. Similarly, one who “paused between putting on his hand and his head tefillin”—a metaphorical sign of weak faith—was also sent home. The warriors were not young men of eighteen years, but older and more experienced in their service of G-d. And the head echelons of the Israelite army were said to be men of the highest faith, fearless and doubtless in their cleaving to the Almighty.

This preamble was used to introduce perhaps the major Charedi fear regarding conscription; that devout young men at the very impressionable age of eighteen would be taken from their sacred yeshivot (the plural of yeshivah) and their carefully controlled homes—wherein television, Internet, sexual exposure to girls, and so forth were vigilantly kept out—and be plunged into a secular free-for-all; thrown into the very camp of the irreligious “barbarians” who stand at the gates of the Charedi world (see Chapter 4.2). This would be an experience from which these young men—and indeed, eventually the entire Charedi community—would never recover. This objection, then, essentially concerns social reproduction and the transmission of the religion from one generation to the next (the process of transmission and the mechanisms deeply embedded in the Jewish religion in
order to guarantee it are discussed in depth in Chapter 4.4). The military today, my Breslov friend concluded, does not speak with rabbis on the matter of drafting Charedi youth, but acts unilaterally. Ultimately, he opined, the public furore over this matter—reaching a peak in 2014—was about political manoeuvring and the obtaining of Knesset election votes.

These criticisms just presented summarise the typical Breslov, and more generally the Charedi, conception of the matter of military service for Charedi men. It must be emphasised, however, that the Safed Breslov community contains within it a spectrum of personal views regarding this topic, and the undertaking itself of voluntary military service (as opposed to obligatory conscription imposed by the State) is certainly not seen as abhorrent. Indeed, several Breslov Chasidim have served in the army—usually prior to their committing to a religious path, although in rarer cases during and even after this process. A very atypical few continued to undertake reserve duty, even after subscribing to the Breslov way of life. Furthermore, in one particular instance that I am aware of, the Rav (Rabbi Kenig, the head rabbi of the community) himself recommended that one of the sons of a core Breslov family be encouraged to do military service. This, however, was only because that son had been voluntarily and by stages departing from the Charedi path and the religious yeshivah framework for some years (see discussion on such youth in Chapter 3.10); presumably, then, military service was seen as the lesser of various evils that his short- to medium-term future might hold for him.

It must also be pointed out that the Israel Defense Forces have for decades run a program for the enlisting of Zionistic religious youth (“kipot srugot”—see Chapter 3.2), recruited organically from their yeshivot institutions. In recent years, furthermore, efforts have been made to accommodate specifically the Charedi sector within the military’s ranks, by establishing a battalion especially for this purpose. The unit is called Netzah Yehuda, meaning “Judah’s Eternity”, and is a full infantry battalion, trained to the same standards as other units of its kind. It was established, and continues to be run in conjunction with, recognised Charedi rabbis (who are, clearly, Zionistic in their leanings)—this is in some contrast to the conclusion of the aforementioned Chasid, that “the military does not speak with rabbis on the matter of drafting Charedi youth, but acts unilaterally”. The Netzah Yehuda website (Nahal Haredi Netzah Yehuda Battalion, undated) gives the unit’s mission statement as:

- To provide for the unique spiritual needs of Haredi youth, while also enabling them to participate in the defense of Israel.
• To provide these young men with the educational and professional qualifications needed to achieve economic independence.

• To provide the Haredi community with a unique opportunity to share the nation’s military burden as well as bridging the social gap between the secular and religious populations in Israel.

During my fieldwork period, a number of young friends in Safed voluntarily joined the Netzah Yehuda Battalion. Some of these youths came from Breslov families, although not ones that could be described as “core adherents” to Rav Kenig’s community (see Chapter 3.1). These young men chose to enlist in the army, for a couple of years, for a combination of reasons—including dissatisfaction with the prospect of a life of yeshivah/kolel study, uncertainty as to their next steps upon completing their secondary education, and indeed, a genuine sense of civic duty and a desire to do their part, arising from values that had been instilled in them since birth.

In conclusion, the lifeworlds that the typical secular and the Charedi man are embedded in are so radically different, that one by and large cannot understand the other. The secular man, himself having served in the military and now seeing his sons conscripted and in some cases their lives at risk (although largely understanding why this needs to happen) can feel only incredulity and violent indignation upon surveying the Charedi position—men who shirk their national duty, are paid by the State to sit around and apparently study all day long, and who by and large do not even pay taxes, due to their lack of taxable incomes. The Charedi man, conversely, looks at the secular man and his irreligiosity, and in his deeper moments sees it as what stands between Israel and the coming of the Messiah, with all the woes of the Jewish people in between. The Charedi man cannot comprehend how the secular man does not keep the commandments of G-d, when the Almighty has warned the Jewish people of the consequences of such disobedience, and consistently delivers on those warnings in front of their very eyes. For the G-d-fearing Charedi, the secular man is the anomaly, for it was only a few generations ago at most that the latter’s ancestors did walk in the ways of G-d, as their forefathers did for millennia. In his own eyes, the Charedi is following the tried and trusted path that was laid down by the Creator, whilst the secular man represents an abhorrent departure from it.

**Charedi Conceptions Regarding the State of Israel and the Zionist Project**

Beyond (yet intimately related to) the particular matter of Charedi views on military service lies the broader question of Charedi attitudes towards the State of Israel, and indeed, towards the Zionist project itself. As always, these attitudes lie along a spectrum, ranging from lukewarm (if not always
vocally declared) support at the one pole, through to complete rejection at the other. The most infamous examples of the latter position may be found with the Neturey Qarta (Aramaic for “Guardians of the City”) Charedi group, located around the world but especially in Israel and the United States. Their anti-Zionist and anti-Israel actions—including, for instance, fervent support of sometimes militant Palestinian groups, and a delegation sent to Iran in 2006 to meet with and express support for the regime of President Ahmadinejad—whilst itself probably representing the most extreme faction of this group, created headlines within the Jewish world, and was an example of the rabid anti-Zionist sentiment that may also be found in the midst of certain other, more mainstream groups, in the Mea She’arim suburb of Jerusalem, in the city of Bnei Brak, and in other Charedi strongholds in Israel today.

The Safed Breslov community, itself highly heterogeneous (and, due to the varied origins of its members, perhaps more so than most other Chasidic or more generally Charedi groups), probably sits on average around the centre of the two extremes just described. Conversation with the same Chasid mentioned above in the context of military service revealed an entire strata of his—and by extension, Breslov and Charedi—thinking on the theme at hand, that is not usually apparent to the secular observer. His conception of the State of Israel—despite being a bona fide citizen of it and recipient of its benefits on many different levels—was truly of an other; a dangerous and threatening alien entity, that seeks to undermine his very existence. This Chasid cited three public institutions that he considered hostile to the Charedi world: the “leftist elite” (despite the fact that a government considered truly left-wing has not been in power in Israel for over a decade), the academy (Israel’s tertiary academic institutions), and Bagatz (the Supreme Court of Israel). He felt also that the secular media was “against the Charedim”. Another Breslov Chasid summarised his view with the comment that “The State wants to eliminate religion—it’s the State against the Charedim”. The first Chasid, speaking from a position absolutely embedded in the “Torah lifeworld” (see Chapter 4.5), pointed out that hating Jews has always been a way to power, citing the Roman Titus and the German Hitler in this context. So, he explained, whilst the nations of the world, the goyim, do this to the Jews, the secular Jews in turn do the same to the Charedi sector. Interestingly, this man also dismissed certain narratives that are core to the secular Zionist worldview, and that, I would add, are supported by firm historical evidence. When I pointed out, for example, that secular socialist Zionist pioneers built the State of Israel as we know it today—through the Kibbutz movement, for instance—he questioned this “mythology”, and urged me to review the factual basis of such claims.
The entire discourse just described represents a worldview fundamentally divergent from the common secular Israeli one. It situates the core contentions between the secular and the Charedi populations of Israel—including, but not limited to, military conscription—not as isolated disagreements, but as elements at the heart of an ongoing clash of power. To the Charedim, the secular world is out to destroy them, whilst to non-religious Zionist Israelis, the Charedi world is seeking to establish a fundamentalist theocracy in their hard-won state. There is paradox on both sides, in that the very justification for the Zionist endeavour—of re-establishing a homeland for the Jewish nation in the land of Israel—has its roots in the Torah worldview, a worldview that constitutes the heart and soul of the Charedi project. Conversely, the Charedi community in Israel would not exist as anything resembling its present-day form were it not for the Zionist project. The back-and-forth, then, continues, in all of its multicoloured—including black and white—permutations.
3.4 “The Rav”—The Figurehead of the Community

The importance of the position of “the Rav” (“the Rabbi”) for the Breslov community in Safed cannot be overstated. This Rav is currently Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig, a man in his late sixties (see Figure 5 below), held in the utmost esteem by almost all members that I encountered of that community. Although, as previously discussed, the Breslov Chasidic group today does not have a Rebbe (see Chapters 2.3 and 2.4), and has not had one since the leadership of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov himself, the veneration accorded to Rav Kenig appears to be similar to that described in the literature for the major Rebbes of other contemporary Chasidic groups (for example, Poll, 1995).

Veneration of the Rav in Daily Life

On a directly observable level, members of the community rise to their feet when the Rav walks in or out of the synagogue, or when he is called as a reader to the Torah. On Shabbat he is usually given the fourth reading portion, considered an honour because, as was explained by a Breslov friend, Rabbi Nachman himself was accustomed to being called up fourth. Four is also associated with the Sefirah (Emanation) of netzach—victory and eternity—from the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, as it is the fourth emotive attribute thereof. On festive occasions Rav Kenig is similarly frequently given the most honoured roles—on Simchat Torah, for example, a festival that marks the end of the annual Torah reading cycle and the beginning of the next one, the Torah readings are auctioned off, often at very high prices. The first man called to the reading of the opening of the book of Bereshit (Genesis) is

Figure 5: The “Rav” (Rabbi) of the Breslov community in Safed, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig

The Rav is venerated by most members of the community, and serves as its beloved spiritual leader.

Photo credit: Ahron Weiner
considered a choice position, and was purchased in 2012 (in a public auction held at the synagogue just prior to the reading itself) for several thousand shekels; the position was then given to the Rav as a gift.

After each Friday evening synagogue service—welcoming in the Shabbat—a small cluster of dedicated men hang about the synagogue until the Rav is ready to walk home. They then escort him, through the narrow, twisting, stone-walled streets of the Old City, on the twenty or so minute walk to his house. Usually the Rav speaks, in a soft, gentle voice, on some religious theme, and all gather closely to catch his words. Occasionally a Chasid asks a question. The entire scene is quite magical, and the atmosphere almost mythical. Pedestrians coming the opposite way seem to sense this atmosphere as it approaches them, for they usually glide silently out of the way, often pausing to watch curiously the winding procession.

Photos or paintings of Rav Kenig hang in practically every Breslov household that I visited. On one occasion, at the house of a family of friends eating a festive meal directly after a circumcision ceremony, news that the Rav was on his way sent the householders into a flurry of activity and preparation; setting a place at the table, and telephoning friends in the neighbourhood to try to get more of them to join the feast and fill the long table. Once the Rav arrived, I felt the mood in the room shift to a self-conscious and stilted one on part of the guests, remaining so until he left. The Rav’s words are recorded at every possible opportunity (except, of course, on Shabbat and festivals, which proscribe the active use of electronic devices); at ceremonies of the sort just described, during homilies given after prayer services, and on any occasion at which the Rav speaks, it is common to see small recording devices placed in front of him.

The Rav as a Tzadiq with a Divine Mission

Closer conversations with Breslovers revealed how the community regards its leader; as a true tzadiq (see Chapter 2.3), a righteous and holy man who moves in and sees into other worlds, and is continuing his existence in this world only to help his fellow Jews on their long and arduous journey of Divine discovery. In the context of discussions regarding tzadiqim and their lofty spiritual status, friends occasionally made reference to the concept of Tzadiq Ha-Dor—the Tzadiq of the Generation, of which there is only one in a given era. A “line of souls” was spoken of, beginning with Moses, and continuing with Rabbi Shim’on Bar Yochay (to whom the Jewish tradition attributes authorship of the Zohar), and then Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (known as “the Arizal”; see Chapter 2.2). The Arizal is followed by the overall founder of Chasidism, the Ba’al Shem Tov, and then by Rabbi
Nachman. The implication of making this reference to such a progression is roughly that the soul of Moses, head of all prophets “who ever were and ever will be”, has manifested repeatedly in this world through these persons; or alternately, that the souls of these persons are directly rooted in the soul of Moses. These metaphors are derived from the broader Kabbalistic concept of “soul clusters”; that all created souls are essentially part of a tree-like, hierarchical structure, with this arrangement reflecting also the delineation of the seventy nations. At the apex of that hierarchy—the soul that contains all souls—is *Adam Rishon*; “First Man”, Adam.

The progression through five historical figures, ending with Rabbi Nachman himself, is one that appears to be quite familiar to Breslov Chasidim, and is precisely the same as cited by Green (1977) based both on traditional Hebrew Breslov as well as on modern scholarly sources. This belief—that I observed alive and well “on the ground” in the Breslov community in Safed—is an example of a theological construct manifesting as a lived reality within a given society. This lived reality, however, perhaps with some exceptions, holds only for that Breslov society itself; other groups do not hold that Rabbi Nachman was the *Tzadiq* of his Generation. Some groups within the Chabad Chasidic movement, for example, hold their last Rebbe to have been the next manifestation of the soul of Moses, and therefore the *Tzadiq* of the Generation.16

One Breslov friend, who was particularly attached to Rav Kenig, took this theme of the transmigration of Moses’ soul and the Righteous Man of the Generation to a whole new level. Whilst he did not state it explicitly, during a fairly deep conversation he pointedly hinted that Rav Kenig occupies a place in the profound sequence, following on from Rabbi Nachman. If this were the case, then the last two spots in this cosmic succession (held by Rabbi Nachman and Rav Kenig) were assigned on High particularly to the Breslov movement. When I related this conversation to another Breslov friend, also a very pious and religiously committed man, he told me that I absolutely should not write of it in this thesis as if it represented the views of the Breslov community generally. Concerning the Chasid who originally made the assertion regarding Rav Kenig, this second friend cited the concept of *ribuy orot*, meaning “multiplicity of light”—a term, as explained in the previous chapter, used within the

16 This last Rebbe of the Chabad movement, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, died in 1994. He is still regarded by many Chabad followers as the Messiah.
Charedi community to refer to an overabundance of mystical immersion and rapture, whilst at the same time implying a loss of grounding and connection to reality at some level.

**Stories Told by the Community about their Rav**

The *Rav*’s personal history is an interesting one, and two stories about him were often fondly recounted to me by members of the community; the first relating to his father’s marriage in Israel, and the second to the *Rav*’s miraculous lung transplant and recovery following a decades-long illness. Friends explained that Rabbi Elazar Kenig’s father, Rabbi Gedaliah Aharon Kenig, came to Israel from Europe in the 1950s, but had to divorce his wife to do so, for she apparently refused to accompany him. Once in the Holy Land, a neighbour in a residential suburb of Jerusalem in which he lived realised that holy greatness was present in their midst. Seeing that the Rabbi had no wife nor children, and having two daughters himself, the neighbour suggested that the Rabbi marry his eldest. The eldest girl, however, did not consent to the marriage, but the younger daughter—sixteen years of age at the time—stepped in and said that she would be willing to marry Rabbi Gedaliah. Thus the union took place, and Rabbi Elazar Kenig was born.

The second story, regarding the *Rav*’s lung transplant, was always presented as a testament to his greatness; to the idea that he moves in a world of miracles and Divine favour. Apparently the story is well known in the Safed Breslov community, and was related to me as follows: the *Rav* had a form of lung disease that progressed over eighteen years, by the end of which he could barely breath. He was placed on a long waiting list for a transplant. An eighteen year old boy committed suicide—apparently an overdose with some drug in pill form, such that his lungs remained unscathed and perfectly healthy. The *Rav* was called on Shabbat, on a standby telephone set up especially for that purpose, and the transplant operation was successfully performed. Friends recounting these events repeatedly emphasised the *Rav*’s acceptance of his own deteriorating condition, the fact that he never complained—even when the disease progressed to the point where his hands were constantly blue and cold and he had not long to live—and the fact that the non-Jewish medical staff (the operation was performed in the United States) took to addressing him with the honourific “the holy rabbi”. The co-incidence of the *Rav*’s eighteen year-old illness and the unfortunate donor’s eighteen years of age was pointed out as proof of the Jewish principle that G-d “creates the cure before he creates the illness”. On the yearly anniversary of his operation, the *Rav* hosts a thanksgiving festive meal for his community.
“Going Up” to Take Advice with the Rav

Particularly striking about the relationship between the Rav and his adherents is the tendency of some (although by no means all) of the latter to take advice with him on almost every matter and looming decision in their lives, whether minor or major. Examples include marriage choices, financial decisions, whether a son should be encouraged to study in a yeshiva or join the Israeli army, or indecisiveness over plans to knock down a wall inside a house to enlarge a room. Such dilemmas and many more are brought to the Rav on a daily basis, very often at his house; he is well-known for receiving both men and women in a never-ending stream of visitors. Usually these will come during normal daytime hours, but I have heard of alarmed calls to the Rav’s house in certain extreme situations at all hours of the night—for example, a sudden and unexpected death on Shabbat and Halakhic questions pertaining thereto, or a severe sickness requiring special intercession.

I myself was encouraged to visit the Rav (or to “go up” to him, as it is usually expressed in Hebrew). I was told that the afternoon was the best time to visit; no need for an appointment—just come and knock, and if you want (but absolutely not necessary) bring a small gift. This I did, in the form of a bottle of quality wine for Shabbat. I was greeted at the door to his house, located just off the “Meginim Square”, by the Rav’s wife; she was dressed in an appropriately severely chaste manner, with a long skirt and long sleeves, and fairly plain clothing generally. I understood that somebody was already inside with him, for I was told to wait outside, which I did for half an hour or so. During this time another visitor arrived, a lady perhaps in her forties. Sensing from her demeanour some level of worry and gravity, I suggested that she go in first, before me.

When it was finally my turn, I was ushered through the house into a room lined with books, in which the Rav sat at the side of a large wooden table; I was seated at ninety degrees to him. A young religious man—presumably from the Rav’s family and some kind of “minder” or assistant—occasionally walked in and out of the room as we spoke.

The Rav was sharp in wit, intellect and humour, with a kindly smile and piercing bright eyes. However—and I can only, of course, give my personal subjective assessment here—I was certainly expecting something “profound” from the interaction. Perhaps I was hoping that a deep part of myself would be lit-up by this man, whom some regard as a Realised Being, regularly closer to touching the Infinite than most of the rest of us. Somewhat disappointingly, I experienced no such sublime awakening. Yet, the visit provided real insight into the love and veneration accorded to this man, and into his absolutely central position within the Breslov community.
The level of attachment to and personal involvement with the Rav of each individual man in the Breslov community varies in practice along a broad spectrum. There are some who have little daily contact with him, and would only really exchange a brief word on Shabbat (there is a custom at the conclusion of the Friday evening synagogue service for the men of the community to file by the Rav’s table at the front of the synagogue and wish him a “gut Shabbos”; Yiddish for “good Shabbat”). At the other end of the spectrum are those who have made the Rav a centrepiece of their lives, in some ways reminiscent of the guru or “holy man” traditions found especially in India, tribal Africa and Siberia (Green, 1977). For these people, attaching oneself to the tzaddiq is holy of holies, and a few make the connection between this attachment and the core Chasidic concept of bitul, meaning nullification of ego. Bitul is an important objective of quietistic (“… the path towards G-d via the abandonment of the self…” ) religious traditions, for according to such traditions the ego itself is one of the foremost obstacles to union with the Divine (Uffenheimer, 1993, p. 65). A key method to aid in nullifying the ego is to relinquish one’s personal decision-making process, in matters minor or major as described above, to another person—and what better other to select for this purpose than the Tzaddiq of the Generation, or at least one’s venerated Rav?

Of the friends whom I observed living their lives at least to some extent in this manner, and with whom I was able to have discussions, I would say that the majority did so without this meta-understanding of what they were doing. For them, relinquishing their personal autonomy to the Rav appeared to be a matter of “he knows best”, “this is the right way to live”, and of course, “this is G-d’s will”. With such people, and especially alongside their standard Charedi adherence to the letter of the Halakhic Law in all matters, the practice of attaching to the tzaddiq in this way would make a fruitful subject-matter for deeper psychoanalytic enquiry, in terms of the structures of the mind that produce and are in turn reproduced by such significant self-abnegation (see Chapter 4.6). Furthermore, and although this relinquishing of personal autonomy to the Rav is done by each individual of their own free volition—to be negotiated anew from day to day and decision to decision—the political implications of such a practice, in terms of the Rav’s control of the community, is not to be underestimated. A minority of friends, however, did appear to be engaging in this practice from a place of deep awareness of the mechanism just described—that the very act of relinquishing at least some measure of control to an other is an important step on the path to achieving bitul.
In stark contrast to his dazzling conception as a tzadiq, as held by most of the Breslov community, I came across certain friends who cast the Rav in a very negative light indeed, through two major themes. My key sources for probing these topics were the “younger generation”—the children (teenagers and young adults) of Breslov Chasidim, some of whom I formed close friendships with. Several of them spoke openly about these negative themes, and even taking into account any personal agendas and perhaps “immature outlook” (due to age, although I do not hold that chronological age is directly correlated with maturity) that these friends had, I was able to corroborate independent accounts to an extent that left me with little doubt as to the existence of a solid factual basis to their stories. The first theme involves the Rav’s “interference”, as they called it, in the family life of members of the community. I was told that many of the women in the community “hang on the Rav’s every word”, to the extent that when their husbands have differing ideas on fundamental issues, the women tend to side with the Rav’s worldviews and pronouncements. I speak here, of course, in very generalised terms about the “women”, and clearly every individual case has its own characteristics; yet this was the general picture painted for me. Friends went on to explain that this interference has resulted in divorces, and in families (at least one specific family was named) leaving the Breslov community and Safed altogether, after being told by the Rav that, “You no longer have a place here!”. This phrase in Hebrew (ein lekha maqom kan!) was repeated to me in certain humorous contexts, although in a barbed manner, and with a clearly derogatory stance towards the Rav.

The second, and more serious, domain in which the Rav was cast in a negative and in some cases derisory light had to do with the handling of a case of child sexual molestation at the Breslov boys school, “Magen Avot” (see Figure 6 below). The reports of molestation implicated one particular teacher, who apparently fled (or was “compelled to leave”, as one friend put it) to England. These reports of molestation also emerged in a number of stories in the mainstream Israeli print and television media—including Channel 1 News and the leading broadsheet “Haaretz” newspaper—in 2009 (Ashkenazi, 2009; Kraus, 2009). My purpose in writing here, however, is not investigative but ethnographic; I am interested in perceptions within the Breslov community of events that transpired, and how those perceptions cast the Rav—for some—in a radically different light compared to his veneration as a tzadiq by the faithful. I therefore limit this discussion primarily to direct ethnographic material that I collected in Safed, as opposed to any kind of investigation concerning what actually took place.
I was told (in at least one case, by a friend who was able to speak first-hand) that some schoolboys were raped, and others touched inappropriately, by this particular teacher. The core issue with the senior management of the school, and by extension with the upper hierarchy of the Safed Breslov community (for they are essentially one and the same, with the Rav at the apex) was the handling of the case—there was never any suggestion that this senior management was directly involved in the acts themselves, only that it managed the situation in a very poor manner. Friends related to me from first-hand experience that the entire affair was brushed under the carpet; that initially their claims were dismissed out of hand and ignored, and that they were shouted at (by the school principal and by the Rav himself) to “stop making up stories”. This approach continued, with the teacher in question apparently still working at the school, until the story could no longer be contained, and it “exploded” into the mainstream Israeli media. One friend related to me a play on words that has since become common, regarding the name of the school Magen Avot, which means “The Shield of the Fathers”. The children would say, “aval mi magen al habanim?!”; the two phrases fit sonorously with each other because the words avot (fathers) and banim (sons/boys) go together, like “father and son”. The second phrase means, “But who shields the sons?!”

When I candidly raised this topic with an older friend, part of the administrative echelon of the Breslov community, and fairly close to the Rav and well-respected, they in turn countered with yet a different picture. The molestation itself was acknowledged—and, of course, condemned in the strongest of terms—but I was told that many of the children (either direct victims, or who had
second-hand knowledge), and who today damn the Rav and his management for it, came from “broken homes”, and had many pre-existing problems. Furthermore, apparently many people outside of the Safed Breslov community became incited against the Rav and the school as a result of the affair, and this friend even stated that “people did criminal things”, including “paying children to spin false accusations”. Another Breslov friend addressed the issue of the Rav’s handling of the entire affair by firstly emphasising that Magen Avot, the boys school, is the cherished “baby/darling” of the community, and of Rav Kenig and his brothers who lead it. He then pointed out that neither he himself, nor the man next to him, have direct knowledge of what happened, and especially regarding an affair so serious, where rumours fly, every case must be thoroughly investigated. This friend did say that, “… there is one thing that I do know—certainly he [the Rav] would not do anything that is contradictory to the ‘good’ [of the community] or that goes against ‘Judaism’”.

The Breslov Chasid went on to cite the Biblical account of Korach’s (one of the leading members of a prestigious priestly family) rebellion against Moses. My friend explained that in that situation, one just had to look at who the people were, in order to decide who was on the side of good and who on evil. Similarly, regarding the Magen Avot affair, he pointed out that it was the Rav versus a “certain ‘gang’/group”, leaving the remainder unsaid. In this vein, and directly related to the first contentious theme just discussed regarding the Rav—that of his interference in the lives of certain families in the community and the apparent ostracism of particular individuals—this friend commented that the Rav also “removed some stray weeds (asabim shotim)” from the community. Some individuals or groups left of their own accord, whilst others—such as a group that was “using drugs”—were “forced out”.

Another Breslov friend expressed sentiments similar to the previous ones just related. He began by stating that he couldn’t believe a word of the idea that the Rav somehow knew of the molestation going on yet did not act to stop it. He then also went on to emphasise the idea of hearing both sides of any story thoroughly, yet continued to venerate the Rav, highlighting his apparently exemplary character traits, spiritual attainment, compassion, love for the community, and so forth. This man spoke very deeply about Rav Kenig and clearly felt much love towards him. He concluded the topic by explaining that the sages spoke of “divisiveness” as being akin to “fire”, and that one should stay well-away from it. The affair was, he lamented, a very difficult period in general for the Breslov community.

I end my ethnographic report of this dreary chapter in the history of the Safed Breslov community here, except to add that at least one friend who was directly involved emphasised to me that his
abhorrence is not of Breslov—the movement and its worldview and teachings generally, which he still feels attached to, and indeed, loves—but of Rav Kenig and other leaders of the Safed Breslov community specifically.

This chapter has shown that the construal of Rav Kenig by the Breslov community in Safed is variable, depending on who is asked and when. The majority of the community appear to regard him with the highest reverence, a small few perhaps taking this veneration to the extreme concept of Tzadiq Ha-Dor, the Tzadiq of the Generation. A minority, however, who have largely dissociated themselves from the community for the reasons described above, regard him with disgust and indeed some measure of hate. Of the venerating majority, some attach themselves to the Rav, in a daily sense, with great energy and commitment, whilst others associate directly with him less frequently. Without doubt, he is absolutely the figurehead of the community, and a key force in guiding its trajectory.

***
3.5 Shabbat

“Shabbat” denotes the last day of the week, on which G-d is understood to have “rested” after the work of Creation. In commemoration of this event Shabbat is a holy occasion in the Jewish tradition, involving an array of ritual observances that come in addition to those of the ordinary weekdays. Particularly prominent on this holy day—and directly related to the metaphor of G-d’s creative efforts and subsequent “rest”—are the complex restrictions on performing creative work (*melakhah*), giving rise to the expression of “keeping the Shabbat”, as opposed to “breaking” it. Judaism delineates, based on activities that were performed in the Temple of Jerusalem, thirty-nine categories of creative work that are expressly forbidden on Shabbat. Other religious festivals—including Rosh Hashanah (the New Year), *Sukot* (Tabernacles), *Pesach* (Passover) and *Shavuot* (the Festival of Weeks)—constitute “Shabbat-like” days, with many of the same prohibitions applying on these occasions too.

**Shabbat as a Metaphysical Concept—a “Time outside of Time”**

More than “just” a holy day that occurs once a week, however, and indeed, not only as a day of the week but as an entire metaphysical idea—evoking a time and space outside that of the ordinary, day-to-day world—Shabbat is a concept of paramount importance in Judaism, to a degree that cannot be over-emphasised. Schwartz (2004, pp. 306-307), discussing from the perspective of *Midrash* (Torah exegesis, including Jewish homiletic stories and mythologies), writes:

> The Sabbath was last to be created, but first in God’s mind. It was the culmination of all creation. Indeed, everything exists for the sake of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the source of all blessings.

> Before God gave the commandment of keeping the Sabbath to Israel, He said to Moses:
> “I have a good present in my secret chambers. The name of that present is ‘Shabbat’. Go tell the people that I now wish to give that present to them.”

Shabbat is a major and venerated occasion amongst the Breslov group in Safed, and indeed—to greater and lesser extents—across the entire city. Breslov Chasidim speak of it as a “time outside of time”, during which the Jew is said to receive a second, “Shabbat soul”; this second soul is a well-established belief in the Jewish religious world. Apart from constituting an important Kabbalistic notion, the idea of Shabbat as a different time and space is almost palpable in the Charedi neighbourhoods of Safed, and certainly within the Breslov Nachal Novea synagogue, as the sun sets
on Friday evening and the holy day begins\textsuperscript{17}. Schwartz (2004, p. lvi) discusses this temporal alteration associated with the Shabbat (and indeed, also with all Jewish religious occasions), explaining that “During the Sabbath, for example, a distinct change takes place in the perception of time. There is a shift from the temporal to the eternal, as the focus changes to contemplation of the divine. In this sacred time a sense of holiness pervades the world, and the meaning of every action is magnified”.

\textit{Physical Space is also Altered on Shabbat}

In addition to changed conceptions and possibly perceptions of time, the importance of physical spaces is also emphasised on Shabbat. One of the classic \textit{Halakhic} stipulations on the holy day is the prohibition against carrying an object from a private to a public domain, or vice versa. The Talmud contains lengthy discussions as to what constitutes each type of space; in simple terms, however, a private domain is one’s home and the property that it sits on, extending to a fenced boundary, whilst the public domain is everything outside of such private domains. On Shabbat, therefore, beyond the clothes that one is wearing, no object may be carried out of or into the house (on the way to or from a synagogue, for example); this restriction applies to house keys, books, baby strollers, and all other conceivable physical objects. Rabbinic law has established, nonetheless, a method to enable the carrying of objects on Shabbat, through the use of an \textit{eruv chatzerot} (“mixed courtyards/domains”; \textit{eruv} for short). The \textit{eruv} refers to a continuous, unbroken physical boundary that simulates, as it were, the boundary of a single private domain, thereby allowing objects to be carried within it. Almost all cities and towns in Israel that contain Jewish residents (certainly including Safed) are bounded by an \textit{eruv}. Most \textit{eruvim} (the plural of \textit{eruv}) make use of existing structures—such as houses, fences, and electricity poles and wires—to delineate their unbroken boundary. In places where there is no pre-existing boundary one is added, usually by means of a wire stretched between poles. Once an \textit{eruv} is established and declared \textit{Halakhically} compliant, Jews may carry within it on Shabbat. In numerous cities around the world that contain large religious Jewish communities, \textit{eruvim} have been built (or more accurately, delineated through existing structures and then the missing pieces filled in) around the Jewish hub/s; for example, in Sydney, London and New York.

This crucial importance attributed to physical \textit{boundaries} on Shabbat—even though at a physical level they are often symbolic only—points to the significance of boundaries in Judaism on a more

\textsuperscript{17} In contrast to the secular standard of midnight to midnight, the Jewish day runs from sunset to sunset.
abstracted, as well as at a metaphysical/mystical, level. In an abstracted sense, I suggest that the private/public delineation represents the Halakhah itself; a set of prescriptions and proscriptions marking boundaries between—as discussed at length by Durkheim (2001 [1912]) in regards to religion more generally—the sacred and the profane (see Chapter 4.1). The Halakhic Law itself is in turn delineated by the boundaries formed by the outlines of the sacred Torah letters against their background; this idea—that the forms of the Torah letters constitute “black fire”, engraved upon the “white fire” of the parchment upon which they are written—is an important Kabbalistic concept.

From a metaphysical/mystical perspective, the public/private domain stipulations, as well as the eruv, may undoubtedly be explained by Judaism in terms of the structure of Creation, supernal energies, and so forth; indeed, such themes were touched upon several times in Breslov study sessions that I attended. The demarcation of a new kind of physical space by an eruv, enabling the devotee to perform (or be exempted from) particular acts and religious requirements within it, is also somewhat reminiscent of “magic circles” in Pagan and New Age traditions (see Chapter 4.3 on “Judaism and Shamanism”).

A Modern-Day Metaphor for Shabbat

The Jewish conception, from a metaphysical perspective, of Shabbat, and the Halakhic prohibitions on creative work during this non-ordinary time, were incorporated by a religious friend and myself into a somewhat unusual yet apt metaphor, based on the iconic 1999 Wachowski Brothers film, The Matrix. The “projected reality” of Olam Hazeh (“This World”) is akin to the “Matrix”, a computer program that simulates reality for every member of the human species. Because it is the devotee’s purpose during Shabbat to go beyond this Matrix to something more essential, religious Jews refrain from interfering in any way with the “computer program” itself; in other words, they do not manipulate the essential structures underlying the projected reality. These essential structures may not be deduced from the structure of the ordinarily observable physical world; they underlie and give rise to that physical world, but are more subtle and complex than it. The instructions on how to refrain from manipulating the world, therefore, cannot be inferred by human beings alone, but rather, are to be found in the Halakhah as handed down by the Almighty (the “Programmer”, so to speak). These instructions are the prohibitions of Shabbat, based on, as explained above, the thirty-nine categories of creative work that were performed in the Temple of Jerusalem. These categories are relevant in this way because the Temple represented the ultimate bridge in Olam Hazeh between the physical and the spiritual realms.
The Observance of Shabbat by the Breslov Group in Safed

By observing the Shabbat prohibitions (as well as prescriptions), the Jew is understood not only to be aligning his or her energy with and respecting the holy day, but also generating the Shabbat, in terms of their personal phenomenological experience, and actually even—in a more general sense—triggering it. The core Jewish concept of events in Heaven being triggered and enabled by the actions of the Jews on Earth is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.5. A Breslov Chasid described his experience of Shabbat as “a lifting of all the pressure and stress of the day [the often frenetic Friday, filled with preparations for the holy day] as Shabbat settles in”. A profound change falls over Safed as the sun sets on Friday; shops close, the roads empty of traffic, and the streets are filled with men, women and children dressed in their finest, making their way to the many synagogues that dot the city. As discussed in Chapter 3.2, some Chasidic men incorporate certain special elements into their dress on this occasion, including the long, striped gown/coat figuratively referred to as a “zebra”, and the fur hat called a shtrnemel.

The Nachal Novea synagogue is filled to capacity on the qabalat Shabbat (Reception of the Shabbat) synagogue service on Friday evenings, as well as—to a slightly lesser extent—during the shacharit prayers on Saturday mornings. This is only partially because almost the entire Safed Breslov community are present; the packed-to-capacity hall (with standing congregants lining the walls) is equally a function of the popularity of the Breslov synagogue as a Shabbat destination for visitors and tourists from outside of Safed. These guests range from secular Israelis seeking—as a result of curiosity or of Divine calling to their Jewish spiritual spark, depending on their own or the Breslov perspective respectively—an “authentic”, “mystical” Shabbat experience, through to religious Jews from the world over passing through the city. The reputation for popularity and hospitality of Nachal Novea on these occasions is matched perhaps by only one other place of worship in Safed, the nearby Beirav Synagogue that follows the tradition of the musical, “New Age” (as described by some) Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. Hospitality to guests, generally a fundamental Jewish precept understood to have originated with the Biblical Abraham himself, takes on extra significance on Shabbat. It is considered a highly meritorious deed to invite one or more guests, especially strangers, into one’s home for a Shabbat meal, and this is something that many Breslov families—despite their relative poverty in many cases—undertake almost every week.

During the Saturday morning service, the entire weekly parashah (portion) of the Torah is read, in at least seven sections (although more may be added by subdividing or repeating passages). A different
man is called up (the process is known as an *aliyah*) for each section, and this calling-up is considered a great honour. As explained in the previous chapter, the *Rav*, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig himself, is usually given the privileged—in the Breslov tradition—fourth section. Just before the conclusion of Shabbat *ma’ariv* (Friday evening) and *shacharit* (Saturday morning) services, it is customary in the Jewish tradition to make a blessing over wine (*qidush*) in the synagogue, in imitation of the more standard blessing over the same performed by the head of the household in the home. In the Breslov Nachal Novea, the emphasis of these synagogue *qidush* ceremonies is on the younger generation; children—from as little as a few years in age up to early teens—gather at the front of the hall, the cantor recites the appropriate prayers, and the children give the standard responses (such as “amen”) in an enthusiastic, unified singsong. The social-reproductive importance of such a practice was not lost on the ethnographer; Chapter 4.4 on “The Torah and the Jewish Religion as a Self-Replicating Entity” gives an in-depth discussion on this point.

At the conclusion of each prayer service a classic Breslov dancing circle, as discussed in Chapter 3.3, is formed by the men of the synagogue. Many guests join in, with those standing on the side looking on with uncertainty—regarding whether to participate or not—often pressed into the circle and taken on its journey. Because of the large number of people present, and in contrast to the standard and relatively small circles during the week, these Shabbat processions turn into long snaking chains, filling every square metre of the synagogue hall, and lasting for at least the length of an entire song and sometimes more.

**Three Feasts on Shabbat**

Food is of prime importance on Shabbat, and three feasts are traditionally eaten during the holy day; on Friday night after synagogue, around midday on the Saturday following *shacharit* prayers, and the “Third Feast”—of particularly mystical significance—in the late Saturday afternoon. As with clothing, religious Jews will do their utmost to put the finest food and drink they can afford onto the table on these occasions; this is in keeping with the Shabbat precept of “… a people saturated with delight”, a phrase taken from a Shabbat prayer (*The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Nusach Sefarad [Hebrew and English]*, 2005, p. 379). At the Breslov Nachal Novea, as with many other synagogues, the second, midday feast in the home is directly preceded by a relatively lighter meal served in the synagogue itself, immediately following the *shacharit* service. This synagogue meal, attended at Nachal Novea by the men only, consists of plates of *qugul* (a traditional baked Ashkenazi dish made from noodles or potatoes) and sweetcakes, as well as carbonated soft drinks. Towards the end of this
light meal congregants cluster at the front of the synagogue where the Rav sits at the head table, in order to hear him speak. His sermons invariably concern religious themes—typically conveyed through specifically Breslov teachings—but also occasionally extending to current affairs. In the time I spent listening, the seminal Tales of Rabbi Nachman (Sipurey Ma’asiyot) was the most common text that the Rav read from verbatim. His voice is usually soft and low, and the audience strains to catch his words.

Breslov Chasidim do not eat the Third Feast in their home, but rather communally at Nachal Novea. By that point in the Shabbat, the many guests (non-Breslovers) who were present the previous night and the following morning will have departed the synagogue, leaving the core Breslov community seated with their Rav in the most intimate gathering of the holy day. In the Jewish tradition, each Shabbat table during the three meals is considered a miniature version of the Temple of Jerusalem itself. Many customs relating to the table are therefore derived from rituals in the Temple—for example, the iconic chalah (braided loaf or loaves of bread) on Shabbat parallels the “showbread” of the Temple. In some contrast to this elevated status of the table, however, and for clearly logistical purposes, all meals served in the Nachal Novea complex are done so with disposable plastic table coverings, and disposable plastic plates, cups, cutlery and serving dishes. At the conclusion of each meal, the entire contents of the several dozen tables in the synagogue are emptied directly into large garbage bags and deposited into bins. Questions of environmental awareness around this practice, in a community that professes a strong connection to nature, are discussed in Chapter 3.7.

**The Sanctification of the Moon at the Conclusion of Shabbat**

In the first half of any given Jewish month (as is Halakhically stipulated), Breslov Chasidim perform an additional practice at the very conclusion of the Shabbat (after Saturday evening prayers—technically already constituting Sunday) that is once more reminiscent of “shamanic” ritual (see Chapter 4.3). This practice is the Sanctification of the Moon (qidush halevanah). Congregants file out of the synagogue onto an outdoor balcony and perform the ritual, beginning with a formal greeting to one another using the words shalom aleikhem (“peace be unto you”), to which the man greeted responds aleikhem hashalom (“unto you be peace”)—this is done with at least three different fellow congregants, selected at random. The devotee then looks at the moon and recites the ritual blessing, after which Biblical passages are read.
Conclusion

A key theme of Dossey’s (1993, pp. 19, 57-81) comprehensive work on the scientific study and theoretical basis of prayer is that whatever metaphor is used to explain the efficacy of prayer (for which, Dossey argues, there is ample and rigorous evidence)—and regardless of whether that metaphor involves a god who “answers” prayers, a means for an individuated mind to access universal Mind, or anything in between—the unconscious plays a key role in all prayer-related processes and outcomes. In discussing this concept, moreover, the author refers not only to the unconscious of a single individual, but dwells also on the idea of a shared universal dimension, involving all human beings or perhaps all of existence, a dimension that lies at the heart of Being and its mysterium tremendum. Dossey (1993, p. 19) goes on to write, “And for some people the most effective way to reverse illness is sometimes to focus primarily on being, following the Formula of No Formula…”

These themes are congruent with Jewish metaphysical conceptions regarding Shabbat. At its simplest level, Shabbat is a mere day of the week, yet it is also far more than that. Shabbat is a higher reality of time and space; in ordinary states of consciousness the individual may have little or no access to the “Shabbat space”, yet that space informs (and according to a stronger metaphor, determines) all of their mundane reality. As discussed above, Shabbat is “the source of all blessings”; this idea is consistent with Dossey’s (1993) conception of the unconscious (or perhaps, the superconscious) region from which prayers are “answered”. The suggestion that in some instances the best course of action regarding illness may be “the Formula of No Formula” is strongly reminiscent of the “Matrix” metaphor used above to describe correct behaviour for a Jew on Shabbat; it is a time of non-doing, of not seeking to manipulate the parameters of the virtual-reality Matrix, so to speak, but rather of “resting”, and taking on a stance in relation to G-d of “Thy will be done” (Dossey, 1993, p. 87).

Recall from the Midrashic story quoted at the beginning of this chapter that Shabbat was G-d’s “good present”, that he gave to the Jews from His “secret chambers”. In Maussian terms (Mauss, 1954 [1925]), therefore, Judaism would describe Shabbat—a metaphysical concept, a day of the week, and a series of religious activities—as G-d’s total prestation to His Chosen People. Shabbat bears metaphysical symbolism at all levels of the Jewish tradition, as well as important social and practical implications for devotees. From a metaphysical perspective, Judaism holds that Shabbat represents one sixtieth of the “World to Come”; it is a time and space outside of the ordinary world, in which the Jew receives a second, Shabbat, soul. In more practical terms, Shabbat impacts prayer, dress and eating practices. It facilitates a coming together of the community, as well as an extra-enthusiastic
extension of hospitality to guests. For the religious Jew, all commerce comes to a halt on this day, as the use of money is prohibited, and indeed, discussing or even thinking about business or financial matters is also proscribed. A Breslov friend aptly described Shabbat as the “hub that holds the spokes of the wheel [of Judaism] together”.

***
This chapter discusses a number of religious practices that I observed amongst the Breslov group in Safed, constituting ethnographic material that is not presented in other chapters of this Part (III. Ethnography) of the thesis. Some points are initially made regarding several Jewish religious festivals, followed by a description of a Breslov wedding, as well as of customs associated with circumcision. Two additional practices are then discussed; the copious use of *miqvaot* (ritual immersion pools)—on a daily basis—by the men of the community, and the recitation of a series of ten Psalms, collectively known as *Ha-Tiqun Ha-Klali* (“The General Rectification”), constituting another daily and also iconic Breslov practice.

Generous feasting and drinking are central features of all Jewish religious occasions, excepting, of course, fast days such as Yom Kippur (on such occasions, however, a feast is still undertaken, in a preparative sense before the fast and afterwards in order to break it). A fairly clichéd Jewish joke runs, “They tried to kill us. They failed. Let’s eat!” In terms of the observance of religious festivals, Shabbat practices were described in the previous chapter, Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) is discussed in Chapter 3.9, whilst some aspects of the synagogue ritual during the commemorative/harvest festival of *Sukot* (Tabernacles) are described in Chapter 3.7. The commandment to become highly inebriated on the festival of Purim, and the manner in which it was faithfully observed by Breslov Chasidim at Nachal Novea, is discussed in Chapter 3.10.

**The Kaparot Rite on Yom Kippur**

On Yom Kippur the Breslov community engages in a practice called *kaparot* (“atonement”), involving blessings made over a live chicken swung around one’s head in a prescribed fashion, and the subsequent ritual killing of the bird by a *shochet* (a certified religious slaughterer). Although receding in modern Jewish communities—or the live bird replaced with money or fish—this ritual is still carried out across many Charedi groups. Its purpose is to transfer, as it were, the sins of the Jew to the animal, which is then killed in his or her place. One Breslov friend explained that almost every single Jew, when they are judged on the Day of Judgement (which is the first day of the New Year, Rosh Hashanah), deserves—at least according to the letter of the Law—severe punishment and probably death for their transgressions during the previous year. In the ten days following this Judgement—called the Ten Days of Awe (falling between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur)—the individual may still, however, redirect the course of G-d’s justice, by means of genuine repentance and through rites such as *kaparot*. 
One evening prior to Yom Kippur a *shochet* and his crew set up on the street, not far from the Breslov District in Safed. Almost certainly, this ritual was being repeated at that very same time—or a day previous or later—in other locations around the city. Bird cages, containing hundreds of chickens in total, are stacked in the street one upon the other. The rite is performed by men and women alike, although sometimes the husband uses a single chicken for his whole family, or just he and his wife take a chicken each, with the understanding that their practice extends to their children as well. The swinging and blessing is done by each individual, but the actual killing is carried out—as required by *Halakhah*—by the *shochet* himself, using a razor-sharp knife drawn across each animal’s neck. I observed one *shochet* checking his knife for any imperfections prior to beginning the work, with this inspection constituting just one of the numerous *Halakhically* mandated stipulations regarding the kosher slaughter of animals. It was explained to me that following the ritual, the dead chickens are processed just as they would be in a kosher slaughterhouse, and the meat given to the poor as charity.

Not all Breslovers engage in this practice of ritual slaughter; some replace it—as mentioned above—with fish or money; these items are similarly given to the poor at the conclusion. Yet other members of the Breslov community are present at the chicken gathering but express distaste for and do not perform the blood ritual; they explained that, having done it for several years, they are now content to use substitutes.

*The Prohibition against Chametz (“Leaven”) and its Social Implications on Passover*

A key element of *Pesach* (Passover)—indeed, almost its very definition—is abstinence across the seven days of the festival from eating *chametz* (“leaven”), a word derived from the Hebrew root denoting “sour” or “acidic”. In the *Pesach* context *chametz* refers to grains—including various species of wheat and barley—that have been wet with water and allowed to ferment and rise. Bread constitutes the classic *chametz*, whilst its antithesis is the iconic unleavened wafer-bread of Passover, *matzah*. At a basic level of explanation, unleavened *matzah* is eaten on this week-long festival to the exclusion of leavened bread, because the Biblical Jews left Egypt in such haste that in preparing provisions for the journey they had no time to allow their bread to rise, and so produced the unleavened version instead. The *chametz/matzah* dichotomy, however, extends far more deeply in its symbolism than mere commemoration; bread and its leaven represent sin, pride and the Evil Inclination, whilst the light, unleavened *matzah* signifies freedom and liberation from such external influences, and importantly from the “ego”, which is also Kabbalistically represented (as explained to me by one who was immersed in the tradition) by the concept of “Pharaoh”. The injunctions against
leaven on Passover are found in several places in the Torah itself; in Exodus 12:15, for example, the severe consequence of eating it are given as follows: “For a seven-day period shall you eat matzos, but on the previous day you shall nullify the leaven from your homes; for anyone who eats leavened food—that soul shall be cut off from Israel, from the first day to the seventh day [of Passover]” (The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 163).

Chametz foods, then, are anathema during Passover, not only in terms of being eaten, but also their very presence in the home (unless they are appropriately segregated; see on). In part because of the monopoly of Israel’s Rabbinic authorities on kashrut (kosher) certification, Pesach impacts Jewish food businesses country-wide; all foods not stamped as being certified for Passover are held in sealed storerooms or sections within supermarkets, restaurants, and similar, and ownership of them is ritually “sold off” to non-Jews for the duration of the festival (the Halakhah also allows for this process to occur for chametz in the private home). In the Breslov community, as with all Charedi groups, the period leading up to Pesach is immensely busy, constituting an extensive “spring cleaning” (indeed, in the Northern Hemisphere this festival falls at the beginning of spring) that consists of myriad rituals and customs to ensure that not even a single crumb of chametz remains unaccounted for in the home. These rites include candlelight searches under furniture, and the traditional public burning in the streets of the last pieces of chametz just before the festival begins. Somewhat peculiarly, and as a result not of Halakhic requirement but of a presumably obsessive-compulsive practice undertaken initially by an individual or a small group of such, a practice that subsequently spread to much of the Jewish world and became established there as bona fide custom, the Breslov community in Safed—as well as much of Charedi society—cover their kitchen benches and cook-tops with copious amount of aluminium foil just prior to and throughout Passover (see Figure 7 below). This is to guard against the possibility that these surfaces, although having been thoroughly scrubbed before the festival, may still contain some trace of chametz that will contaminate food being prepared upon them (using the Passover-only utensils and cookware that almost every Charedi family, no matter how poor, possesses). In some cases, families find solutions other than aluminium foil to cover their kitchen surfaces; one Chasid explained that for some years he had been very successfully using Perspex-like boards cut to size.
The level of engagement with these preparatory tasks and the stress they elicit amongst the Breslov community is remarkable. Chasidim told that each year they forget anew the sheer scope and intensity of Passover preparations, all self-inflicted, of course. A problem that was cited, sometimes jokingly but often also seriously, in regards to this frenzied yearly lead-up to the festival was that husband and wife frequently literally fall asleep at the Pesach seder (the traditional Passover feast, in which the story of the Exodus is recounted), exhausted by their logistical efforts.

An additional characteristic of Passover, resulting from this intense preoccupation with clearing chametz, are the many different customs regarding correct preparation—at social levels ranging from the Sephardi, Mizrachi and Ashkenazi worlds, through to regional customs and down to individual family traditions—and the social consequences they reproduce. These consequences are, as pointed out to me by a Breslov Chasid, essentially divisive; since each group does things differently, and in a marked departure from the usual communal Jewish spirit on festivals, people tend not to eat at one another’s houses during Pesach, even within the same religious community.

**All Night Vigils on the last day of Sukot and on Shavuot**

On two festivals of the year Breslov Chasidim seek to stay awake an entire night, in reverence for the spiritual significance of the occasions marked. The first is the last night of Sukot (Tabernacles), heralding in the day that G-d’s final judgement for the year (after it was “decided” on Rosh Hashanah [the first day of the New Year] and “sealed” on Yom Kippur) is “delivered”. As such, judgement may still be ameliorated by a last-ditch effort; in the Breslov community this effort consists of reading
Psalms until dawn, with devotees who make it through the night usually completing the entire Book of Psalms.

The second all-night vigil takes place on Shavuot (the Festival of Weeks), coming as an atonement of sorts for what Midrashic sources describe as the failure of the Jewish people in the desert to arise on the morning of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai; needing to be aroused, instead, from their slumber by the Almighty Himself. As always, this type of statement is to be understood not only in a physical/practical, but also a psychological and spiritual, sense. On the night of Shavuot Breslov Chasidim read a text called the Tiqun Shavuot, the “Rectification/Repair of the Festival of Weeks”, although customs regarding what is to be studied throughout this night differ markedly between different groups in the Jewish world. The particular text used by the Breslovers follows the Kabbalistic custom of Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari), consisting of selections from the entire Torah, Prophets and Writings, followed by Talmud, Zohar, and similar. Not all Chasidim make it through the Sukot and Shavuot nights, but many indeed do. For them, the effects of sleep deprivation on their conscious state of mind produces a unique shacharit morning prayer experience the next day (see also Chapter 4.3). Some described it as literally “horrific”, having no thought other than their bed (!); others, however, pointed to a heightened religious experience during morning prayers, once the sun had risen and the fatigue of the night was eased.

**Life Events—Marriage**

In Charedi society, and certainly within the Safed Breslov community, the average age for marriage is quite young, with men and women often marrying before reaching their twenties. Whilst probably not to the extent of bygone generations, the level of segregation between the sexes in the Breslov group is substantial, standing in stark contrast to the modern Western dating practices of the non-Charedi population around them. A very common method, therefore, for finding potential partners is through matchmakers, whether professionals, or parents or relatives acting in such a capacity. I did not specifically hear of any “arranged marriages” per se—in the sense of one or both partners being instructed and/or coerced into accepting their parents’ choice of spouse—in the Breslov community, although such arrangements are not unheard of in other Charedi groups. Nonetheless, Breslov and Charedi dating and marriage practices are radically different from secular norms in contemporary Israel.

One Charedi friend explained that, in the case of men and women born into the religious lifeworld, once a recommendation for a match has been made (again, by a matchmaker, relatives, or similar),
the couple might meet as few as three times before deciding whether to marry or not. These meetings occur always in public places, with other people about, in order to comply with the Halakhic prohibition against yichud, meaning “seclusion”—in simple terms, a man and a woman may not be secluded together (in a closed room, for example), unless they are of immediate kin relation (grandparent, parent, spouse, sibling or child). Hotel lobbies, for instance, are popular locations for such “dates”. The same friend explained that in the case of ba’aley tshuvah (secular Jews who have become religious), most rabbis will advise a minimum of ten meetings before deciding in favour of or against marriage.

I was invited to attend a Breslov wedding held in the city of Bnei Brak, one of the Charedi strongholds of Israel, located near Tel Aviv. One reason for this choice of location was simply financial—the dedicated multi-storey complex in which the wedding was held was described by Breslov friends as a “wedding factory”; a series of separate halls that were each filled every evening (excepting on days Halakhically proscribed for marriage) by several nuptial parties in parallel, catering for the endless business of marriage in a society where families of eight children (and often more) are common. In this instance the groom and his parents were from Safed; accordingly—in a routine that the Breslov community knows well—a bus was booked for guests in order to ferry them from Safed to Bnei Brak in the early evening, and then return them home again late at night. Interestingly, upon arrival at the venue one of its most prominent features was an immense poster displayed across almost an entire external wall of the building itself. The poster declared (in Hebrew), “1943 years since our Temple was destroyed”, with a further admonition that one should never forget this fact.

The wedding proceeded with the chupah (“canopy”; also used colloquially to signify the ceremony itself) held outdoors, under the sky. It appeared very structured and formulaic; there were no personal touches or words added to the traditional Jewish ceremony on the part of the couple, and in this instance I was reminded of the “factory” analogy as mentioned above. Following the chupah, guests proceeded upstairs for the festive meal and dancing. There was no allocated seating by name, for relative to typical secular Israeli weddings, the invitation of guests to this event was a fairly laissez-faire process. In contrast to named invitations, RSVP dates, and similar for the former, the entire Breslov community was invited to this occasion, with invitation posters and cards displayed—for all to see and take prior to the date—at the Nachal Novea synagogue in Safed.

Throughout the entire night—on the bus to and fro, at the chupah, and in the hall feasting and dancing—there was almost complete separation between men and women. And yet, the eternal
cosmic dance between the Masculine and the Feminine is a complex one, never black-and-white, and engaging always far deeper than the “official line” or the “rules on paper” on their own would have one believe. On this particular occasion this assertion was demonstrated by teenage girls and young unmarried women peeking over the barrier that divided the wedding hall into segregated sections (the men on one side and women on the other), watching the men engaged in highly energised—and sometimes even acrobatic—traditional Chasidic dances to the music of a live klezmer band. The sight of those girls, dressed in modest Charedi fashion, shyly, yet also boldly, looking over the barrier—in full view of all the wedding guests—painted a picture almost as old as European Jewry itself, and rather than constituting a scandalous misdemeanour, appeared to be an organic and almost expected and necessary part of the wedding ritual as a whole. Interestingly, it would be unthinkable for the opposite to occur, in terms of Charedi men peeking into the women’s section.

In the week following the wedding there is a tradition amongst religious Jews for the newlyweds and often their close family members to be invited every night to a different household (of family or friends) in the community for a festive dinner, as well as for particular blessings (sheva brachot, the “Seven Blessings”) that are recited aloud, each time anew. I was invited to one of these gatherings, consisting of about thirty or so people, and involving much eating and dancing. The atmosphere was lovely and warm; virtually all of those present knew one another well. Men and women were still separated—eating, for example, at different tables—but, due to the level of personal familiarity, there was a little more communication and interaction between the groups, compared to what had been the case at the wedding itself.

**Life Events—Circumcision**

Here I make only a few brief points regarding the all-important Jewish custom of circumcision (*brit milah*), the eternal sign of the Covenant between G-d and the Jewish people, and also signifying a range of other spiritual beliefs (for example, the concept of an element of G-d’s Creation undergoing completion by human agency; see Chapter 4.3). The Rav of the Breslov group in Safed is a certified mohel (circumciser), and as such carries out most of the ceremonies for newly-born boys in the community himself. These ceremonies usually take place early in the morning, eight days—as is Biblically commanded—after the child is born. The early morning timing is seen as meritorious, in that Judaism teaches that one should seek to “grab” a positive mitzvah (commandment)—whatever it may be—eagerly, rather than delay; the morning of the eighth day, therefore, is the earliest and best time to perform the circumcision.
On the first Friday evening (that is, the beginning of Shabbat) after their baby is born, also constituting the first Shabbat before the circumcision ceremony, Breslov parents hold a traditional gathering called (in Ashkenazic pronunciation) a *sholom zocher* (“welcome/peace-be- unto the male”). This is an informal gathering, usually located at the baby’s home but sometimes at the house of grandparents or friends, and attended by the men of the community after the Friday evening feast in their own homes. The *sholom zocher* and its location is publicly announced at the conclusion of the evening service at the Nachal Novea synagogue. The gathering usually involves some light refreshments, conversation, and a little Torah study, and continues as an open house event until all the guests have left.

**Daily Immersion in a Miqveh Ritual Purification Pool**

The *miqveh* ritual immersion pool plays a central role for religious Jewish women, being *Halakhically* stipulated at certain times in accordance with their monthly menstrual cycle. Whilst use of a *miqveh* by men is customary and not commanded (with some religious Jewish men, for example, immersing only before Yom Kippur and on their wedding day), in the Chasidic movement it became common for men to use a ritual pool every single day, usually in the morning, prior to *shacharit* prayers. Most—although not all—men of the Breslov community in Safed follow this custom. Use of the pool is linked directly to basic Jewish concepts of purity (*taharah*) versus impurity (*tum’ah*); Chasidim emphasised to me that each time the body Below is submerged underwater, the soul Above is likewise submerged in a “spiritual” bath\(^{18}\). The daily repetition of this ritual illustrates, I suggest, the preoccupation with religious purity that seems to characterise many members of the Safed Breslov community.

Both Nachal Novea and the smaller Breslov Trisk synagogues contain *miqvaot* (the plural of *miqveh*). Whilst the latter is a fairly standard affair, albeit heated and supplied with a proper change room and showers, the *miqveh* complex at Nachal Novea was described to me by one Breslov Chasid as a “Taj Mahal” (!). It consists of several heated immersion pools, all constructed, of course, to exacting *Halakhic* specifications, and also of well-appointed—and in places ornately tiled—showers and change rooms. Entrance to both complexes is through a turnstile gate, by means of either an electronic

\(^{18}\) See also the next Chapter for discussion of the seven different *types of miqvaot* delineated by Judaism.
card obtained through subscription, or a one-off payment with coins. On Shabbat the Nachal Novea miqveh gate is left open, allowing free access to all.

The most notable miqveh in all of Safed, highly frequented by some Breslov Chasidim as well as other inhabitants of the city, and also by throngs of tourists, is the “miqveh of the Ari”, named after the seminal sixteenth century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari). This miqveh, located a short walk from the Breslov District, consists of an artificial rock pool fed by a trickling mountain spring, with the pool itself housed in a stone complex perched on the side of one of Safed’s hills. The miqveh was apparently favoured by the Ari, and apart from being a contemporary tourist highlight, some (although by no means all) religious Jews perceive immersion in it to be spiritually meritorious, somehow above and beyond an “ordinary” miqveh. There is no Halakhic basis for such an assertion, however, and those opposed to it dismiss it as a mere “superstition”.

Whilst it is usual custom at any ritual pool to “immerse”—dipping the entirely naked body completely underwater and then coming up again—three times (and often seven on Shabbat), on one occasion I observed a man immersing hundreds of times at the Ari miqveh, occupying the small pool for almost half an hour, to the consternation of some of those waiting to use it. This ritual was probably an example of one of the almost infamous tiquney Ha-Ari, “rectifications of the Ari”; a series of practices—including copious miqveh immersions, fasting, rolling in snow, and other forms of self-mortification—that the Ari and his close followers were thought to have engaged in. Such ascetic practices were used to combat what was perceived to be the Evil Inclination manifesting itself in various ways; lust and anger are often cited in this context. Whilst the “rectifications of the Ari” are usually today mentioned in mainstream Charedi circles as an item of historical interest, a small number of men—perhaps including the one just described—still apparently practice them.

*Daily Recitation of the Tiqun Ha-Klali—the “General Rectification”*

The *Tiqun Ha-Klali* (“General Rectification”) is a series of ten specific Psalms, read by the individual with certain prayers added before and after, together constituting an iconic Breslov practice. The Psalms are: 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137 and 150. According to the Breslov tradition (and indeed, adopted and practiced in other parts of Charedi society), this is a mighty and cosmic combination that many tzadiqim (righteous men) throughout the ages had sought, yet that G-d finally enabled Rabbi Nachman to discover and reveal publicly, due to his spiritual merit. The tradition teaches, according to the words of Rabbi Nachman in one of the opening prayers to the *Tiqun*, that every sin has a remedy or rectification, but that the ten Psalms together constitute a remedy for all
sins. Very commonly the *Tiqun* is mentioned—both in the literature (for example, Witztum et al., 1990, p. 125) and by men I conversed with—specifically as a remedy for sexual transgressions, and especially for involuntary nocturnal emissions. The *Tiqun Ha-Klali* is recited at least once a day by most men of the Safed Breslov community, in their own time, although on the morning of Shabbat it is done communally at Nachal Novea following *shacharit* prayers (see also Chapter 4.5 for further discussion of the *Tiqun Ha-Klali*, specifically in the context of Rabbi Nachman’s grave in Uman, Ukraine).

***
3.7 “Forests, Mountains and Finding G-d”—The Natural Environment and Hitbodedut

A close Breslov friend, the same one who for a time led nightly secluded meditation sessions in a forest near Safed (see below), conveyed an interesting teaching on the forest versus the city as different environments in which to worship G-d. The Hebrew words for forest and for city each contain the same three letters, but in different arrangements; forest is ya’ar (y-‘a-r) and city ir (‘i-y-r). Where, asked this Chasid, is the all-important letter yud (y/) located in each word? This letter, physically the smallest and most humble of the alphabet, and denoting 10 in gematriyah, is the quintessential representation of G-d in the Jewish tradition. In the word for “city” the yud is found in the middle; the letter and what it symbolises is still there, of course, but somewhat concealed. In contrast, explained this Chasid, in the word for “forest” the Divine letter is located at the very beginning, clear and plain for all to see.

The Breslov emphasis on and affinity for the natural world, especially in comparison to other Charedi Jewish groups, is particularly pronounced. Rabbi Nachman strongly emphasised, for example, the hitbodedut practice—secluded meditative prayer, in which one speaks to G-d as he or she would to another human being. He recommended its performance “…outside of town, amongst the grasses, since the grasses arouse the heart” (Hitbodedut: Secluded Meditative Prayer, undated, p27). In another expression he says: “If a person would merit hearing the songs and praises of the grasses, how each grass sings a unique song to G-d… how beautiful would be hearing such a song! Therefore, it is very beneficial to serve G-d with hitbodedut in the open field, among the growths of the earth, pouring out one’s prayers before Him sincerely” (Hitbodedut: Secluded Meditative Prayer, undated, pp. 26-27). A contemporary, glossy and modern magazine (Tzaddik: Healthy Jewish Living for Body and Soul, Fall 2011), published by the Breslov community in Safed and containing a variety of articles pertaining to Jewish tradition, law, history and Chasidism, also bears witness to this group’s affinity to nature; many of the brightly coloured, full-page photographs within it are of natural scenes, including a lush forest (p20), a stunning sunset (p37), and a flowing stream (p72). Such visual elements are relatively uncommon in orthodox Jewish publications. Green (1992, pp. 429-430) emphasises that the mystical appreciation of nature so characteristic of Rabbi Nachman was rare in the history of Jewish mysticism more generally, and that, “Nahman’s writings contain a strong romantic element, which at times reminds one that he is as much a contemporary of Wordsworth as he is a latter-day student of Luria and Cordovero…”.
This chapter relates ethnographic observations regarding the interactions, in a religious context, of
the Breslov group in Safed with nature and the natural environment. A number of miscellaneous
details are reported, followed by description and discussion of the hitbodedut practice. Two apparent
contradictions between the typical Charedi—including the Breslov group in Safed’s—lifestyle, and
the Breslov principle of respect and veneration for the natural environment, are finally discussed.

Breslov Practices Emphasising Nature and the Natural Environment

At Nachal Novea synagogue the Friday evening service welcoming the Shabbat is, as explained in
Chapter 3.5, one of the largest and most touristed in all of Safed. At the conclusion of the service at
least two people stand in the foyer holding fragrant plants for the congregants to smell as they file
out. In Judaism there is a blessing to be recited upon smelling a fragrant tree or part thereof, and a
slightly different blessing for a fragrant herb or grass. Since the recitation of any blessing at the
appropriate time is considered meritorious, vegetation from both categories is provided—usually a
mint species for the herb/grass category, and a different species for the tree—such that the men can
stop and make a blessing upon each. This plant ritual does not appear to be organised by the
synagogue authorities themselves, but rather, seems to be a regular personal initiative of sorts on the
part of a particular man and his young sons—those sons are often the ones holding the foliage and
inviting people to participate. Congregants gather around, recite the blessing, and smell the plants
with great gusto. This practice, that would perhaps seem peculiar in other Chasidic or Charedi
synagogues—and certainly on Shabbat—appears very normal and appropriate within the Breslov one.

With the coming of spring the Breslov community organises buses to take the men on a communal
excursion into the forest (see Figure 8 below), to see the first flowerings of the trees. I did not attend
this gathering, and so am unable to report on what exactly transpires there. The excursion itself,
however, is another example of the Breslov emphasis on nature and the natural environment; I am
not aware of any other Charedi group in Safed that undertakes such a practice on an annual basis.
The week-long Festival of Sukot (Tabernacles) is a particularly joyous event in the Jewish calendar. Sukot is a historical commemoration, marking the forty-year period in which the Children of Israel wandered the desert and lived in temporary shelters after their exodus from Egypt. It is also an agricultural festival, celebrating the autumn harvest, and as such is closely associated with nature. In any religious Jewish setting the festival usually has strong resonances with the natural environment; Jews spend time in a temporary, vegetation-roofed “booth” and daily wave a bundle of the Four Species (citrus fruit, palm branch, willow and myrtle) in the six directions, in an intricate ritual that is incorporated into the morning prayers. In the Breslov milieu, the natural environment is particularly emphasised for this occasion; the Nachal Novea synagogue, for example, is adorned with wreaths of plants, and the tables laid out with festive white cloths. Scores of men carry out the Four Species ritual in unison in the early morning, with the slender palm, willow and myrtle branches tied together in parallel, the citrus fruit held at their base in definite (but unacknowledged) phallic symbolism, and the entire bundle shaken—in cadence with the appropriate blessing—to “pierce evil” (as one explanation goes) in the six directions; east, south, west, north, up and down. The overall effect in the synagogue is remarkable—strikingly reminiscent, for example, of an indigenous ceremony in a rainforest, or perhaps of a historic European harvest festival, and certainly quite a departure from the customary Charedi ambience.

Breslov Chasidim frequently emphasise the importance of walking in nature, particularly for an individual who feels troubled about some matter, minor or major. Advice given on this theme often
concerns hitbodedut (see below), but not always; the benefits of a simple, peaceful forest walk in and of itself are well-recognised. One Breslov friend was particularly attached to spending time in the woods, emphasising to me the feelings of quietude and inner peace that those experiences give him. In his younger adult years, he recounted, he would often go into the forest for several consecutive days, packing a little food and water, and sleeping in a tent. He passed the time in different ways—walking, reading a little, praying, hitbodedut, resting, and generally taking in the sights. Seen outside of their religious context, these excursions are almost exactly what a modern Westerner would describe as “camping trips”. This man also encouraged me to go out into the forest as much as possible. Whilst such trips into nature are very evocative of the Breslov, and indeed, more generally Chasidic, ethos, camping out regularly for days at a time—as this friend had done—is a rarity in Breslov society. I knew of nobody else in the Safed Breslov community who actually did so, nor who even mentioned that he had done so, with such enthusiasm, in the past. This particular Chasid explained that now, however, due to the demands of family life, he would go out far less often. Conversely, though, he found that at this stage of his life, “short amounts of time in nature gave [him] what he needed”.

**Hitbodedut—Secluded Meditative Prayer**

In the course of my fieldwork, the Breslov emphasis on nature found one of its principal expressions through a practice that is considered a hallmark of Rabbi Nachman’s tradition—hitbodedut, a Hebrew word meaning “to make oneself alone/secluded”. Whilst the purpose of the practice is not related to nature per se, but rather concerns connecting to G-d in the most personal way possible, Rabbi Nachman recommended its performance in nature and at night, and he, just like his great-grandfather the Ba’al Shem Tovⁱ⁹, had ample opportunity to do so in the extensive forests that covered much of the Ukraine. Breslovers often emphasised to me that despite Rabbi Nachman’s recommendation, however, and indeed as he himself had made clear, the hitbodedut practice does not of necessity need to be performed in the forest, nor at night—any location in which the individual may be alone and free from distractions will suffice. The devotee may undertake it, for example, in an inner-city

---

¹⁹ A popular story about the Ba’al Shem Tov recounts that he would leave home to go into the forest on a Sunday, with a bag of food that his wife packed for him. When he returned home before Shabbat almost a week later, however, all of the food would still be in the bag. The message of this story is that the Ba’al Shem Tov was on such a high spiritual level, that he had little need for physical food to sustain his existence.
apartment in the middle of the day. To do it at night out in the forest, however, is apparently considered the ultimate form of the practice. The night-time aspect was explained to me, at a basic level, through the idea that at night there is less “energetic activity” in the air, as most people are asleep. On a deeper level, there are sophisticated Kabbalistic models of when different heavenly forces are in ascent and descent throughout the daily cycle (see Chapter 4.6), and accordingly, when is most favourable to engage in a practice such as hitbodedut.

The essence of hitbodedut consists of speaking out loud to G-d, as one might converse with a friend—literally a conversation with the Creator. The purpose is to pour one’s heart out to Him, giving thanks and gratitude for one’s existence and for what one has in this life, as well as asking for the things (whether material or spiritual) one feels he or she needs. Just as important, however, if not more so, is pouring the heart out to G-d by talking about one’s deepest doubts and fears, and confessing wrongdoings, thoughts and desires that are understood to be on the side of evil. Whilst this practice, and indeed the word “hitbodedut”, has become closely identified with Rabbi Nachman and the Breslov movement in general, there is no suggestion that he “invented” the method. I have heard it explained by different religious, including Breslov, friends, that direct, personal communication with G-d—and not necessarily in terms of prophetic visions, but in the day-to-day, ordinary manner that hitbodedut is so representative of—was in fact the norm in the Temple days, two thousand or so years ago and prior. Idel (1988b, p. 108) points out that the early Jewish literature on the subject treats hitbodedut as “… an activity engaged in by Moses, the prophets, and the pious men of ancient times”.

Modern Jewish teachings explain that following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the spiritual consciousness of the Jews fell to such a nadir that they were no longer able to make such personal Divine communications spontaneously (this is also in line with the doctrine of the “Decline of the Generations”). It was at this point that Rabbinic prayers and blessings—with their prescribed structures and scripted words—began to be introduced, to fill the vacuum. The practice of direct, personal communication with G-d, however, was never really abandoned, and one expression of it in a contemporary milieu is the particularly Breslov emphasis on hitbodedut.

Breslov Chasidim, as well as the copious written material available that explains “how to do” hitbodedut, emphasised to me a number of points regarding the practice. Firstly, and despite such guidance materials, there are no rules, nor a set template, as to how to go about it; as long as the individual is sincerely speaking aloud to G-d, and following their heart, they will be successful. Secondly, there is no pretence that by “confessing”, one is revealing to the Almighty something that
He is not already cognisant of; rather, some friends highlighted the *psychological* benefits of such deeply personal self-disclosure. Thirdly regarding *hitbodedut*, was the imperative to actually *speak out aloud*—even if the devotee has no idea what to say, they should begin with simple expressions; for example, telling G-d about one’s day. The sincere practitioner will be guided, such that eventually he or she will be able to pour words to their Creator from the deepest recesses of their soul. Finally, the importance of regularity in the practice—preferably at the same time and location each day—was highlighted.

The account given so far of the *hitbodedut* practice appears to be somewhat contradictory to Uffenheimer’s (1993, pp. 168-169) scholarly analysis, based largely on historical textual sources, of “contemplative prayer” in the early Chasidic tradition. Acknowledging that “Contemplative meditative prayer constituted the primary message of the spiritual world of Hasidism…”, she goes on to emphasise that the central aim of this practice was the “casting off of corporeality” in order to achieve *bitul* (nullification of self; see Chapter 3.4) and thus identification with the Divine. In its modern version, however, a key aspect of *hitbodedut* appears to be a very real concern with the ego and the world that it inhabits, in terms of the needs and wants of the former versus the concrete limitations of the latter.

It is likely, however, that this more worldly version of *hitbodedut* is only one level of the practice in contemporary times, the level of the “masses” that consist of mostly novice practitioners. The scholarly descriptions of correct contemplative prayer as aiming purely to annihilate the self originate directly from the writings of the Ba’al Shem Tov and especially of his close disciples (such as the Maggid of Mezeritch), all of whom would have been practitioners at the spiritual pinnacle of this practice. I believe that there are today, in Safed and in other places, Jews who similarly seek to connect to such lofty spiritual heights in their prayer; however, they are probably a minority. By far and away, when the majority practice *hitbodedut*—even when asking G-d to help them overcome the Evil Inclination, find faith, and be led back to Him—there is a definite sense of an individual “I”, present throughout the entire dialogue. Nonetheless, according to Breslover friends, any “level” of engagement with the prayer practice is worthy in and of itself—a man who cannot adequately feed his family, for example, prays for the means to do so. Ideally he realises that this is just another step upon the spiritual journey, because (and somewhat reminiscent of Maslow’s [1943] hierarchy of needs) as his prayers gradually produce tangible results, he becomes increasingly freed from such worldly concerns, and can focus more fully upon union per se with the Divine.
Hitbodedut is spoken of very highly in the Breslov community in Safed. However, whilst I have no accurate figures, I estimate that its actual practice is not very widespread, and that less than half of the Chasidim in the group actually undertake it regularly. This refers not only to the idealised form of hitbodedut in the forest at night (which I believe very few indeed carry out), but even just to putting aside a small proportion of each day to do the practice, at any time and in any space. Breslov Chasidim themselves pointed to the difficulties of finding quality time to be alone, amidst the busy demands of family and kolel life.

In the very early spring of my primary fieldwork period, when night-time temperatures were still falling to ten degrees Celsius or thereabouts, I was fortunate to be invited to go into one of the forests near Safed with a group of Breslov Chasidim, in the middle of the night, on a regular basis. The group was able to form because one Chasid, the organiser of the initiative, possessed a car, an uncommon luxury amongst the Safed Breslov community. Spaces were thus limited to five in total, and I felt privileged to have been offered one. The four other men in the group ranged in age from approximately their lower thirties to early sixties. The owner of the car, whom I personally became quite close to, had undertaken regular hitbodedut in the past, sometimes at night on an ongoing basis for weeks or months. He explained, however, that once he was married and had children, going out at night became far more difficult. This friend also acknowledged that practicing hitbodedut at night involved some level of personal sacrifice, in terms of time lost with his wife and children due to unsynchronised schedules.

As is frequently the case with any training practice (from physical through to spiritual) that is considered arduous, I found that undertaking hitbodedut in this way was difficult at the beginning of a session, but often uplifting and even intoxicating at its end. Regarding this particular manner of doing the practice—at night and in the forest—one friend in our little group remarked that, whether they explicitly express it or not, to do hitbodedut in this fashion is “the dream of every Jew”. In saying so he was, of course, speaking somewhat figuratively (for most Jews have never even heard of the term “hitbodedut”), but it reflected his opinion that such a practice would be of great benefit to each and every one of them. Discouraged and eventually defeated by the need for sleep and by the cold, I continued with the group for only a week or two; I believe they themselves persevered for less than a month before giving it up, at least in that specific version of it.

A typical night began by being woken by an alarm at 2:30 a.m. or thereabouts, and a short while later waiting in the freezing, dark street to be picked up by the car. After doing a circuit of the city to
collect the other men one by one from their homes, we would drive to a natural water spring in a forest on the outskirts of Safed. Muted conversation—often in a half-asleep state—would usually concern G-d, man, the meaning of life, some religious parable, or similar. At the spring, in the middle of the dark forest, we completely stripped off our clothes and one by one immersed in the water. It was explained to me that there are seven different types of *miqveh* (an immersion pool for ritual purification, constituting an important aspect of Jewish religious practice; see the previous chapter)—including, for example, the sea, a lake, and an artificial *miqveh*. Whilst all of them allow the devotee to fulfil the basic commandment of immersing, each of the seven *miqvaot* (the plural of *miqveh*) rectifies particular sins or faults. A natural spring, hinting through its deep hidden source at the Almighty Himself—who is also hidden—is said to be akin in its power to *all* of the other types of *miqvaot* combined. The spring water felt freezing—a far cry from the heated “Taj Mahal” of the Nachal Novea synagogue *miqveh* (see again the previous chapter)—but a warm glow suffused the body after emerging from such cold liquid. In that state we dressed and drove off to a different forest, perhaps twenty minutes away, for the *hitbodedut* itself.

The car was stopped on a dirt road, and a time agreed upon—usually an hour-and-a-half later—to meet back at it. Each of the five walked off in a different direction to begin his practice. I was not able to observe directly (apart from hearing the occasional shouting or crying out) what each man was doing, but from later questioning and discussion built up a picture of how some may have used their time. Different Chasidim undertook different activities, compared to one another, and also each man across different nights. In the darkness punctuated by bird cries and small animal rustlings, some spent time sitting on the ground speaking to G-d; others tended to pace around more. Some also lit a candle whilst sitting. A couple, in the fashion so typically ascribed to Breslov Chasidim by other religious groups, would scream, shout and cry out to G-d, expressing deep and often anguished sentiments. The words “Oy Tatti!” (in Yiddish “Oh Daddy!”) were frequently sounded, a phrase (often accompanied by a long sigh) vocalised not only in this prayer setting, but also in the course of ordinary conversation in daily life. Loud hand clapping was also common—this practice is supposed to bring focus to the individual and also to drive away undesirable energies or entities.

By the time we returned to the car, the mood was usually quite changed. A glimmer of dawn would be appearing, and the ordeal of the chilly *miqveh* and the cold, dark and sometimes ominous forest was behind us. Allowing the romantic imagination to run a little free, I felt a definite esoteric and “mystical” quality to what we were doing, a feeling that I believe was shared by the others in our group. The combination of the water spring *miqveh* and *hitbodedut* in the forest, in the middle of the
night, evoked images of the Ari or the Ba’al Shem Tov themselves, undertaking similar practices in their times. The backdrop of Safed as a holy city of great spiritual significance only enhanced these images. Conversation now, on the way back to the city, would usually be cheerful and engaged, tinged with genuine camaraderie. We would arrive back with a little time to spare before morning _shacharit_ prayers in the synagogue at 7:00 a.m.

The portrayal of the typical Breslov Chasid running about in the woods at night and screaming to G-d has been associated, anecdotally, with their popular image as “crazy” Chasidim. Salzman (1996, Introduction, p. 2), for example, in his account of one Jew’s description of the Breslovers (also given in Chapter 2.4), writes:

> The fear and anger toward this group, however, was not limited to the secular world. In fact, one man who had grown up in an orthodox Jewish home told me, “I don’t care if you become ultra-orthodox, just stay away from Breslov. Their Rebbe was a madman, and his Hasidim are crazy.” He described the insanity of their religious practices (e.g. going out to the forest alone in the middle of the night and crying out to G-d) and warned me to stay away from them.

On the same theme, Witztum et al. (1990, p. 127) open a section of their paper entitled “The Distinction between an Individual’s Mental Illness and a Sect’s Accepted Beliefs and Behaviours” with the words:

> The life style of Bratslav hasidim is indeed unusual. Most do not work, but spend their day studying. At night they go out and meditate in isolation and pray near the tombs of zaddikim. They arrive home in the middle of the night, and on waking they will leave for morning prayers.

As illustrated in the preceding discussion, however, regular _hitbodedut_ in nature and during the night requires perseverence, self-discipline, a degree of sacrifice in one’s day-to-day life, and often some measure of logistical organisation. Shatil (1993), a secular psychologist who spent two years immersed in a Breslov _yeshivah_ (similar to a _kolel_) in Israel, makes similar observations regarding the young men of that institution, who rose an hour before midnight each night to listen to their rabbi speak before heading out to the forest to perform _hitbodedut_ (p. 28). The situation he describes is quite different from the Safed Breslov one, however, because Shatil’s (1993) _yeshivah_ consisted primarily of a group of young men sleeping in shared dormitories and thus able to rise en masse; this
is in marked contrast to married Breslov men in Safed, living in family units and running their own lives.

Shatil (1993, p. 36) also notes in the case of a further group of married men who came from their homes to the yeshivah every day, that the sleep/wake cycle of each Chasid became unaligned with that of his wife as a result of nightly hitbodedut; on a positive note, however, perseverance with the practice was considered an indication that a man was on a good spiritual path, whilst inability to meet its rigours a sign of descent (p. 35).

Interestingly, Shatil (1993, p. 28) suggests that the particular sleep/wake cycle resulting from hitbodedut practice late at night disconnected the men of the yeshivah from the “goings-on of the external world”, an observation that I corroborate from my own short week or so of nocturnal woodland excursions. Going to sleep early in the evening and rising in the middle of the night, along with the accompanying and ongoing build-up of fatigue (for one usually does not go to bed early enough in order to sleep an ideal number of hours), seemed to create a disconnect from the daily, ordinary, world of society at large. I felt as though I was living in a slightly parallel existence, in which nightly miqveh immersions, hitbodedut in the forest, and prayers at synagogue had become more real than socialising with friends, shopping for groceries, or writing field notes.

Mark (2009, p. 81) uses night and sleep as examples through which to introduce a central theme that he proposes in his book; that the “… contrast between the ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ of rational mind (da’at) is central to understanding the various methods of serving God that R. Nachman developed for his disciples”. The author goes on to write (p. 81), “… sleep, night and dream are all indications of states of consciousness marked by the absence of ordinary mind (mochin) and rational mind (da’at)”.

The hitbodedut practice objectifies in the external world what is to the researcher the most fundamental intrapsychic religious object—G-d (Spero, 1992). By regularly speaking out loud to G-d, one enhances the level of reality attributed to Him, and indeed, this is one of the declared objectives of the practice; as a (non-Breslov) rabbi remarked to me in esoteric overtones, “If you continue doing hitbodedut, ‘certain things’ will begin to happen”. The ultimate ontological status of those “certain things”, of course, is a matter of faith. These themes are explored in greater detail in Chapter 4.6 “Towards A Psychoanalytic Theory of the Charedi Phenomenon”.

116
Regardless of the ontological status of the object of the practice, however, and whilst it may be possible that “running about in the forest at night” is symptomatic in certain individuals of some psychological disturbance, my observations associate the regular practice of hitbodedut with quite the opposite; with stable, dedicated men, who are able to muster the commitment and self-discipline to make it happen, day after day. The source of their strength is their belief in G-d, and most reported that regular hitbodedut in turn strengthened that belief.

**Apparent Contradictions between the Charedi Lifestyle and an Ethos of Respect for the Natural Environment**

Given the Breslov veneration for the natural environment, two aspects of the typical contemporary Charedi lifestyle—highly characteristic of the Breslov group as well—are surprising and remarkable, in their contradiction to an ethos that apparently emphasises the sanctity of nature. The first is the massive, regular use of disposable plastic tableware and cutlery during mealtimes; the second is the general state of mess and rubbish found on average in many Charedi environments, including in the homes and on the streets of Charedi neighbourhoods.

Not only in Breslov households, but in the many Charedi homes more generally that I visited, I observed time and time again entire meals—usually on Shabbat, but also during the week—served on disposable plastic tableware and eaten with disposable cutlery. The once-used plastic was then discarded, and a fresh set laid out for the next meal. In its description, and indeed in its very mention here, this point may seem rather trivial. The phenomenon has become so widespread in Israel, however, that shops devoted entirely to selling disposable plastic may be found in Charedi neighbourhoods, and I have heard a number of secular Jews similarly remarking on this matter. After Shabbat it is not uncommon to see garbage bins around Safed filled to the brim with disposable dinnerware. Interestingly, this phenomenon does not appear typical of kipot srugot—non-Charedi religious Jewish adherents; it is particular to the Charedi sector. Amongst the former, of course, some families do use disposable plastic, and in the latter I certainly did attend Shabbat feasts in which the food was eaten from crockery plates with steel (or silver) knives and forks. In general, however, and very conspicuously so, the phenomenon is an especially Charedi one.

It is uncertain, yet unlikely, that financial considerations are the primary driver for this widespread use of disposable plastics; buying cheaply available permanent tableware and cutlery is surely more inexpensive than weekly purchases, ongoing for years, of disposable ones. Rather, Charedi and secular Jews alike remarked that the practice is probably so common for reasons of utility and ease;
with such large families, the amount of washing up required following each meal would be substantial. Furthermore, the practice may appeal in that it reduces the need for vigilance regarding kashrut (kosher)—as long as disposables are used, there is no need to differentiate tableware and cutlery as either milk or meat, since items are used only once and then thrown out. Not wishing to offend, I broached this subject—of the massive waste of plastic, and the accompanying generation of large volumes of rubbish—with Breslov friends gently. I would ask jokingly, for example, how families got through Shabbat decades ago, when there were no disposable dishes available. Except in one particular instance, when the adverse environmental impacts of the practice were directly acknowledged, the replies generally given did not indicate any recognition of wrongdoing in an ecological sense. Friends would laugh and say, for example, “Yes, they had to wash a lot of dishes back then”. Some made remarks to the effect that they saw the availability of plastic today as part of the beneficence of G-d, who makes the Shabbat that little bit more pleasant by largely removing the need to wash dishes. For those people, there seemed to be no awareness of the implications of the practice, and therefore no moral issue involved in choosing to do it. Such apparent lack of environmental awareness, whether—on a case by case basis—“voluntary” for the sake of cognitive convenience, or stemming from a true lack of education, stands in stark contrast to the Breslov valuing of the sanctity of the natural environment.

Along a somewhat similar theme, and likewise in contrast to an ethos of respect for the natural environment, is the general state of mess and rubbish typically found in many Charedi settings, including in the homes and on the streets of Charedi neighbourhoods. This statement, that many Charedi men and women would find offensive, requires some qualification, yet it is an absolutely justified one in terms of the reality it describes. Anecdotally, many secular Jews in Israel speak of the effects of hitchardut—a place or a neighbourhood “becoming Charedi” in terms of its demographics—on the physical environment. The stereotypical image is one of neighbourhoods, as they become increasingly populated by Charedi families, also becoming more dilapidated in terms of rubbish in the streets and lack of maintenance in general. The process of hitchardut has been very prominent in the past two decades or so across many of the suburbs of Jerusalem, for example; the phenomenon is a highly discussed subject amongst secular Jews living in the city, because entire neighbourhoods that were previously secular—or mixed secular and religious—have in the space of a few years turned into Charedi enclaves.

The adverse effects on the physical environment that seem to accompany this process of hitchardut are also commonly cited by secular Jews, and indeed, I have heard it acknowledged by Charedi Jews
as well. One example that I can attest to, from direct personal experience having lived close by for seven years (previous to my doctoral ethnographic work), is the suburb of Ramat Eshkol in the north eastern part of Jerusalem. Once an affluent, physically polished, and secular district, located not far from one of the main campuses of the Hebrew University, it had begun since around the year 2000 to be settled by Charedi families. Within a decade or so the suburb became predominantly Charedi, and is also known today for its large English speaking population. A current real estate website, for example, says of Ramat Eshkol, “It has become one of Jerusalem's most sought-after locations for young ultra-Orthodox families, especially English speakers” (Eiferman Properties Ltd., undated).

Along with its hitbardut, the physical appearance of this suburb has also changed adversely, in a subtle yet noticeable manner. Despite the provision of municipal council services—including rubbish removal, street cleaning and maintenance—being quite independent of the religiosity of a suburb, the streets of Ramat Eshkol, as well as the entrance areas to many of its houses and apartment buildings, have more rubbish lying about and a more dilapidated look than previously. The general impression is of a suburb gone from being fairly clean and well-kept to somewhat shabby and unkempt. I have also heard other residents of Jerusalem remark similarly on this point.

In Safed too, the lack of emphasis on cleanliness and maintenance in Charedi neighbourhoods (including the main Breslov one) is conspicuous. This is, of course, a generalisation, and specific cases to the contrary exist—spotless streets and houses in Charedi suburbs, and dirty and decrepit ones in secular neighbourhoods—but it is a generalisation pointing to an existing underlying pattern. Furthermore, parts of the revered ancient cemetery of Safed, as well as areas within the closely surrounding forests, are also covered in rubbish. Being highly touristed areas, this state of affairs cannot be attributed only to the residents of Safed, and certainly not to the Charedi ones in particular; however, the situation may be seen as one part of a larger picture, as described above. Interestingly, one friend from the Breslov group, and very active and influential therein in terms of community involvement, several years ago attempted to start a comprehensive initiative to clean-up Safed. They summarised that effort as follows (anonymous, personal communication, July 2014):

Regarding the initiative [to clean Safed], it actually did get off the ground. The cheder [boys school] was the only school to really carry out awareness programs, which went on for about two years. For example they had demonstrations from the recycling plant staff who came and explained the bottle recycling process and showed different “products” produced from recycled plastic. It was quite interesting actually. Also during this time, we had the bottle cages on the cheder premises and children were encouraged to bring
their empty bottles from home—which they did and the cages were filled up again and again. They also instituted a program called "To everything there is a process", which showed the processes in nature from the beginning to end. Like wheat to bread and grapes to wine, etc. This involved field trips and hands-on activities when something needed to be produced. For example, they picked grapes and processed them manually etc.

We were the ones to introduce the recycling initiative into the city in terms of bottle cages and paper recycling bins, supervised the various pickup points in the city and paid the companies to maintain the receptacles, pickups, etc. We had a grant at the time from a New York donor that covered the expenses. After this ended, the mayor (who is still the mayor now) picked up the ball and took it over on a municipal level and was able to install more points throughout the city, which exist until this day, B"H [with the help of G-d]. I know there is much more to do in the city regarding clean-up and awareness, but at least something has been started and I am sure the time will come when it will get even more serious. (Would love to see the sidewalks cleaned and full time trash pickup from the streets, parks and cemetery!) I know there is tremendous interest in it, but it is lacking the funds and the right people to be behind a more comprehensive effort.

Assuming there is indeed a negative correlation between the Charedi proportion of the population of a neighbourhood, and how clean and well-kept its environs appear, and furthermore suggesting a direct causation flowing from the former to the latter, the question arises as to why this causation might exist. Some secular and Charedi Jews pointed to the combined effects of impoverished time, amidst busy schedules at kolel and the running of large families, and money, in terms of generally meagre livelihoods, as prime causal factors. Such explanations may be relevant, but they are not sufficient, because many communities in Israel and indeed around the world are temporally and financially strained, yet are not associated specifically with dilapidated physical environments. Two other hypotheses, that seek more fundamental explanations grounded in psychological rather than just external/situational factors, bear consideration. Firstly, it may be possible that the Charedi preoccupation with the spiritual leads to a neglect of the physical. However, do not monasteries, for example, exist around the world in which the spiritual is the primary focus, yet their physical environment spotlessly maintained? Furthermore, the Chasidic ethos, as the Breslov group exemplifies, takes the immediate physical world as a prime conduit to G-d (the main reason for the Breslov veneration of the natural world in the first place). That a concern with Heaven leads to a neglect of Earth is probably, therefore, also not a sufficient explanation for these observations.
The second hypothesis was originally suggested to me by a non-Charedi religious friend, and focused on the fact that a substantial proportion of members of many Charedi communities—and certainly of the Breslov group in Safed—do not earn their livelihood through work, but subsist instead from government welfare, stipends, and charity (see Chapter 3.1). As such, and exacerbated by the fact that they are embedded in the modern Israeli secular milieu—in which men and women largely do undertake paid work, and possess substantial quantities of high-end material goods—the typical level of self-respect, on an unconscious level, of individuals in those Charedi communities may be low. This in turn, my friend suggested, has a detrimental effect on their respect for their physical environment, and hence the prevalence of the phenomenon of neglect just described.

Whilst an intriguing explanation, a Charedi individual would deny, without doubt, any suggestion that their general lack of material luxuries impacts their sense of self-respect; quite the opposite, many Breslov friends took a measure of pride—at least explicitly—in their humble material circumstances. The more general causal connection this theory makes between not earning a living through one’s own efforts and a lack of self-respect—whilst again, a connection that would be denied by Charedi Jews, who emphasise that all comes from G-d as He sees fit to give—carries in my mind more traction, as it seems to reflect something that may be fundamental to the human psychological makeup. Whether this lack of self-respect in turn leads to neglect in beautifying and maintaining one’s physical environment—the second causal connection the theory suggests—remains, of course, a hypothesis.

***
III. Ethnography

3.7 “Forests, Mountains and Finding G-d”—The Natural Environment and Hitbodedut
3.8 The “Chosen People” and the Goyim—Attitudes Towards Non-Jews

Opposing categories are a key theme in Jewish theology, and such dual pairs often form a focus for the religion’s symbolic concepts and practices. Examples include man versus woman (each with their distinct burden of duties and obligations in this world); the sun versus the moon; the Good Inclination (Yetzer Hatov) versus the Evil Inclination (Yetzer Hara); the Shabbat and festival holy days (yemey qodesh) versus the ordinary days of the week (yemey chol); ritual purity (taharah) versus impurity (tum’ah); and many others.

One duality fundamental to Judaism is the concept of the Jews versus the other nations, or goyim. This duality is well-expressed through the commonly cited Biblical metaphor of the two sons of Yitzchaq (Isaac); Ya’aqov (Jacob), also known by the spiritually elevated name Yisrael, representing the Jews, versus Esav (Esau) as an exemplar of the other nations, the goyim. Reference to this dichotomy is very prevalent in the religious texts—beginning with the Torah itself, through Mishnah and Talmud, and extending to modern works—and also in day-to-day conversation amongst religious Jews. In the Breslov community in Safed, and in the wider Charedi world both there, in other parts of Israel, and in Uman in the Ukraine (on pilgrimage; see the following chapter) , I observed that a keen awareness of the Jew/goy dichotomy, a grasp of this polarity as being fundamental to the structure of Creation, and in many cases a hostile stance towards non-Jews, is not the rule, but certainly by far-and-away the norm.

Many friends might protest this starkly presented observation, and try to convey a different flavour to the Jew/non-Jew dichotomy, one grounded in a deeper understanding of the texts and the intentions of the religion as a whole. Indeed, on paper a case may be made that Judaism does not hold the Jews to be superior to the other nations, and that the concept of the “Chosen People” has often been misinterpreted by non-Jews to mean “chosen” in the sense of favoured, loved above others, and so forth. This case on paper would more correctly interpret the concept of chosenness as referring to the selection of a certain group to “carry a greater burden” relative to other groups, and to serve G-d in particular ways. It would go on to emphasise that, according to Jewish tradition, the Torah—with its obligation of mitzvot (commandments)—was offered to all of the nations, yet they refused to accept it. Thus, the case would argue, the division between the Jew and the non-Jew is an equitable one, for it articulates a hierarchy involving differing responsibilities and, accordingly, differing remunerations.
III. Ethnography
3.8 The “Chosen People” and the Goyim—Attitudes Towards Non-Jews

Such a line of reasoning may be plausible and valid, but my immediate purpose in this discussion is not theological but ethnographic. Whilst a few religious Jewish friends seemed to have at least a foothold in such an expansive understanding of the Jew/non-Jew dichotomy, and a rare few were apparently able to walk a fine line between a universal love of all beings whilst at the same time privileging the Jewish soul with a uniqueness of obligations, and consequently a favoured relationship with G-d, most of the religious Jews whom I conversed with expressed a far more primitive grasp of the dichotomy, characterised by superiority and hostility.

One place in which this superior and hostile view is quite apparent—perhaps because it is least inhibited and most freely expressed there—is amongst the children of Breslov families, with whom I regularly spent time. The view was often vocalised to me in various forms; not in a nasty manner, but matter-of-factly, as another mundane piece of information about reality. Such moments drove home the point that these people inhabit a lifeworld that, despite apparent external commonalities, is radically different from a typical modern Western one; this theme is discussed in depth in Chapter 4.5. The eight-or-so year old son of one family, for example, in grasping for a derogatory persona with which to populate a story he was telling me, searched about with the words, “The place was full of… full of…” and then triumphantly hit upon, “goyim!” I was also, in playful verbal teasing matches with some of these children, affectionately yet with the uninhibited barb characteristic of that age, several times called a “goy”—with all the negative implications that the word clearly entailed. Another, older person—a teenager who had been spending some time overseas—referred to the “smelly goyim” who had been trying with their cars to “run us over as we were crossing the road”.

In visiting another family, of the Chabad Chasidic group, I found myself in debate with the husband and wife over whether goyim actually “possess a soul”. The couple claimed to cite sources in the Tanya (the eighteenth/early nineteenth century central work of the Chabad group, laying out its particular version of Chasidic philosophy and practice) that state that non-Jews do not possess a neshamah. Broadly speaking, Judaism defines three spiritual or semi-spiritual structures that may be translated as “soul” or “spirit”, depending on context; these are neshamah, ruach, and nefesh. Being essential Kabbalistic terms and themes, much could be expounded by somebody knowledgeable in the matter, regarding the science of these structures. Thus, I believe that my conversation with the Chabad family was conducted on a level of ignorance on both our parts, in terms of a true understanding of what we were talking about in light of the Jewish tradition. However, again, my interest here was not metaphysical nor theological but ethnographic, and to some extent psychological; these friends expressed their opinions strongly and enthusiastically, and I found myself
wondering, “Supposing that non-Jews indeed do not have a neshamah-soul—but wouldn’t you want them to have one, as fellow human beings? Is this something that a Jew should take a particularly insidious joy and relish in?” At one point in the conversation, the view was expressed that since goyim do not have a neshamah, all that they are interested in are the basic biological functions of eating, sleeping, sexual intercourse, and so forth.

In terms of the sociopolitical realities of the contemporary State of Israel, I did not observe Breslov (or more generally Charedi) attitudes towards Israeli Arabs or Palestinians as being markedly different from typical secular Israeli “right wing” ones. By and large, these attitudes emphasise the Jewish right to the Land of Israel and the hostile nature of its non-Jewish residents and neighbours, as well as frequently implying (or overtly stating) the inferiority of those non-Jews. Whilst the Charedi sense of its G-d-given connection to the Land is a fundamental one, it does not necessarily appear to be any stronger than the same sense in non-religious “right wing” Israelis, who may break the Shabbat upon all of its stipulations, yet support the idea of Israeli territorial expansion with as much—or even more—zeal as the Charedim. Paradoxically, however, in rare instances (as discussed in Chapter 3.3), the rejection of the Zionist project by particular Charedi groups has become so pronounced that it leads to a reversal of (at least explicit) attitudes; vocal and active support for the Palestinian—and even the anti-Israel Iranian—cause.

Clearly it is not the case that all Charedi Jews hold a similarly negative and hostile perspective towards goyim, yet based on my first-hand experiences, I suggest that many, and perhaps a majority, do. The Jew/non-Jew dichotomy is a central one for the Charedi lifeworld, and indeed, for Judaism generally. That dichotomy did not, of course, emerge from a vacuum—there are obvious historical reasons for the hostility of the Charedi community today towards the goyim. More generally, such dichotomies are central to the very definition of self—by individuals and by societies as a whole—in terms of an entity contrasting itself with what it considers its opposite. This theme is taken up in depth in Chapter 4.2 on “The Charedi Constitution of Self through Other”.

***
III. Ethnography

3.8 The “Chosen People” and the Goyim—Attitudes Towards Non-Jews
3.9 Pilgrimage to Uman, Ukraine

The Growth of the Rosh Hashanah Pilgrimage in Recent Years

The annual pilgrimage to the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov in the town of Uman in the Ukraine, undertaken around the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, has become an immensely important and significant event for the Breslov Chasidic community, and increasingly for non-Breslov Jews as well. What began as a trickle—a thousand or so persons—in the latter half of the 1980s, grew substantially after the fall of Communism to an estimated 15,000-20,000 pilgrims in 2007 (Akao, 2007, p. 137). When I attended in September of 2012, sources on the ground approximated a total of 30,000 or even more pilgrims. In the past decade the pilgrimage has grown substantially beyond the Breslov community, and now religious Jews from different Chasidic groups, and even non-religious Jews—in many cases with what could be described as a “hippie” or New Age orientation—make their way there (see Figure 9 below).

The epicentre of the pilgrimage is the burial site of Rabbi Nachman, previously covered over by private Ukrainian residences, but in the mid-1990s declared a “Historical-Cultural Centre” by Ukrainian Presidential decree. Following disputes and wrangling between three bodies—Ukrainian national authorities, the City Council of Uman, and the self-styled “World Committee of Breslover Hasidim” (established in New York in 1981)—local residents were largely evacuated and the private houses directly adjacent to the gravesite purchased by Jews (Akao, 2007, pp. 139-141). Today a
III. Ethnography

3.9 Pilgrimage to Uman, Ukraine

The synagogue has been built over the gravesite, as well as other structures installed in the streets adjacent. The most remarkable of these is the Kloyz Synagogue (see Figure 10 below), a sizeable building that during Rosh Hashanah seats and stands several thousand Jews, and includes an adjoining miqveh (ritual immersion bath) that can accommodate hundreds of people at a time.

![Figure 10: The Kloyz Synagogue in Uman, Ukraine](image)

During the week or so of the pilgrimage, this synagogue seats and stands several thousand people for each service. The banner in Hebrew reads: "And all will make as one union to do Your Will with a whole heart"

**The Pilgrimage is a Highly Significant Event for the Breslov Group in Safed**

For the Breslov community in Safed the pilgrimage is one of the highlights of their year. Families who have barely enough money for basic ongoing expenses, such as rent and food, somehow save and scrape together sufficient funds to send the men (fathers and sons) to Uman year after year; some of them have travelled so often that they have lost count of their total number of visits. Many of the older children of Breslov Chasidim, in their late teens or early twenties, who have largely left the Charedi path—a leaving signified first and foremost in their dress, and then in their much-reduced level of religious observance—still continue to travel to Uman on Rosh Hashanah. The most common explanation they gave to me regarding this practice was that, “I’ve been doing this since I was a child—I can’t imagine Rosh Hashanah anywhere else”.

The Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage is undertaken almost exclusively by men—indeed, I noted Hebrew posters on notice boards in Uman admonishing pilgrims not to bring their wives at this time of the year. Occasionally, Jewish women—clearly not locals—were visible on the streets, but this was an exception to the norm. There is a tradition for women to make the pilgrimage at various points throughout the year, but during the New Year the tens of thousands who throng the streets around the
burial site are almost entirely men. In Safed, the wife of one of the men who was preparing to go (a man not belonging to the core Breslov group, but closely affiliated with that community in terms of his studying with them, praying at their synagogue, and having close connections with other Breslov men) described the event as a “big boy scout jamboree”, and attributed much of the religious fervour and states of expanded consciousness and closeness to G-d that the pilgrims report experiencing as being at least partially a result of physical circumstances; tens of thousands of men, away from home, wives, and associated responsibilities, in their own little enclave celebrating a highlight of the Jewish religious calendar. This comment about a jamboree is evocative of Victor Turner’s seminal research into pilgrimages, and his conception of *communitas*, a state of union between human beings that transcends ordinary social hierarchical structures (see, for example, Bilu, 1988, pp. 302-303. For a brief discussion of communitas, see the next Chapter 3.10, under the section on Purim).

Bilu (1988, pp. 308-310), using the example of the annual religious pilgrimage in Israel to Meiron (a town located close to Safed and marking the resting place of Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochay, the mythical author of the Kabbalistic Zohar; see Chapter 4.5), focuses, in contrast, on the psychological dimension of activities enacted during the pilgrimage that are diametrically opposed to communitas. Bilu employs the psychoanalytic notion of sibling rivalry, wherein pilgrims are vying for the blessing and favour of the omnipotent “father” (the venerated object of the pilgrimage), and goes on to associate some traditional rituals—for example, Moroccan Jews feasting on slaughtered sheep and imbibing large amounts of alcohol at this annual Meiron gathering—with the orality ascribed by the psychoanalytic literature to one type (the “regressive”) of sibling rivalry. Bilu thus shows that pilgrimages can be arenas for a very active vying, by participants, for social power and status, and not just spaces for an idyllic communitas. Clearly, such activities of an “anti-communitas” nature occur too at the annual Uman pilgrimage, and one type is associated with conspicuous consumption; precious seats in the Kloyz synagogue, for example, are rented for the week through a pre-paid arrangement, and seats closer to the front go for a higher price. Other opportunities also exist in Uman for displays of conspicuous consumption and for social vying, for the favour, for example, of the head Rabbi of an organic community that is participating in the event (in the Breslov Safed case, the Rav; see Chapter 3.4). Whilst largely relegated to a secondary position in the face of the overwhelming sense of brotherhood that seems generally to permeate the Uman gathering, such activities—that reproduce and articulate the social structure rather than blurring it—are a significant part of the tapestry as a whole.
In Safed I was frequently asked whether I planned to go, and after replying with uncertainty was enthusiastically advised, “You must go!” Indeed, Breslov Chasidim make frequent mention throughout the year of Uman and the pilgrimage. Such conversations are prompted by a variety of different topics, yet perhaps foremost amongst them is discussion of Rabeinu, meaning “Our Rabbi”—a direct reference to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Use of this term generally connotes a feeling of strong connection to the Breslov tradition, if not necessarily denoting an explicit self-identification as a “Breslov Chasid”. Indeed, one friend whom I met in Uman related to me the idea that there is no single definition of “Breslov” today, but rather, that the Breslov movement consists of loosely affiliated groups, with the prime criterion defining Breslov identity being an individual’s personal connection in their heart to Rabbi Nachman’s teachings (see also Chapter 3.1).

The Rabeinu concept is core to the Breslov lifeworld, and any real understanding of the latter requires at least an appreciation of the former. The aspects contained in the concept are ever-present—and often referred to directly—in the Safed community, but they emerge with full force, as fundamental religious and metaphysical realities in the adherent’s lifeworld, at the Uman epicentre. Clearly, there is a historical understanding of Rabbi Nachman as the man who founded the Breslov Chasidic tradition. Books containing his sayings and teachings, first and foremost his magnum opus “Likutey Moharan” (see Chapter 2.4), are regularly studied and referenced in the kolel. But his historical aspect is perhaps the least important to his adherents—what truly concerns them is the spiritual; the Rabbi’s eternal soul, the work he continues to do in this world, and their connection to him right now. For Rabbi Nachman is understood to be an active force in the present, doing the work of G-d and saving Jewish souls. He is sometimes allegorised as a shepherd, collecting stray souls and leading them back to the flock. These concepts are closely related to the idea—as discussed in Chapter 3.4—of a progression of souls, beginning with Moses, and continuing through Rabbi Shim’on Bar Yochay (to whom the Jewish tradition attributes authorship of the Zohar), Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari), the Ba’al Shem Tov (overall founder of the Chasidic movement), and then, as was propounded to me, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Having a direct connection to—or indeed, being derived directly from—the soul of Moses, the father of all prophets who were and ever will be, Rabbi Nachman is thus intimately involved in Breslov conceptions of the Messianic Redemption to come (a core concept in Judaism generally). He is not “just” another great rabbi, Torah scholar and leader, but is situated at the heart of, and somehow intimately tied to, cosmic events that will unfold when the Messiah finally arrives.
The Pilgrimage as an Ecstatic Religious Experience

Pilgrims I spoke to in Safed either before or after this particular pilgrimage in 2012, and in Uman itself in that year, described their experiences along various phenomenological spectra, making reference to their level of connection to G-d, feelings (or lack thereof) of connecting with the presence of Rabbi Nachman (see Figure 11 below), degree of satisfaction with their own spiritual work and religious commitment during their time spent in Uman, and feelings of ease or conversely hardship regarding the logistical conditions of the journey. In terms of purely religious sentiments, the term orot, meaning “lights”, was often used, with many friends explaining to me that their first visit to Uman was the most memorable of all, for they were “in orot”; in other words, they experienced such a religious high that it was akin to being surrounded by lights (see also Chapter 4.5 for a general discussion of this topic). Subsequent pilgrimages, however, were often (although not always) described in less ecstatic language, with the remark that the pilgrim felt they had to do more “work” (of a spiritual/religious nature) in order to re-experience similar highs. Another common description that friends used for the entire pilgrimage, very reminiscent of a concept linked to the Shabbat, is that the experience of Uman across Rosh Hashanah is akin to a “time outside of time”—a different dimension, as it were, that the pilgrim is transported to (see also Chapter 3.5).

My personal experience in Uman was one of the most profound of my life, coinciding with and indeed bolstering a period of deep religious immersion and dedication on my part. My dipping into that “G-d trip”—experiencing it first-hand in the truest sense of the phrase—allowed me a deeper understanding of this concept of “being in orot (lights)”, for I myself had (albeit briefly) lived it. Indeed, several Breslov friends from Safed, who were present in Uman, commented that my experience reminded them of their own first (or first few) times in Uman, when they similarly experienced profound spiritual elevation. This personal Uman experience is recounted at greater length in Chapter 4.5.
Logistical Hardships

In contrast to spiritual experiences, some of the stories regarding logistics are not so favourable in tone—late flights, transportation issues with Ukrainian bus and taxi drivers, accommodation difficulties in Uman, and so forth. Firstly it must be stated that the level of logistical organisation that I observed on the ground in the town in 2012—considering the brief but massive influx of tens of thousands of pilgrims adding perhaps another third to its total population—was largely astonishing in the positive sense. Most impressive were the food halls, established each year anew, catering for thousands of people and hosting a number of major feasts that are celebrated in the course of the week or so that most pilgrims stay (see Figure 12 below). Each of these feasts consisted of several sumptuous courses, and would not have been outdone, neither in quality nor quantity, had they been celebrated in a typical Breslov household in Safed. Tea, coffee and biscuits were freely available, around the clock, from a serving area that had been set up on one of the main streets in what becomes a sort of “Jewish compound” during the pilgrimage. The strict kosher requirements governing all food provisions only add an extra layer of complication to the immense preparations required in order to provide such services.

Secondly, from a logistical point of view, and based on accounts from friends who have been making the pilgrimage for over a decade, the ease with which one can undertake the trip today—including use of pre-paid transport vouchers to Uman from Kiev (or from another nearby) airport, pre-purchased meal tickets and synagogue seats, and the level of logistical organisation in the town itself—would have been unimaginable ten years ago, and sounds almost fantastical alongside stories relating the
life-threatening experiences of isolated handfuls of pilgrims making their way to Uman under the rule of Communism. To give an idea of the immensity and novelty of this now de rigueur Breslov practice in its present form compared to that period, contrast the picture of the pilgrimage painted above to a description written several decades earlier (published in 1992, but based on material from a thesis of 1975): “Even now, the Uman graveyard having been destroyed and turned into a housing project, many a Bratslav tract will provide directions… for the furtive traveller to the Soviet Union who wishes to offer prayers at that most holy of shrines” (Green, 1992, p. 26).

Yet, as mentioned above, every individual experience is different, and pilgrims do indeed face some hardships. The most common phrase that I heard regarding such difficulties was a cheerful, “It’s all part of the tiquun”. Tiquun, literally meaning “repair”, is a fundamental Jewish concept used in explaining the role of humankind in the world, and indeed, referring to a process occurring throughout all of Creation (see Chapter 2.2). By using this phrase, pilgrims were implying that any hardships they suffered were sent by Heaven, as part of their personal process of atonement for and repair of sins previously committed. This attitude was usually a generalised one; it did not attempt to match specific hardships with particular sins, only to acknowledge that G-d’s justice is omnipresent, and that any suffering experienced must be going to a good cause (and probably, since it occurred as part of the Uman pilgrimage, carries with it an extra amount of tiquun). In some ways, this attitude is evocative of popular Western conceptions of the Eastern notion of karma.

Figure 12: Food halls, set up for the Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage week in Uman

Meals, including festival (Shabbat and Rosh Hashanah) feasts, are hosted in these halls for thousands of pilgrims, who purchase a ticket in advance that covers the entire week.

In recent years, the level of logistical organisation—including, as seen in the photograph, allocated and signed seating—has become remarkable. The amount of practical preparation required in the months previous in order to host such a service is immense; it includes construction of the physical buildings, as well as the slaughter and kosher provision of large amounts of meat. The impact on the regional Ukrainian economy during this period of the year is substantial.
Impacts on the Local Ukrainian Population of Uman

Although outside of the scope of this research project beyond a brief mention, the economic and social effects of the Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage—and the now ongoing Jewish presence throughout the year—on the local population of Uman is clearly massive. The town is impacted economically on several levels, beginning with the direct flow of money from pilgrims to apartment/house owners for the purpose of accommodation. The majority of dwellings—including apartments as well as standalone houses—in the “Jewish compound” and its immediate vicinity are leased out for the Rosh Hashanah week, with many accommodation arrangements negotiated on the spot between owners or their representatives, and the pilgrims as they arrive. Many locals vacate their homes and find alternate accommodation for the duration, simply because of the large amount of money, in Ukrainian terms, to be earned from leasing their properties during this short period of time. Prices are quoted in American dollars and payments are made almost exclusively in cash. Rooms are often crowded with extra beds that owners squeeze in; each such bed can be rented for several hundred dollars for the week. In a more permanent vein, and with more substantial economic consequences, Jewish parties have been buying up real-estate in the area immediately surrounding the gravesite/synagogue, with ownership now extending to several multi-storey apartment buildings.

Economic impacts extend to local merchants in shops, who supply pilgrims with day-to-day necessities. One economic activity that a relatively small yet conspicuous number of pilgrims engage in involves tobacco; cigarette packets are purchased in bulk in Uman, cheaply, and sold for a profit to friends or local shop owners in Israel. Since there is a legal limit on the number of cigarettes per person that may be imported through customs at Ben Gurion airport in Israel, these entrepreneurs usually seek to spread their stock amongst friends returning from Uman (although in some cases take the risk of attempting to clear customs with undeclared stock)—I myself took some cigarette packets through customs for a particularly close friend. Thus, local shops in Uman, anticipating bulk tobacco purchases, stock up on product just prior to Rosh Hashanah. The economic effects of the pilgrimage extend also to wider circles, including massive food purchases by the aforementioned food halls, and transportation costs paid by pilgrims to commute between airports and Uman, and also to undertake day trips—usually in mini-vans or taxis with Ukrainian drivers—to other important Jewish sites in the region (especially, for example, to the grave of the Ba’al Shem Tov in Medzhybizh, several hundred kilometres away). Finally, money flows also to the Ukrainian airline industry, as carriers provide numerous additional “charter” flights, crammed with pilgrims, between Tel Aviv and Kiev, Odessa or Vinnitsa.
Of particular interest to me, although with little time to directly study it beyond personal speculation based on a small set of observations, are the social and cultural impacts of the Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage on the local Uman population, especially since the event has grown from a small trickle of people to a massive “happening” in a relatively short period of time. For several hundred years at least, Ukrainian history has been soaked in Jewish blood; indeed, it is related that Rabbi Nachman of Breslov decided to spend the final period of his life in Uman specifically following the 1768 massacre in that town of thousands of Jews by the Ukrainian rebel Haidamak army. The Holocaust saw several million Jews who lived in the territory of modern Ukraine murdered by Nazis, in many cases with the enthusiastic cooperation and active involvement of native Ukrainian personnel, including, for example, local auxiliary police (Spector, 1990, cited in Yevtushenko, 2003). The scope of pogroms, violent incidents and anti-Semitic policymaking generally in the Ukraine, in the past several hundred years, has been substantial indeed.

In light of this history of Ukrainian violence against the Jewish population, it was remarkable to see the “Jewish compound” actively and efficiently guarded by Ukrainian police, in a few cases with German shepherd dogs, a symbolism not lost on any Jew visiting Eastern Europe, but this time with the situation reversed, as it were. Day and night the militia scrutinised the endless stream of people flowing past the main access points, and would pull out and check the documents of Ukrainian locals they spotted, presumably to prevent troublemakers from gaining access. How, then, does the local population conceive of these pilgrims; masses of strangely dressed people who flock to and transform their little town every year, performing strange rituals of intense adulation around the grave of a buried Rabbi? Do the proceedings evoke any sentiments of identification, in the sense of Christian saint (and especially local-saint) veneration, in the residents of Uman? What did residents think of “Jews” in general before the pilgrimage became so substantial, and how have their views changed since? And, how are those views reconciled with what they know of Ukrainian Jewish history? For this thesis, these must all remain open questions. Akao (2007) does address some of them, and interestingly gives two examples that provide contrasting perspectives on the evolving relations between Ukrainian locals and Jewish pilgrims in Uman. The first example relates to an incident in 2003, in which:

Being frustrated by gradual secularization of the pilgrimage and inevitable contact between pilgrims and women during Rosh Hashanah, the Breslover Rabbis, with the support of the local administration, declared that women should not trade in the impromptu market built near the gravesite. Eventually, they were “banished” from the
area… This sudden forceful measure generated strong resentment amongst some of the residents, and the local newspaper *Khronika* covered the incident in the article entitled “The Ghetto for the Aborigines?”:

> Folks, if you are proud of Ukraine and don’t want to feel insulted, don’t go on the streets of Pushkina during the period of the Hasidic pilgrimage! The best thing is to put such a sign in every entrance to the City of Uman […] In every stall they have posted a notice written both in Hebrew and in Russian reading “The trade is kosher,” or “Trade is conducted only by men.” How can such a thing be allowed? We will soon be instructed where to live, where to go and what to talk about. Welcome to the ghetto! It is our country’s police who protect the pilgrims, but we seem to lack the authority to protect our own citizens from being demeaned and feeling like outcasts.

(Akao, 2007, p. 145)

Conversely, however, Akao (2007, p. 151) also writes:

> For the normalization of host–guest relations it may be desirable to engage the pilgrims with local culture and draw their attention to local tourist attractions. In this respect, there have been some promising signs. Today, twenty years after the revival of the tradition, the social variety of pilgrims has widened. Some of them are interested in the lifestyles of the local people and seek to enjoy friendly relations with them. Moreover, relationships between hosts and guests generally seem to become more favourable and stable from year to year because many pilgrims, unwilling to look for alternative accommodation, prefer to stay at the same apartments. As a result, mutual understanding and respect between both sides has undoubtedly been growing.

***
On a night bus ride specially organised for guests travelling from Safed to a wedding in Bnei Brak (a major Charedi district located near Tel Aviv) I happened to sit beside a Breslov Chasid who was both an English-speaker and an American university graduate. Conversation soon turned to a fascinating topic—psychoactive drugs and non-ordinary states of consciousness. I was immediately keen to probe Breslov attitudes on this subject, and to understand in what light Breslovers generally perceive the use of such drugs; would most simply reproduce the dominant (and largely ignorant) “official line”, in Israel as in the rest of the world, that “drugs are bad” and “say no to drugs?” Or, might at least some understand the existence of a spectrum between hedonic “recreational” consumption, and the entheogenic use of such substances for the purpose of knowledge and transformation? Furthermore, Israel has a robust medical cannabis program, and one large hospital was at the time conducting an officially-sanctioned clinical study examining the therapeutic potential of MDMA (the active ingredient in “ecstasy”) for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; see, for example, Mithoefer, Wagner, Mithoefer, Jerome, & Doblin, 2011). Thus, whilst not always prominent in the Israeli media—and certainly not in sources accessed by the typical Charedi population—in Israel itself there are substantial research projects underway that testify to the immense medicinal potentials of previously reviled “drugs”.

The Chasid I spoke to was unusually open-minded on the topic, and together he and I developed a metaphor comparing states of consciousness as induced by psychoactive molecules, to those evoked by each of the Jewish festivals. Every drug leads to a specific state of consciousness and set of typical

---

20 “Entheogen” is a word derived from Greek roots, meaning “generating the divine within”. It was coined several decades ago by a group of ethnobotanists who wished to refer to certain plants and molecules, not just in identity, but also in terms of the context and purpose of their ingestion; namely, “spiritual”, shamanic settings for discovery of self and the Infinite. The class of psychoactive drugs that includes psilocybin (from “magic mushrooms”), mescaline (from peyote and Trichocereus spp.), LSD-25, and also dimethyltryptamine (DMT), has been called by a number of names, each reflective of how those who coined and use that name conceive of consciousness alteration. Thus, for example, use of the medically-favoured terms hallucinogen or psychotomimetic (mimicking psychosis)—inaccurate words that are ill-suited to what they are attempting to describe—or the just-discussed, “New Age”-preferred, entheogenic. I usually choose, herein and in general, to refer to these drugs as psychedelic, meaning “mind manifesting”. Despite (or perhaps alongside) the historical connotations of the word, hearkening to the Hippie countercultural movement of the 1960s, it is the most appropriate and judgement-free term available.
III. Ethnography

3.10 Psychoactive Explorations—From Purim to Psychedelic Drugs

phenomenological experiences. Similarly, each of the Jewish festivals (Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, Sukot and so forth) embodies certain states of consciousness; when the devotee faithfully does their best to follow the observances—practical, cognitive and emotional—for a particular festival, he or she is able to immerse in that consciousness and, according to the Jewish tradition, in a sense enter a different world. This is akin to the principle underlying the description of Shabbat as a “different time and space” (see Chapter 3.5). My friend agreed that indeed, and especially in the case of individuals who had attained relatively “high spiritual levels”, each festival is akin to a particular type of “trip”, with all the experiential intensity and diversity that the term implies.

Mention must also be made here of the remarkable hypothesis of Merkur (2000, 2001); in these two books the author, a scholar of comparative religion as well as a psychoanalyst, expounds at length upon his idea that the manna eaten by the ancient Israelites, during their exodus from Egypt and on the way to the Promised Land, was in fact a psychedelic sacrament derived from the ergot fungus that has infested rye, wheat, and other grains crops, probably for as long as humans have cultivated them. The ergot fungus produces psychoactive alkaloids such as ergotamine, a molecule that contains lysergic acid—related to the modern-day LSD—within its chemical structure. Merkur suggests that the religion of the ancient Israelites was actually based upon a “Mystery school”, of a sort similar perhaps to that of the Greeks and their kykeon, at the heart of which lay this radically consciousness altering sacrament. He connects the idea to a whole range of elements core to the Jewish tradition, including references to wheat in general in the canonical texts, the showbread of the Temple in Jerusalem, and prophetic visions. Interestingly, concerning the extraction of psychedelic alkaloids from ergot fungal species, Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck (2008, p. 42) write, based on their knowledge of chemistry and extraction processes par excellence, “With the techniques and equipment available in antiquity it was therefore easy to prepare an hallucinogenic extract from suitable kinds of ergot”. Whilst developed in some detail, and referring to Biblical as well as to more recent historical textual sources, Merkur’s theory remains, of course, a hypothesis.

This chapter will present ethnographic material describing the use of psychoactive drugs within the contemporary Jewish religious world. The topic is a broad one indeed, and here I give relatively limited observations and accompanying discussions. The paramount importance of wine in Judaism generally, and the key role of alcohol during the festival of Purim, is discussed. The use of cannabis in Safed in general is then addressed, followed by an account of psychedelic “raves” that religious youths, whom I became acquainted with in a nearby town, organised and attended. Whilst themselves
grappling with various levels of faith and observance of Jewish tradition, the majority of these young
men (and sometimes also women) came from Charedi or religious families. A number of
miscellaneous observations regarding drug use in the religious Jewish context are then given. Almost
all of the material (excluding that relating to alcohol and Purim) presented does not relate to the core
Safed Breslov group, who typically demonise and reject these substances; their conceptions and
attitudes are discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Purim—To Become Drunk “Until He Does Not Know the Difference…”

In the Jewish tradition wine is of key significance, with almost every festival and certainly the Shabbat
involving its blessing and imbibing. Kabbalistically, the gematriyah (numerical value of the letters)
of the Hebrew word for “wine” (yayn) are the same—seventy—as the word for “secret” (sod). Wine
can apparently, therefore, to those who have the appropriate spiritual attainment and knowledge,
constitute a gateway to the understanding of deep mysteries. Festive drinking is especially associated
with Chasidic groups, far more so than with Mitnagdim (“those who opposed” the Chasidic
movement; see Chapter 1.1). A common Chasidic event is the tisch (Yiddish for “table”), in which
followers (sometimes hundreds and in rarer cases thousands) cluster around their Rebbe whilst he
conveys a Torah teaching, or as he and his inner circle eat a meal. In some Chasidic groups the
consumption of substantial amounts of alcohol—in the form of wine, or often whisky or vodka
shots—during such tische is common practice.

In this domain the Breslov Chasidic community in Safed represents a departure from stereotypical
Chasidic norms, in that wine and other forms of alcohol do not feature prominently in their lifestyle;
nor on Shabbat, during festivals, nor at weddings or similar events. For these people—of course
allowing for individual exceptions—drinking is by and large minimal and subdued. During one day
of the year, however, this group, as well as the entire city, immerses in an inebriated communal
celebration in a manner that is rarely seen and publicly condoned to such extents in Western society
outside of organised, ticketed events. This day is the festival of Purim, commemorating the attempt
and grand failure of Haman, a vizier of the ancient Persian empire, to exterminate the Jews of his
land. Apart from reading the Scroll of Esther, reciting special prayers in synagogue, handing out gifts
of food and drink to friends and strangers, dressing up in costumes, and several other practices, the
day is especially characterised by unrestrained celebration and festivities. The Jewish tradition holds
as an actual mitzvah (commandment) that on this day one must become drunk, to the extent that “he
III. Ethnography
3.10 Psychoactive Explorations—From Purim to Psychedelic Drugs

does not know the difference between cursed be Haman [the evil Persian vizier] and blessed be Mordechai [the Jewish hero of the story]” (Talmudic tractate Megillah [7b]; Tauber, undated).

Purim in Safed is a spectacular, colourful event, with the streets flooded by day and night with both children and adult revellers, many of them in costumes. I moved with a group of friends from the courtyard of one house to another, and on to the next one; dwellings of acquaintances and strangers alike, to celebrate with food, drink and dancing. The ordinary social boundaries between different Jewish Israeli groups—religious/secular, Chasidic/Mitinagdim, and Breslov/other Chasidic groups—are also highly blurred, in what feels like an all-inclusive Jewish event. People wander the streets handing out the traditional Purim gift of wrapped trays of food; often I passed ones that I received onwards to other strangers. A feeling of camaraderie and shared delight pervades the city. By night, in the Breslov Nachal Novea synagogue, the Chasidim are at work taking the commandment to get drunk to its proper Charedi culmination. The scene, to my surprise and delight, could only be described as a bacchanal celebration, with bottles of wine, whisky and vodka crowded upon tables, a band playing, and the men dancing, singing and drinking. Women also participate in Purim festivities, although usually—and certainly within the Breslov group—in separate settings. By the end of the night, the walls of the Nachal Novea building, normally housing pious Chasidim bent over books in earnest study, or swaying back and forth in fervent prayer, enclose a Dionysian scene of spilled alcohol, slumped bodies and vomit. In the streets outside, young Breslov children smoke cigarettes for the first time, or attempt to acquire alcohol. A sense of “(almost) anything goes” seems to enthuse the revellers. In summary, Purim in Safed is a ball!

The Talmudic obligation to become drunk “until he does not know the difference…” has deep metaphysical underpinnings, for in the Jewish tradition Purim represents a state of consciousness beyond the duality of “good” and “evil”; a place that is all Being, and as such all Good, with no opposite. Surprisingly to many Jews, the festival of Purim is actually considered spiritually higher and more holy than Yom Kippur itself; the very name of the latter (Ki-Pur, in Hebrew meaning “similar to Pur”) hints at this. In one lesson that I attended at the Nachal Novea kolel, studying the seminal Breslov Likutey Halachot (section Halachot Purim Aleph, Qerach Gimmel) Kabbalistic teachings regarding Purim were discussed. Vomiting on this festival (as a result of drinking so much alcohol) is considered a tiquin (a rectification or repair; see Chapter 2.2). This is because the vomiting symbolises how Haman—considered not just a flesh-and-blood historical human being, but also representative of a particular energy or entity in the world—will eventually, at G-d’s behest, throw up the Divine sparks that he “suckled” (precisely the Hebrew word used—yanaq) from the side of
good, in his attempt to appropriate them to the *Sitra Achra*—the “other” side, of evil. Compare to the description below of “purging” during ayahuasca sessions.

Returning to the analogy related at the beginning of this chapter, that drew a metaphor between the Jewish festivals and drug-induced states of consciousness, Purim and the “cosmic and uplifting setting of the psychedelic trance dance floor”—as will be described below regarding psychedelic raves—appear to have core characteristics in common. One is the aforementioned transcendence of dualities—such as good and evil, or right and wrong—that is also often a defining feature of the psychedelic experience. Another characteristic seems to be precisely what Turner (1982) is referring to by his term *communitas*. Communitas essentially denotes the union of a group of human beings, in a physical space and in personal feelings, in which the “many” have become “one”. Regarding the difficulties of defining this word (and somewhat reminiscent of the difficulties of describing the psychedelic experience in general), Turner (1982, p. 127) writes: “It is neither by chance nor by lack of scientific precision that, along with others who have considered the conception of communitas, I find myself forced to have recourse to metaphor and analogy”. A defining aspect of communitas is its lack of structure as found in “ordinary” society; in other words, its inherent *anti*-structure. In the former one finds statuses, positions, obligations, and responsibilities, but in communitas these external, artificial constructs are stripped away, yielding a state of homogeneity, equality and unity. Turner (1982, pp. 131-132) suggests that, “Beyond the structural lies not only the Hobbesian ‘war of all against all’ but also communitas… whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species”. These feelings of equality and unity, irrespective of social position and in most cases regardless even of particular religious sub-affiliations, are dominant on the streets and in the houses of Safed during Purim. They are largely and predictably coterminous, however, not with the “human species” as a whole, as Turner idealises, but with the *Jewish* nation. The ambience of “(almost) anything goes” in the streets, as described above, exemplifies anti-structure gaining, for once, relative ascendancy in what is usually the highly structured and prescribed Charedi milieu.

*Cannabis in Safed*

Due in part to the decades-long work of Professor Raphael Mechoulam, from the Hebrew University, in discovering and elucidating the endocannabinoid system in the human body, and the attitudes towards the drug that such local research has helped to foster, Israel has a robust, government-regulated medical cannabis establishment. The drug is also widely used recreationally—
anecdotally, cannabis is very common across the entire country and especially in major cities, consumed in both its dried plant form “marijuana” and as the concentrated extract “hashish”.

Recreational cannabis use is widespread amongst the youth of Safed. An explanation given by one such youth for the customary ease in being able to procure the drug there is that a company (“Tikun Olam”) that legally grows it has a nursery located just outside the city. Unfortunately, I am unable to give quantitative data about the extent of cannabis consumption amongst the youth of Safed, nor more specific information on its extent in Charedi families in particular. Discussion must resort, therefore, to qualitative observations and anecdotal estimates. In a discussion with teenagers and youth in their early twenties in Safed regarding cannabis smoking, one young friend remarked that “different proportions of kids in different populations smoke”. In Bnei Akiva teenagers, for example, a popular youth movement closely associated with kipot srugot (“knitted skullcaps”, denoting Zionistic, non-Charedi religious Jews—see Chapter 3.2) this friend held that none smoke. Likewise, he expressed certainty that in the Breslov yeshivah—the institution for senior boys of an age in between the boy’s lower high-school and the kolel for married men—none consume the drug. Amongst other Safed youth, however, he suggested that a very high proportion smoke cannabis. My own observations and experiences concur with this appraisal.

It appeared to me that the core adult Breslov group in Safed do not consume cannabis at all. Most of their children, firmly embedded in their parents’ milieu, are similarly uninterested in the drug. A cannabis/Breslov connection does come into expression, however, through those youth—sons and in some cases daughters of committedly Charedi parents—who over time have been voluntarily moving away from the Charedi Breslov path. Most such youth with whom I spoke still professed a strong faith in G-d and in Judaism; however, they were in a process of rejecting and distancing themselves from the Charedi lifeworld, to greater or lesser extents depending on the individual. An immediate and highly visible marker of this rejection is their lack of typical Charedi attire (see Chapter 3.2), replaced by modern Western clothing. The sexual interplay between males and females, too, is usually radically departed from the Charedi imperative of complete separation, and resembles a more typically Western dating environment. Another behaviour common to many, although by no means all, youth in this category is the regular recreational consumption of cannabis.

Predictably, in discussing with Breslov adults what they see as the horrific moral decline in those younger individuals who are leaving the Charedi path and also smoking cannabis, the latter is simply viewed as one of a long list of behaviours that testifies to spiritual degradation as a result of the
former. I do not believe that the idea even occurs to most of the pious, that the consciousness-altering effects of the plant are playing a major role in enabling for some of those young people new perspectives on reality, thereby reinforcing their feelings that something is not quite right for them in Charedi society. Of course, it is likely that those particular children originally attracted to cannabis, often at ages as young as thirteen, were already questioning the parameters of their culture, and it was this questioning that brought them to the drug in the first place.

**Psychedelic Raves: Charedi Youth in a Nearby Village**

In a town close by to Safed I became acquainted with a group of young people, generally aged between sixteen and twenty-three, who were regularly consuming psychedelic drugs—in particular, but not only, LSD—in a variety of settings, including within houses in urban environments, and in natural spaces such as forests or in the desert. Some of these psychedelic trips in nature are part and parcel of “rave”-style parties, either small ones near Safed organised by these people themselves, or larger events that take place in various parts of Israel, every weekend during certain seasons of the year. Importantly, almost every one of these youths comes from a Charedi family, yet—as with the young people described above in relation to cannabis—are in various stages of voluntarily exiting the Charedi way of life. Despite this exit, however, most are still embedded in the “Torah lifeworld” (see Chapter 4.5) to greater or lesser extents; they still hold a belief, for instance, in G-d and His Providence, in the sanctity of the Torah, and in the fundamental connection of the Jew to the Land of Israel.

Typical party scenes in the surrounds of Safed involve thirty or so individuals in a clearing in the woods, a majority of them male but also some females, dancing to trance music playing from speakers connected to a fuel-powered electricity generator. Many of the young men have conspicuous peyot (sidecurls), and some wear a tzitzit (a religiously prescribed piece of cloth knotted with four-thread fringes at each corner) as their outermost garment (see also Chapter 3.2). I estimate that at such gatherings, at least half of the participants take a dose of LSD. Cannabis is smoked by almost everybody present, and additional drugs, including alcohol and nitrous oxide21, are consumed.

---

21 Interestingly, nitrous oxide seems to have been discovered by this group of youth near Safed only recently. In similar “psychedelic scenes” in Australia and the United Kingdom, the use of nitrous oxide appears to be far more common. The drug is known also as “laughing gas”, although this term does not even begin to describe its profound effects on human
So-called “changa”, a preparation of dimethyltryptamine (DMT) mixed with a monoamine oxidase inhibitor-containing plant, as well as other herbs added (Mishor, McKenna, & Callaway, 2011, p. 113), is also sometimes present. I observed individuals, who had little or no idea regarding the effects of DMT, smoking changa for their first time, and—sometimes after just one or two inhalations—literally blasting off to radically altered states of consciousness. As I attempted to reassure a young man coming back from such an experience—spanning no more than five minutes or so in the consensus measure of time—visibly shaken and distressed, he explained that the world as he knew it had disappeared, replaced by a space whose boundaries were defined by white light, as far as the eye could see. When asked how G-d fitted into that space, he responded that that realm was something far beyond any conception we could have of G-d.

Such scenes, involving youth in the process of leaving the Charedi path exploring the world of psychoactive—and indeed psychedelic—drugs with great enthusiasm, are reminiscent of the descriptions of Morris (2008) regarding Jews from Chasidic communities in Brooklyn, New York, doing the same. His accounts, however, portray young people who had largely left their families and were living communally with each other, moving periodically from what was described as one form of dilapidated and ramshackle accommodation to another. Moreover, the drug consumption patterns of those groups, that Morris (2008) nicknamed “Magic Jews”, appeared to be substantial indeed, constituting an almost non-stop binge that included LSD, mescaline and other psychedelic phenethylamines, MDMA (ecstasy), as well as cocaine and benzodiazepines (such as Valium).

The youth from the town near Safed described here, in contrast, generally appear to be leading far more “normative” lives. Most are in the senior years of high-school, in some kind of religious educational framework (such as a yeshivah or similar), or are working as paid employees. Many still live at home, whilst others reside in rented accommodation. For most, these “psychedelic adventures”—such as the forest parties described above—are something they dip into from time to time, and certainly with less quantity and diversity of substances compared to Morris’s (2008) “Magic Jews”. Although those shared, peak psychedelic trips constitute a focal point of their own and their group’s identity, the individuals whom I became acquainted with appeared able to maintain a routine life alongside such experiences. Each person, of course, has to contend with their own particular set consciousness. The famous philosopher of religions, for instance, the Harvard Professor William James, used nitrous oxide extensively to augment his metaphysical ponderings (for example, James, 1882).
of life circumstances; some keep their colourful activities hidden from their families, inasmuch as this is possible. Others have been rejected by their kin and were no longer in contact with them. Yet others are able to speak openly to their parents about their drug experiences, even—in rare cases—in Charedi (including Breslov) families. In one such instance, a friend explained to me that whilst his parents were now committedly Charedi, they were also ba’aley tshuvah (secular Jews who had become religious), and in their own pre-religious pasts had themselves consumed cannabis and LSD.

Concerning this group of youths, I originally proceeded from a hypothesis that such frequent experiences with psychedelic drugs, in persons who had been immersed (coming as they did from religious families) within a lifeworld for which G-d was the absolute focal point, would ignite novel and radical cognitions concerning Judaism, the Infinite, and other metaphysical themes. Except in rare cases, however, I was quite wrong. Time and time again, these young people whom I engaged with—and in the case of those who became close friends, spent hours speaking to often in the very same settings here under discussion—made very little connection between the psychedelic and the religious worlds. Moreover, for them the Charedi experience was often construed as the very opposite of the consciousness-expanding, magical and fantastical psychedelic experience, and they were unable and unwilling to frame the latter in terms of the former. This was in stark contrast to the typical worldview professed by what is almost a mythological stereotype in present-day Israel; that of a thoroughly secular young man who finishes his military service and travels, for example, to India for an extended trip. There he discovers psychedelic drugs for the first time, and due to the experiences they facilitate eventually embraces Judaism and becomes a ba’al tshuvah—a newly religious devotee.

Anecdotally, almost everybody one meets in Israel knows somebody, or someone who knows somebody, who fits this stereotype. The Breslov Chasidic group in particular—due, amongst other factors, to its openness, acceptance of difference, and emphasis on “mystical” teachings—tends to attract some of these people, and several friends in the Safed Breslov community indeed fitted this mould. Many of them, although not having touched psychoactive drugs (beyond alcohol and caffeine) for years or decades, still interpreted and understood their original entheogenic experiences through the Jewish religious frame, an approach that is largely rejected by (or does not even occur to) the youths under discussion, who come to the psychedelic experience as a reaction against the Charedi way of life.

St John (2008, p. 151) suggests that trance gatherings fuelled by psychedelics—of the genre that these youth are engaging with—are essentially liminal phenomena, and that due to the “apparent contraction of institutional religion in the twentieth century”, such genres have taken on certain
aspects and functions of the ritual frame. These youth are in the process of turning away precisely from such “institutional religion” that comprises the essence of their Charedi culture, yet—as is a basic human imperative—are seeking an alternate ritual frame through which to connect to something more essential and uplifting, compared to what ordinary, day-to-day life can provide. This alternate frame they find in the “cosmic”\textsuperscript{22} setting of the psychedelic trance dance floor. In a sense, the Apollonian path of self-disciplined religious practice, with its promises of spiritual attainment at some future point in time, is being replaced with the Dionysian experience of delight in the here-and-now. St John’s (2008, p. 151) reference to “liminal phenomena”—based on Turner’s (1982) work—is especially appropriate in this context, in that these youth in some sense find themselves at the interstices of society, between the Charedi lifeworld and the broader Israeli milieu. The psychedelic experience they are seeking is similarly liminal, representing a transition between the ordinary day-to-day world, and states of consciousness that feel far more profound.

\textit{Other Observations regarding Drug Use in a Religious Context}

In the course of my fieldwork I came across two other associations between Judaism and psychoactive drugs, both of them very specific in terms of place and people; the first involved a circle of men and women—including, at times, religious individuals—who met occasionally in a town near Safed to drink ayahuasca, the DMT-containing psychedelic brew that has its origins in the rainforested lowlands of South America. The second was a Charedi man from a non-Breslov Chasidic group who—with the permission and even blessing of his Rebbe—had been using the powerful African psychedelic plant iboga (\textit{Tabernanthe iboga}) to treat drug addiction in young men.

In a town close by to Safed I several times accompanied a circle of men and women drinking ayahuasca, the psychedelic brew that is core to the cultures of many indigenous groups in the Amazon Basin and lowland South America more generally. For these groups the use of ayahuasca is steeped in teachings and traditions that provide complete cosmological and practical frameworks. The brew, in its most basic version (for endless variations, incorporating different additives, exist), consists of

\footnote{The word “cosmic” is used here in an attempt to convey the flavour of the psychedelic experience at its full, positive peak—a flavour that cannot properly be expressed in words, but that can include feelings of deep existential significance regarding the totality of one’s conscious experiences in life to that point, a sense of the numinous splendour of reality, and feelings of intense pleasure at every level of one’s being. For an extensive and novel treatment of the phenomenology of the psychedelic experience, see Merkur (1998).}
III. Ethnography

3.10 Psychoactive Explorations—From Purim to Psychedelic Drugs

the leaves of a DMT-containing plant—most commonly Psychotria viridis—mixed with the ayahuasca vine Banisteriopsis caapi, all pounded together and boiled in a lengthy preparation process. The vine contains monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) that limit the actions of this enzyme in the digestive tract, thereby rendering the DMT in the leaf orally active. The resulting experience can be a difficult yet profound one, and may involve a radical alteration of all conceivable facets of the human phenomenological experience, including affect (emotion), body feeling, sensory perception (visual, auditory and tactile), ideation, and identity (Shanon, 2002). Very common is intense vomiting—la purga or “purging”—that is usually construed by indigenous practitioners as a positive occurrence; a cleansing of the body and the spirit of their pollutants.

Since the 1990s the use of ayahuasca has spread at a rapidly accelerating rate across the globe, and “ayahuasca circles” may today be found in many major cities of the developed world. Because DMT is a Schedule I drug under the 1971 United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and consequently scheduled in most countries around the word (and furthermore, the main harmala alkaloids—that are responsible for the MAOI action of the vine—are also scheduled), this neo-shamanic activity must of necessity be clandestine. These Westernised ayahuasca ceremonies are led by a “shaman” or a circle leader, who dispenses the “medicine”, as it is usually referred to, “holds space”—maintains the spiritual and energetic integrity of the circle and keeps it protected from undesirable entities—sings and/or plays music, and generally runs the session. Almost all of these shamans are Westerners, many of whom have spent years in parts of South America—typically in Peru, Columbia, Ecuador, Venezuela or Brazil—to learn from the traditions of local ayahuasqueros. As such, each shaman brings their unique syncretised style to these circles, based on the traditional teachings they acquired, combined with their own personal vision of how to integrate those teachings into modern Western settings.

A number of such ayahuasca circles that I attended close by to Safed incorporated Jewish religious elements into their ceremony. Before the brew was drunk, for example, one of the organisers read the Wayfarer’s Prayer, a standard Hebrew passage that religious Jews commonly recite prior to making a physical journey. A few of the participants wore kipot (skullcaps), and made a standard blessing over drink before imbibing the cup of ayahuasca that was handed to them. In a remarkable display of syncretism facilitated by the shaman who was running it, the character of one particular ayahuasca session was decidedly Jewish, made so by several factors. These included the shaman’s dress, consisting of long flowing desert robes and Bedouin-style head covering; similarly his female partner’s (who was also his assistant) clothing, making her appear as if a Biblical Rebecca or Rachel
of the desert; the music that was played and sung, consisting especially of Hebrew *piyutim* (Jewish liturgical poems); the central theme of gratitude and love for *Hashem* (G-d), substituted for the commonplace “Mother” that is most often used in Westernised settings to refer to the brew itself and to some conception of the deity/energy underlying it; and a general immersion in other Jewish themes and prayers. Of course, such a ceremony was probably a unique and rare event in Israel generally, having no bearing on mainstream Jewish religion, and certainly not on the Charedi lifeworld. It demonstrates, nonetheless, a contemporary association between Judaism and consciousness altering drugs.

The final such association to be mentioned relates to a man who was a respected member and teacher in a Charedi community (not in Safed), and closely situated in that group’s hierarchy to its Rebbe, a position of great honour. In the past, however—prior to becoming religious—he had been firmly embedded in the United States countercultural movement and its associated drug scene. After his embracing of the Jewish path this man had abandoned that culture for decades, yet more recently was searching for a means of helping young drug addicts (generally to alcohol and opiates) to overcome their addiction, and came across iboga. This powerful African psychedelic, facilitating trips that can last several days, has been the object of increasing Western scientific interest in recent years, due to an accumulation of evidence that a single administration of iboga can have remarkable efficacy in treating alcohol, opiate (such as heroin) and other addictions (see, for example, Rodger, 2011).

This man described the iboga experience as no happy walk in the park, but rather, as a “shovelling of coal in the basement of Creation”, as the individual is forced by the drug to grapple with his or her deepest and darkest psychic and spiritual “knots”. Correct to the time of this writing, the legal status of the plant *Tabernanthe iboga* in Israel is uncertain, but its use does not appear to be directly contravening the law. Having shown his Rebbe the evidence, including in some cases first hand impressions through individuals whom he had met before and after their treatment, the Rebbe gave his blessing for the project. To my understanding, young men had to prove their genuine commitment, to some extent, before being accepted for this therapy. They also took upon themselves a basic religious framework, including keeping Shabbat and putting on *tefilin* as per the daily Halakhic prescription. The success rates of this psychedelic therapy combined with religious practice were apparently impressive.
The Breslov Conception of Psychoactive Drugs

This chapter has provided various observations and insights regarding associations between Jews and psychoactive drugs. The only association that relates to the religion and to its practitioners as a whole is that regarding wine; this is the only psychoactive whose consumption is an integral part of the Jewish religion. The additional discussions concerning cannabis, psychedelics, ayahuasca and iboga were limited to particular people or groups of people, in specific places. As with their opinions regarding a host of other subjects—for example, the spiritual status of the head Rav of the community (see Chapter 3.4)—the opinions of members of the Breslov group in Safed concerning drugs lie along a spectrum. Some individuals, especially ba’aley tshuvah who have had their own previous psychoactive experiences, are able to hold a relatively balanced perspective, and not package the entire topic under the banner of “evil”. On the other hand, some of these men from the same group—who left their secular lives and embraced the religious path—now actually revile drugs, perhaps because such substances represent for them former lives of permissiveness and excess.

Despite this spectrum of opinions in the community, I suggest that most of the Breslov Chasidim in Safed hold negative views towards drugs, even though the vast majority have never consumed psychoactives—beyond alcohol, caffeine and perhaps tobacco—themselves. For this majority, drugs are commonly associated with the “dark side” and evil. When I attempted to describe the psychedelic experience to them, and my own views regarding the overlap between those experiences and the experience of the Divine that Jewish Halakhic practice itself is attempting to elicit, there was an occasional openness to such ideas. That openness, however, was immediately succeeded by caveats and warnings, regarding the trickery of the Yetzer Hara (the Evil Inclination), and regarding avodah zarah (idolatry). Clearly, in the minds of many of these people, and especially in response to descriptions of my personal ayahuasca experiences in Peru that I conveyed to them, the psychedelic space was inevitably associated with foreign gods and deities, and as such perceived as dangerous and forbidden, in the strongest sense of the words. Recall also the mention in Chapter 3.4, of a group of people who were “forced out” of Rav Kenig’s community, apparently because they were “using drugs”.

In contrast to this formulaic relegation of drugs to the “dark side”, a religious, non-Breslov friend—and an accomplished and highly learned man—was able to provide an alternate Jewish view on psychoactives, and in particular on psychedelics. He had no doubt as to their power overall, and fully recognised their potential in facilitating high and holy states of consciousness. On the other hand, he
also recognised their ability to do the opposite; to produce destruction, suffering and evil. Kabbalistically, this man associated psychoactive drugs with the *qlipah nogah*. The *qlipot*, as briefly mentioned in Chapter 2.2, are the “impure shells” in which evil resides. They can be understood to exist at all levels of reality—in the spiritual structures of man and woman, for example, as well as in the overall composition of the universe. The *qlipah nogah* (“glowing/glittering shell”), however, whilst still comprising one of these shells, has a dual nature—it contains both good and evil elements, in a sense sitting halfway between the light and the dark sides. From this place, suggested my friend, comes the power and efficacy of psychoactive drugs, and as always, it is the will, intention, and self-discipline of the person using them that will determine on which side their outcome falls.

**Conclusion**

In the opening to Chapter 3.7 on “The Natural Environment and Hitbodedut”, a Kabbalistic teaching was related regarding the *forest* and the *city*. Both settings contain the presence of G-d, but—as the Hebrew letters that spell the words suggest—in the city He is more concealed, whilst in the forest more visible and revealed. This is one of the reasons why Rabbi Nachman encouraged the practice of *hitbodedut*—secluded meditative prayer—outside of town, in the woods amongst the grasses. The forest/city dichotomy constitutes an evocative metaphor, that may also be applied to the use of drugs—whether in the pursuit of recreational experience, spiritual gnosis, or anything in between. The consumption of drugs, as discrete festive events, constitutes a “forest experience”, whilst the ordinary flow of daily life—including the repetitive religious activities of the Breslov Chasidim—are of the “city” variety. Innate to the human condition appears to be a seeking of forest experiences relative to city ones, defining in a sense a figure of excitement and delight against the ground of routine and boredom. The same figure/ground relationship is symbolised by the Shabbat and festival holy days (*yemey qodesh*), versus the ordinary days of the week (*yemey chol*). Indeed, life and death themselves appear also to be, in a sense, larger categories of the same duality.

For the youth described in this chapter—including those who were smoking cannabis, but especially those involved with psychedelic raves in the forest—their religious Charedi life was akin to the “city experience”, that they felt to be ordinary, mundane, and constraining. They had become sceptical and doubtful of the message that their elders had been conveying to them for their entire, short lives to date; “persevere in this path of faith, commitment, and self-discipline, and it will lead you to the greatest delights of the soul, to be experienced only as you draw close to your Creator, and unimaginably more wonderful than anything you could taste now”. Yet, rejecting this Charedi
promise, and in the same way that a devout Chasid goes into the forest to pray or travels to Uman on
the New Year’s pilgrimage—seeking a novel and re-invigorated spiritual experience—these young
people (although not framing it in religious terms) were doing exactly the same; going into the forest
and taking LSD and similar drugs, in order to re-invigorate their experience of reality.

***
III. Ethnography

3.10 Psychoactive Explorations—From Purim to Psychedelic Drugs
IV. Analysis

4.1 “Zero Degrees of Freedom”—Towards Total Prescription and Proscription of Thought, Speech and Action

The Halakhic Stipulation of “Right” and “Wrong”

This chapter discusses a fundamental aspect of the Charedi lifeworld, and subsequently forms a basis for the psychoanalytic explanatory framework given in Chapter 4.6. In mathematics a “degree of freedom” is the number of independent configurations that a system may take on without violating any of the constraints imposed upon it. A system with “zero degrees of freedom”, therefore, is totally defined, having only one state and no independent movement along any dimension. The title of this chapter uses this expression to point to what appears to be the Jewish ethos—taken to its logical extreme in the contemporary Charedi lifeworld—of constraining human behaviour through Halakhic Law to the greatest extent possible. The declared purpose of this ethos is to be assured of complying with the Will of G-d to the highest degree. This compliance is achieved through the Law’s prescription and proscription, from the major to the minutiae, of the three modes of expression through which humans appear to exercise free will in the world—firstly and primarily through physical action, followed by speech, and finally extending even to thought.

The idea that there is a “right” and a “wrong” way to act (and speak and think) in the world is fundamental to all systems of human tradition, religion, and social organisation. Lévi-Strauss (1966, p. 10), for example, quotes an American ethnologist who describes the correct procedure amongst the Pawnee American Indians of the Great Plains for crossing a stream of water:

They [the refinements of ritual] are explicable by a concern for what one might call ‘micro-adjustment’—the concern to assign every single creature, object or feature to a place within a class. The ceremony of the Hako among the Pawnee is particularly illuminating in this respect, although only because it has been so well analysed. The invocation which accompanies the crossing of a stream of water is divided into several parts, which correspond, respectively, to the moment when the travellers put their feet in water, the moment when they move them and the moment when the water completely covers their feet. The invocation to the wind separates the moment when only the wet parts of the body feel cool: ‘Now, we are ready to move forward in safety’ (Fletcher 1904, pp.77-8). As the informant explains: ‘We must address with song every object we meet,
IV. Analysis

4.1 “Zero Degrees of Freedom”—Towards Total Prescription and Proscription of Thought, Speech and Action

because Tira’wa (the supreme spirit) is in all things, everything we come to as we travel can give us help…” (Fletcher 1904, pp.73, 81)

In a metaphorical sense, the above passage represents a description of “Pawnee Halakhah”. The latter word denotes in Hebrew “a walking”, or “the path one walks”, and refers to the exhaustive set of prescriptions and proscriptions in Judaism that govern behaviour in the world. As explained in Chapter 2.1, there are 613 mitzvot (commandments) derived from the Torah; 365 positive commandments (prescriptions) and 248 negative ones (proscriptions). Because of the theoretically infinite numbers and types of real-world situations that the core 613 commandments may be applied to, further clarification is required in order to ensure perfection and to prevent deviance on part of the devotee. The Rabbinic tradition formulated, therefore, the Halakhah over many centuries, with the purpose of ensuring adherence to the stipulations of the Torah and thereby to the Will of G-d. The Halakhah contains a seemingly vast number of rules and prohibitions concerning matters small to large, including prayer, dietary requirements, Shabbat observance, religious festivals, marriage laws, sexual conduct, financial dealings, dress, and many more.

One reason why the Halakhic body of law is so large and detailed relates to the Rabbinic principle of “building fences” around the Torah; stipulations that come to protect the Torah-based 613 core commandments. A classic example of such a fence is the concept of objects that are muqtzeh—meaning “separated” or “set aside”—on Shabbat and major religious festivals. On these occasions, as discussed, there are thirty-nine categories of creative work that are forbidden by Jewish law—including, for example, igniting a fire, measured cutting (to a specific size; not applying to food), writing, and playing a musical instrument. Whilst from a strictly Torah-based perspective the physical tools for these activities (for example, matches, scissors, pens, and a guitar) may themselves be handled on Shabbat, the Rabbis perceived that one who handles such an object may, apparently, inadvertantly use it, thereby desecrating the holy day. The Rabbis therefore labelled such objects as muqtzeh, and forbade their handling at all on such days. Breslov Chasidim, as with members of other Charedi communities, take these “setting aside” stipulations very seriously. If a small child, for instance, knocks over an electrical device on Shabbat, a parent often picks it up (for safety reasons, which according to the Halakhah override any other considerations) using their elbows. This is to emphasise that a muqtzeh object is indeed being touched, but handled in such a way that acknowledges and demonstrates this touching to be an extra-ordinary occurrence.
The somewhat “obsessive-compulsive” custom described in Chapter 3.6, consisting of the covering of kitchen bench tops with copious amounts of aluminium foil during Passover, is certainly not Rabbinically mandated, and does not, in *Halakhic* terms, constitute a bona fide “fence” around the Torah. It carries, however, the same flavour of such a fence, although here dictated by tradition and enforced by the psychology of the individual, rather than by a formal legal-religious framework. Although it may be argued that Rabbinical fences are the result of a carefully considered logic, whilst customary acts such as the one just described for Passover are the result of unreliable emotional motivations, the category of “custom”—as opposed to *Halakhic* Law—still carries much authority in Judaism (see further discussion below).

The magnum opus of the *Halakhah* is the *Shulchan Arukh*, published in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Yosef Qaro (who, incidentally, is buried in the ancient cemetery of Safed). The *Shulchan Arukh* deals with the topics listed above regarding the “vast number of rules and prohibitions concerning matters small to large”, and many others besides. One of the first (Chapter 3 in the *Shulchan Arukh*) subjects treated is called “Using the Facilities”, and constitutes a set of remarkably in-depth stipulations regarding urination and defecation; how they should be performed, which parts of the body may or may not be touched, the direction one should face, and many more. This chapter appears so early in the work because the *Shulchan Arukh* opens with the “Laws of Morning Preparation” and the order of the day. There is also, however, a deeper explanation, in that the toilet in some way represents the lowest and most grossly physical (as opposed to subtly spiritual) aspect of the human being. In a Kabbalistic sense this topic corresponds to the “most extreme” manifestation of the lowest *Sefirah* (Emanation), called *Malkhut* (Kingship), in the fourth, lowest world of Actualisation. Since the purpose of the *Shulchan Arukh* is to elevate the soul, it must begin at the lowest of places, and hence this chapter on “Using the Facilities”.

In more recent times a range of Jewish books have been published that explicate and clarify the *Halakhah* in great detail, and also that apply *Halakhic* rulings to modern technology; beginning, for example, with major topics such as the prohibition on the manual (as opposed to timer-automated) switching on or off of electricity during Shabbat, and extending to such things as the intricacies of

---

23 In the Kabbalistic system, the four Worlds of Emanation, Creation, Formation and Actualisation each contain the ten *Sefirot*. According to a basic level of explanation, the lowest *Sefirah* (*Malkhut* or Kingship) of each world is understood to correspond to the highest *Sefirah* (*Keter* or Crown) of the world below it.
IV. Analysis

4.1 “Zero Degrees of Freedom”—Towards Total Prescription and Proscription of Thought, Speech and Action

prayer schedules on flights that cross international time zones. The subject of accurate prayer times, stipulating the earliest and latest times for the three daily prayer services (and in some cases for especially sacred components thereof) was discussed in Chapter 3.3. In a particularly symbolic illustration of the Charedi ethos of “zero degrees of freedom”, one of the most commonly consulted websites (http://www.myzmanim.com/) that provides Jewish prayer times for millions of locations across the globe (by applying solar calculations to longitude and elevation), gives each such time to the nearest second. This detail has no practical application—the nearest minute would suffice—yet appears on the website nonetheless. In another example, this time directly from the Breslov Charedi lifeworld, one Friday night in Safed a group of Breslov Chasidim began the preliminary group prayer (zimun) for the Blessing of Food (birkat hamazon—“Grace”, recited at the completion of a meal) but had left out an important stage of the ritual. This stage was the “last waters” (mayim achronim)—a small amount of water from a cup or jug poured over the fingertips into a receptacle vessel, with the water container and receptacle passed around the table until all have fulfilled the obligation. The Chasidim found themselves in the middle of a blessing when they realised this omission, a situation that presented additional difficulty, because the recitation of a blessing may not be interrupted once certain words invoking the Lord—words that are used at the start of almost all formal Jewish blessings—are uttered. There appeared to be a substantial amount of stress and angst around the table concerning this entire set of circumstances. Somewhat reminiscent of the Pawnee American Indian ritual described above, the feeling was almost as if a “magic spell”, consisting of very specific words and actions, to be carried out in a particular order, had gone awry.

In contrast to this attitude, with its ethos of almost deifying the letter of the Law (in Hebrew, going to kotzo shel yud—“to the last point of the letter yud”, which is physically the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet), a few Breslov Chasidim were also able to express humour at the apparent extremes of their beliefs and practices, and occasionally at themselves. At another festival feast, for example, I conversed with the father of the household about my anthropological work. He joked about being a guinea pig for my study, and several minutes later began dipping his finger into his wine glass, dripping drops of wine onto his plate, and repeating the action whilst counting in a whisper. A few moments after I became interested in these actions he—soon followed by myself and the entire table—burst into laughter, as he told me that he was inventing a ritual for me to document!

The entire Halakhic body of “dos” and “don’ts” is supposed to constitute for the Jew the path to self-perfection; by following it he or she elevates themselves in increasing degrees and earns merit to cleave to the Creator. In terms of having these “dos” and “don’ts” spelled out for apparently every
conceivable situation—with the objective of “zero degrees of freedom”—the role of the Rav (the head Rabbi of the Safed Breslov community) becomes clearer. Chapter 3.4 discussed the role in the community of Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig—the Rav—in some detail. An important function of his position is to dispense advice to his Chasidim on almost every topic imaginable, ranging from matters of major life significance to minor details; for example, marriage choices, financial decisions, whether a son should be encouraged to study in a yeshiva or join the Israeli army, marital problems, or indecisiveness over plans to knock down a household wall to enlarge a room. When the entire body of Halakhic Law cannot provide a clear course of action, Breslov Chasidim—as with other Chasidim, and indeed, Charedi Jews more generally—very frequently consult with their rabbi. The rabbi thus serves as a mechanism that brings the asymptote, so to speak, closer to the zero line, ever in its quest for total stipulation of how one is to proceed according to the Will of G-d. An important precept in Judaism is that once one picks a rabbi to take advice from on a regular basis, he or she must follow that advice wholeheartedly, regardless of whether the recipient likes it or not.

In a similar vein is the precept (discussed in Chapter 3.2, in the context of dress) of “doing as one’s parents did”, again as a guiding principle generally, and particularly in cases of uncertainty as to how to act. Through this precept, the emphasis in Judaism on obedience and compliance—with the Will of G-d, with the commandments of the Torah, with the stipulations of the Halakhah, and with the norms and customs of one’s parents—becomes highlighted once more. The latter category of custom (minhag), as opposed to strict Halakhah, is a further complexity unto itself, and is discussed at some length in Jewish sources such as the Talmud. These discussions provide extensive guidelines regarding customs; when they are to be followed, when they may be discarded, and how a particular minhag may eventually metamorphose into Halakhah. The precedence in the contemporary Charedi world of written texts over and above custom as a source of truth for guiding conduct is discussed at length by Soloveitchik (1999) and is treated below.

**Jewish Perspectives on Halakhah are Variable**

Whilst the Halakhah appears to epitomise an approach of rigidity in regards to the total stipulation of how a Jew is to act, speak and think in the world, a deeper examination of the topic reveals highly variable Jewish perspectives on the matter. In discussions with one religious, non-Breslov friend in Safed—a very learned and spiritual man—several themes were teased out. Firstly, this friend pointed out that whilst the 613 mitzvot (commandments) are taken directly from the Torah in a clear-cut fashion, the massive body of Halakhah established from them is far from clear-cut. There is, in fact,
controversy or debate (machloqet) within almost all of the sources—the Talmud foremost amongst them—from which Halakhah as it stands today is derived. Therefore, this friend suggested that “… the Shulchan Arukh of modern times is only one possible ‘reality’ of Halakhah. The [contemporary] Charedi world would give the impression of one single, monolithic code of Law, but this is an illusion”. Returning to the mathematical metaphor inherent in this present chapter’s title, the original set of 613 Torah-based commandments may be said to have been inputted, in an ongoing fashion over thousands of years, into a complex function; the outputs of this function, collated across time, constitute the contemporary body of Halakhah. The function, however, has itself been the subject of debate and change over the centuries; primarily reflecting the ongoing yet shifting Rabbinic zeitgeist. Thus, whilst the Shulchan Arukh is today accepted and venerated throughout the Jewish world, it represents only one solution set to the problem of applying the original 613 commandments to daily life.

The second theme discussed with the aforementioned friend were the initial objections, including by highly regarded rabbinical scholars, to the actual publication of the Shulchan Arukh itself in the mid-sixteenth century. Perhaps foremost amongst these objectors was the Maharal of Prague—Maharal being a Hebrew acronym denoting “Our Teacher the Rabbi Loew”, and referring to the sixteenth century Talmudic scholar and Jewish mystic, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (he was also, incidentally, the mystic credited with the creation of the famed “Golem of Prague”). The Maharal’s objections to this codification of the Halakhah are also cited by Sorotzkin (2013, p. 201). My friend summarised his understanding of these objections as follows: the Maharal saw the publication of the Shulchan Arukh as a negative development, because the very essence of Judaism—ultimately related to the concept of free choice between Good and Evil (as discussed in Chapter 2.1)—calls for an active, autonomous process, by each individual, in applying the Law to their daily lives. In this regard, he explained, the Maharal emphasised that given a particular religious problem or question, it would be better to reach an incorrect conclusion and act “wrongly”, yet through a personal and active application of the Halakhah, rather than to act “correctly”, but through being told what to do. According to this line of thinking, it would appear that the Charedi aspiration for zero degrees of freedom is ultimately and somewhat paradoxically flawed, for it defeats its own purpose, of allowing the individual to choose Good over Evil of their own free will (and this is why the Yetzer Hara—the Evil Inclination—exists in the first place).

The same friend finally raised a third theme in relation to Halakhic observance in Charedi society. He lamented the fact that Halakhic application there is largely black and white—a thing is either
required or not required, permissible or not permissible. Yet, this friend asked, is not each individual at a different point in their spiritual progression, a multi-dimensional progression that—although not knowing where it began, nor truly where it ends—consists of many chapters and stages? He suggested, therefore, rather than a “one size fits all” code of Law that is applied across the board, the idea of a graded Halakhah. According to this idea, the basic prescriptions and proscriptions of the Torah would still stand as absolute Jewish law; however, the mostly Rabbinical body of Halakhah derived from them must contain a mechanism that allows for a more relaxed and humanistic application of the Law, depending on the individual’s total situation. Whilst gradations of chumrah—strictness of interpretation—certainly exist in Jewish theory and practice, an ethos of a graded approach appears to be generally foreign to Charedi thinking; indeed, as this chapter is seeking to demonstrate and emphasise, its ethos is quite the opposite. The result of the lack of such a graded approach is, in many cases, severe psychological anguish, including guilt and anxiety. This topic is discussed below, as well as in Chapter 4.6.

Some Psychological Aspects of “Zero Degrees of Freedom”

Carl Jung (2014 [1935 lectures], p. 127) states that “Fanaticism is always a sign of repressed doubt”. The inner dimensions of the Charedi aspiration towards zero degrees of freedom—and I take this aspiration to be a form of the “fanaticism” that Jung refers to—are clearly complex and manifold. Doubt, as one such inner factor, must at times underlie an individual’s entire religious-devotional project; an ethos of doing more—more rituals, ordinances, stipulations, and similar—may therefore be a kind of psychological antidote to such doubt. In one of his major works, Spero (1992) discusses the idea that the Halakhah consists of structures that have their origins in the human psychic interior, structures constituting an objectification in the external world of inner relationships between self, and the most fundamental psychological religious object—“G-d”. This theme of psychic structuration is taken up in detail in the last Chapter (4.6) of this thesis.

As has been discussed, the Halakhah extends to all things, beings, times, and so forth. Spero (1992, p. 24) writes: “The purview of Halakhah is essentially boundless in that there is no behaviour that is not to be subsumed under one or another of Halakhah’s general or specific forms…” Yet, despite the already highly prescribed and proscribed lives that Breslov Chasidim lead, I observed in many (but by no means all) a drive towards introducing yet stricter and more numerous religious stipulations into their lives. This drive towards “doing more” appears to be stronger, on average, in ba’aley tshuvah (secular Jews who have become religious) compared to Chasidim who were born into the
Breslov community. It is likely, then, that this drive towards doing more stems from several motivations, including a need to prove oneself (to G-d, and indeed, to one’s own self) and overcome doubts, but also from a generally stronger religious zeal, and perhaps too, an unconscious desire for greater social acceptability and status.

One American Breslov ba’al tshuvah used an analogy taken from sport to explain why he had committed to the Charedi way of life, and why he thought that it was the best environment for his children to grow up in. He talked about the “best box” at a baseball game; if one is supporting a team with all of one’s heart, he explained, then of course one wants the best. And, “the Charedi world represents the best”. This friend admitted that there are indeed problems within the Charedi community as a whole; however, he believed strongly that it was still the best type of society from which to serve G-d and walk in His ways.

Another Chasid, also a ba’al tshuvah but of Israeli origin, gave a relatively sophisticated answer to the question of why he was living the Charedi life. Firstly, he argued, human beings, bereft of a framework of moral guidance that is external to them, are unable to ascertain of their own accord what is good and right, as opposed to evil and wrong. The morality of a given system, in other words, can be determined only in comparison to standards (presumably of a “higher order”) outside of that system; moral imperatives cannot be extracted from the system itself. And these higher order standards that define human morality, the Chasid explained, are the stipulations of the Torah. This Torah, given by the Almighty Himself, originates from a space that is entirely outside of the world of human existence. Without the Torah as an absolute and immutable benchmark, the Chasid argued, there would be no gold standard for defining morality, and certainly no way for human beings to know how to live morally. Even if they tried to do good, yet relied on the machinations of man as opposed to the wisdom of G-d, humans would be sure to fail, their efforts subverted by the Evil Inclination and leading only to ruin.

In regards to why he chose a specifically Charedi—as opposed to a more generally Jewish religious—life of Torah observance, this man’s response captured an essential aspect of the Charedi ethos, an ethos that this present chapter seeks to emphasise, and also one that leads directly to the subject matter of the following Chapter 4.2, on “The Charedi Constitution of Self through Other”. The mission of a Jew, he explained, is to adhere to the letter of the Law down to the most minute detail, otherwise, “we don’t know where we’ll end up”. There is a slippery slope, he opined, such that if one cuts corners on small observances, within a few years or a few generations, major transgressions will follow. This
Chasid cited the apparent prevalence of robbery, rape and murder in contemporary times as examples of this slippery slope; the situation, he argued (essentially echoing the Jewish doctrine of the “Decline of the Generations”), is becoming worse with each passing generation. The only way to avoid falling into major transgressions, therefore, is to follow the Law utterly and completely.

Another friend—religious but not Charedi—remarked that this black and white approach is powerful, for it provides the devotee with some measure of certitude in what is essentially a highly uncertain (and therefore anxiety-provoking) world. In the first Chasid, who emphasised his fear of the “slippery slope”, I sensed a fear of the other, an other that is always waiting in the shadows to ensnare the unwary. Whether that other is objectified as the Evil Inclination (Yetzer Hara; see Chapter 2.1), Amalek (see Chapter 4.4), the non-Jewish nations (goyim; see Chapter 3.8) or the debauched lifeworld of non-religious Jewry (see Chapter 3.3), it is always there, pressing, like “barbarians at the gates”. There must, in other words, always be something external as the cause of fear.

This fear of an impending evil, subsequently, provides all the more reason to follow the commandments of G-d down to the last detail, straying neither left nor right from the letter of the Law. The typical dress of Charedi men (see Chapter 3.2) is highly symbolic of this black and white approach. When challenged that his slippery slope conception was a logical fallacy, in that it assumes chains of cause-and-effect that are far from established and also denies the possibility of a middle ground, the Chasid dismissed such arguments. He cited again Torah-derived passages that in his mind warn—and already did so thousands of years ago—of all the woes of the world as humanity is experiencing them today, as well as Talmudic teachings that caution against over-philosophising as a means of justifying departures, whether minor or major, from the Halakhic ways of G-d. Indeed, in Breslov circles the word “philosopher”, as well as Hebraized word-forms arising from it (such as lehitpalsef—“to philosophise”) are generally pejorative. Several Breslov Chasidim remarked to me that Rabbi Nachman emphasised the path of simple faith; certainly in G-d, but also in one’s teachers and rabbis. These Chasidim warned, echoing traditional Breslov thinking on this matter, that over-intellectualising is sure to be hijacked by the Evil Inclination and bent to its own purposes; this is the “curse of the wise”. For such reasons, they explained, Rabbi Nachman advocated an approach to the service of G-d highlighting simplicity, and frowning upon any overly philosophical or intellectual grappling with the tenets of the approach itself. In the same vein, Rabbi Nachman is said to have forbidden his followers from reading the seminal “Guide to the Perplexed”, written by the revered Maimonides (also known as the Rambam) in the twelfth century.
An additional and important psychological consequence of the drive to “zero degrees of freedom” is the apparent cognitive dissonance that accompanies Charedi society and individuals therein. Research and theories of cognitive dissonance were particularly prominent in the experimental psychological literature of the 1950s/60s (for example, Festinger, 1962). The term essentially refers to two pieces of information in an individual’s mind that are not compatible with one another, thereby creating internal psychological conflict; that is, dissonance. A classic example of such conflict may be experienced by a cigarette smoker; there is the fact that he or she smokes, on the one hand, and their awareness of the detrimental effects of that smoking on the other. Dissonance is created by these two opposing pieces of information, pieces that are not logically congruent with one other (or actually are logically congruent, but only with the admission of a third, unpalatable and anxiety-provoking fact; for example, that one is addicted to tobacco and not in control of the situation).

I suggest that the archetypal Charedi cognitive dissonance is comprised of the fact that Charedi individuals live a life following, or at least attempting to follow, the letter of the Jewish law down to its very last detail (and if possible, beyond). This kind of life—bearing the “burden of the Torah”—is an often demanding and difficult one. When undertaken in a typically contemporary Charedi manner, involving the study of Torah rather than working to support one’s family (see Chapters 3.1 and 3.3), entire extra layers of financial difficulty and material impoverishment may be added to the Charedi experience. Dissonance arises from the direct, first-hand observations by such Charedi adherents regarding non-religious Jews around them, who—despite breaking the Shabbat, desecrating the festivals, not keeping kosher, and so forth—are in many cases leading successful and prosperous lives, with happy and fulfilling families. This cognitive dissonance is dealt with in several different ways. One such way, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.4, is by applying the Talmudic precept that these irreligious Jews are having their reward—for whatever good they have done (for no human being is without at least some good points)—“paid out” in This World, Olam Hazeh. Those fruits, however, are sadly limited, confined at most to the interval of a human lifetime; these people, who shun the ways of G-d, will lose (or will have to work extra hard to make amends to get to) the greatest reward of all, which is the eternal bliss of closeness to G-d in Olam Haba, the World to Come.

The degree to which this particular form of cognitive dissonance is present in parts of the Charedi lifeworld was powerfully driven home for me by the headline of an article in one edition of a pamphlet, that was handed out on a weekly basis following the qabalat Shabbat (Reception of the Shabbat) synagogue service on Friday evenings. Paraphrasing from the Hebrew, the headline of the article ran approximately, “Will women perform more mitzvot in the Redemption?”. Myself going
through a turbulent time in terms of personal grappling with the Jewish faith, of my contending with the Charedi mindset and its aspiration towards “zero degrees of freedom”, and of what I understood to be that mindset’s abhorrent deification of the Law (rather than living it as a *path* to the Divine), this headline aroused true resentment on my part, for it epitomised much of what I felt to be unpalatable regarding Charedi religious practice.

This last statement requires some clarification. The Talmud provides extensive discussions regarding the reality that human beings generally, and Jews specifically, will experience following the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. This reality is further differentiated from *Olam Haba* (the World to Come), which constitutes a yet higher dimension of metaphysical existence. There is much debate and uncertainty in the canonical sources regarding these eschatological states, yet what is certain is that they will be radically different from ordinary reality as it is experienced today in *Olam Hazeh* (This World). Recall from Chapter 2.1 that, in the metaphor used by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (the RaMCHaL), *Olam Hazeh* is the place of testing and earning, containing all the necessary elements to allow a person to reject evil, to choose to cleave to G-d, to become more “G-d-like” in his or her attributes, and to therefore earn his or her true reward. That true reward is received in *Olam Haba*—the eternal state of rest and delight for souls—each soul according to its own level of earned merit in union with the Divine (Luzzatto, 1997 [18th century], p. 53). The coming of the Messiah, therefore, heralds the end, or at least the beginning of the end, of the time of *earning*, and the ushering in of the time of *reward*. Luzzatto (1997 [18th century], p. 47) emphasises that, because G-d wants to bestow the ultimate good upon his creations, the time of earning is finite, whilst the time of reward is infinite; *Olam Hazeh* is the journey (akin, using another metaphor, to the ordinary days of the week), whilst *Olam Haba* is the final destination (akin to the Shabbat). The Talmud (Tractate Niddah 61b) records the sage Rabbi Yosef stating (based on a Rabbinic ruling regarding shrouds for corpses) that, “This implies that the commandments will be abolished in the

---

24 A problematic and logically paradoxical statement, for if the time of reward is infinite, then it extends into all spaces and times, infinitely and totally. If such is the case, what space is left for the finitude of the world of earning? Such questions, and their possible solutions, are reminiscent of Hindu and Buddhist discourses positing that all beings are “Enlightened”, right Here and Now; however, that they are not “aware” of their Enlightenment (and this is the essence of Maya). Such questions also appear clothed in the same metaphysical costume as the paradox (to the human mind) of the *tzimtzum*; the “withdrawal” or “contraction” of the Infinite in order to create “space” for the finitude of Creation.

163
Hereafter”, and Rabbi Yochanan adds, “What is the purport of the Scriptural text, Free among the dead? As soon as a man dies he is free from the commandments” (Come and Hear, undated).

And yet, disregarding these precepts—that are core to the Jewish religion—the Charedi mindset appears to be so obsessed with the mitzvot themselves, that it produces articles such as the one cited above, asking whether women will perform more mitzvot after the Redemption! I suggest, then, that much of the self-regard of the typical Breslov Chasid (and more generally, Charedi Jew), and especially the ba’al tshuvah, is tied up in this obsession; a self-regard contingent upon self-perceptions of how one is fulfilling (or shirking) the work of the mitzvot. The particular brand of guilt that may arise from such a psychological position is discussed following the section below.

Diachronic Aspects of the Charedi Zeitgeist; the Work of Professors Haym Soloveitchik and Menachem Friedman

This chapter has sought to make clear that whilst Judaism, as a way of life, was from its earliest days defined by prescriptions and proscriptions at all levels of behaviour, the particular cultural interpretation and application of Judaism by the contemporary Charedi community has taken these stipulations to a greater extreme than ever before, aspiring, essentially, to “zero degrees of freedom”. Clearly, however, this Charedi extreme did not emerge overnight, nor from a vacuum, but is firmly rooted in social and historical developments. Professor Haym Soloveitchik (born in 1937) is a leading historian of Jewish Halakhah, as well as a widely published commentator on subjects pertaining to Judaism more generally. Himself originating from a world of Torah-based religious observance, yet also being a respected academic—having spent time, amongst others, at Harvard and the Hebrew Universities—his widely publicised essay “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy” (Soloveitchik, 1999) contains key discussions and insights relevant to the subject matter at hand. For this reason I quote him at some length in the discussion below.

Soloveitchik (1999) describes and seeks to explain a radical change that has been taking place in Jewish “ultra-Orthodox”—that is, Charedi—society, a change involving “the very texture of religious life and the entire religious atmosphere” (p. 321). The essence of this change, occurring across the second half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, has been the new precedence and status accorded to religious texts, as the ultimate source of authority and control regarding religious practice. Initially this may appear to be a somewhat surprising statement, for the place of texts—the Torah foremost amongst them—in Judaism has always been paramount. The important distinction that Soloveitchik makes, however, is that the Jewish way of life was passed down from generation to
IV. Analysis

4.1 “Zero Degrees of Freedom”—Towards Total Prescription and Proscription of Thought, Speech and Action

generation not through book learning, but through “mimetic transmission”, particularly in the home; first-hand, practical imitation of fathers by sons and mothers by daughters. The traditional Ashkenazic position, across centuries in the Old World, was “one which saw the practice of the people as an expression of halakhic truth… Custom was a correlative datum of the halakhic system. And, on frequent occasions, the written word was reread in light of traditional behaviour” (Soloveitchik, 1999, p. 322).

In the past few decades, however Soloveitchik (1999, p. 324) explains that:

… a dramatic shift occurs… From then on, traditional conduct, no matter how venerable, how elementary, or how closely remembered, yields to the demands of theoretical knowledge. Established practice can no longer hold its own against the demands of the written word.

The weight of the written text, then, has gone into ascension, whilst the importance accorded to minhagim (customs), as an authentic source of guidance regarding the correct way of doing things, into decline. One phenomenon resulting from this shift has been an explosion of contemporary Halakhic publications clarifying a host of subjects relating to practical observance. These subjects concern not only Halakhic implications for modern technology—clarification of which would be an expected modern development—but also for the most essential of Jewish practices, that have been going on unbroken for millennia. The application of tefillin (small, scroll-containing boxes that are temporarily bound to the body with leather straps), daily prayers, and Passover observances are amongst the examples given by Soloveitchik in this regard. He writes (p. 323), “Abruptly and within a generation, a rich literature of religious performance has been created, and—this should be underscored—it focuses on performances that Jews have engaged in and articles they have used for thousands of years”. He goes on to add (p. 324) that this development’s “… earliest manifestations were in spheres of religious performance where there had been universal compliance. The audit, rather, has encompassed all aspects of religious life, and its conclusions have left little untouched”.

This entire process discussed by Soloveitchik is closely related to that which I observed within the Breslov community in Safed, and have described as an aspiration towards “zero degrees of freedom”. When taken in light of the explanatory framework he gives for this development, its prevalence in the Breslov milieu becomes clearer. Soloveitchik (1999, p. 325) suggests both distal and proximal causes for this shift from an unquestioning acceptance of custom to an emphasis on the written word, and for the subsequent “audit” and intensification of religious life that accompanied it. In indirect and
more general terms, the “… successive ideological assaults of the Socialist and Communist movements and that of Zionism” are cited, as factors that have shaped the religious milieu of Ashkenazic Charedi practice, contributing to the transformation described above (Soloveitchik, 1999, p. 325). In a more immediate sense, however, Soloveitchik explains that it was the coming together, following the Second World War, of Jews from disparate nation states and communities into the melting pots of Israel and the United States, that instigated the social and psychological conditions underlying this shift. In the Old World each Jewish community, in every village, town and city— whilst of course adhering to the precepts of the venerated Shulchan Arukh—had its particular customs, traditions and ways of following those precepts. Each community represented, in effect, one of many possible “realities of Halakhah”, as discussed above. A community’s religious practices (and indeed, entire way of life, for there was no clear distinction between the two) were passed down first-hand from parent to child in the home, from teacher to student in the school, from rabbi to congregant in the synagogue, and so forth. Until the “ideological assaults” of post-Enlightenment thinking and modern political movements, as well as several other major historical events25 in the Jewish world, there was probably no self-reflexive questioning of their way of life, nor any conception that things could be done any differently.

Within the melting pots of Israel and the United States, however, came the problem of differing customs and practices. Therefore:

If one seeks to do things properly (and these “things” are, after all, God’s will), the only course is to attempt to comply simultaneously with as many opinions as possible. Otherwise one risks invalidation; hence the policy of “maximum position compliance,” so characteristic of contemporary jurisprudence, which in turn leads to yet further stringency (Soloveitchik, 1999, pp. 326-327).

This explanatory framework is so relevant to the Breslov movement because the Breslov Chasidic group represents a melting pot par excellence, attracting adherents from across the spectrum of Jewish society (see Chapter 2.4); this is certainly the case with regards to the Breslov community in Safed.

25 These events included the messianic furors that swept the Jewish world in the seventeenth (Sabbateanism) and eighteenth/nineteenth (Frankism) centuries, as well as the Chasidic movement itself that originated in the eighteenth century.
Their aspiration towards “zero degrees of freedom”, therefore, may be seen not only in a psychological light as discussed above, but also in terms of historical developments, and of a sociological process that comes to tie adherents—originating from the same broad tradition yet practicing it in somewhat disparate ways—together.

Friedman (1995, pp. 128-149) describes essentially the same phenomenon of “zero degrees of freedom”, referring to it as the “world of humrot [stringent interpretations]” (p129). Writing several years prior to Soloveitchik (1999), he traces the post-Second World War emergence of the Charedi move towards stringency, similarly citing the rupture of the living tradition, as well as “…the very basis of Jewish existence being challenged and the erosion of religion and tradition [being] on the increase…” (Friedman, 1995, p. 137), as reasons for the growing Charedi commitment to Halakhic literature and the drive towards zero degrees of freedom. Friedman also cites the modern welfare state, increasing standards of living, and technological advancement, as factors making more stringent religious interpretations feasible for the average adherent (pp. 141-143).

Addressing on a fundamental level the entire devotional religious project, Soloveitchik (1999, p. 328) writes:

A tireless quest for absolute accuracy, for “perfect fit”—faultless congruence between conception and performance—is the hallmark of contemporary religiosity. The search is dedicated and unremitting; yet it invariably falls short of success. For spiritual life is an attempt, as a great pianist once put it, to play music that is better than it can be played. Such an endeavor may finally become so heavy with strain that it can no longer take wing, or people may simply weary of repeated failure, no matter how inspired. The eager toil of one age usually appears futile to the next, and the performative aspiration, so widespread now, may soon give way to one of a wholly different kind, even accompanied by the derision that so often attends the discarding of an ideal. Yet this Sisyphean spirituality will never wholly disappear, for there will always be those who hear the written notes and who find in absolute fidelity the most sublime freedom.

Regarding those who “find in absolute fidelity the most sublime freedom”, this is precisely what my religious friend was referring to—as discussed above—through his remark that the black and white Charedi approach is a powerful one. The Charedi path is a kind of ultimate gambit; for the searching masses it will—as Soloveitchik is quoted above—“fall short of success”, leading only to cycles of alternating religious zeal, Divine experience and joy on the one hand, yet failure, guilt and anxiety on
the other (see the next section below). Yet for a rare few, who have the inner strength to stand fast in
the face of the myriad attachments, desires and doubts that seek to tear one from the devotional path
and its Olympian demands (and such an inner strength is a profound thing indeed), this journey of
absolute fidelity might well lead into sublime regions of Being and bliss.

The concluding words of Soloveitchik (1999, p. 351) for his entire essay are reminiscent of the
troubled point made several times in this thesis, concerning what appears to be the Charedi deification
of the letter of the Law over and above the Divine experience itself:

It is this rupture in the traditional religious sensibilities that underlies much of the
transformation of contemporary Orthodoxy. Zealous to continue traditional Judaism
unimpaired, religious Jews seek to ground their new emerging spirituality less on a now
unattainable intimacy with Him, than on an intimacy with His Will, avidly eliciting Its
intricate demands and saturating their daily lives with Its exactions. Having lost the touch
of His presence, they seek now solace in the pressure of His yoke.

“Jewish Guilt” and Conceptions of “Good” and “Evil”

Some of the points made so far in this chapter regarding the obsessive nature of Charedi practice were
identified and discussed—in regards to religious traditions generally—by Freud (1957 [1907]) in his
aptly titled essay *Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices*. Freud draws a close analogy between
religiously “obsessive acts or ceremonials” and clinically obsessional neuroses, pointing out that as
with neglect of apparently illogical obsessive compulsions in a clinical patient’s private life, neglect
by a devotee of their religious ceremonials will lead to pronounced anxiety and guilt (Freud, 1957
[1907], pp. 25-27). In both cases, the strict regimes enacted are far from nonsensical (as they might
appear to the casual observer) but rather “… are throughout and in all their details full of meaning,
that they serve important interests of the personality” (Freud, 1957 [1907], p. 28). Freud recognises
and emphasises the fact that the pious especially are given to obsessional religious acts, for setting
their personal standards—consisting of the denial of instinct in favour of principled will (see
below)—so high, they are usually doomed to cycles of failure in their religious undertakings. Their
ceremonial acts, therefore, often become defensive and protective measures. In his final paragraphs
on this topic, Freud (1957 [1907], p. 34) concludes:

It cannot be denied that in the religious sphere also there is a similar [to the clinical]
tendency to a displacement of psychical values, and indeed in the same direction, so that
petty ceremonials gradually become the essence of religious practices, and replace the ideas underlying them…

In view of these resemblances and analogies one might venture to regard the obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart to the formation of a religion, to describe this neurosis as a private religious system, and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis [italics added].

Further discussion of Freud’s fairly pronounced views on religion, as well as a number of psychoanalytic perspectives on the Charedi phenomenon more generally, are given in the final Chapter (4.6) of this thesis.

The stereotypical expression “Jewish guilt” is no random coincidence, and this chapter has presented foundations for a psychological basis for understanding the essence of such “Jewish guilt”. In its most basic form, it arises from the experiences of a people who have spent thousands of years seeking to do the practically impossible; to live by a moral code that asks of the human to become super-human, to “defeat” and transcend his or her base drives and desires—and sometimes even their common sense—in the service of the Creator Himself. Jewish guilt, in other words, arises out of what is one of the most ancient of human battles, that of will versus instinct. On this matter Soloveitchik (1999, p. 333), somewhat similarly to Freud, writes: “Through a millennium of ethical (mussar) writings runs a ceaseless warfare between will and instinct, as does the pessimistic feeling that the ‘crooked timber of humanity’ will never quite be made straight”. The perennial angst arising from this warfare, and the guilt experienced when an individual feels themselves to be “losing” rather than “winning” at it, can and does affect, of course, all followers of the myriad devotional religions and traditions practiced by humankind. It appears, however, that this type of guilt—resulting from a sense of failing to serve one’s Creator perfectly, on the one hand, and believing that one’s very existence has as its ultimate purpose that service to Him, on the other—finds particularly fertile ground within the Jewish milieu.

The first reason for this state of affairs is the Jewish conception of the Jews as the “Chosen People” of G-d. As discussed in Chapter 3.8, this attribution of chosenness is interpreted by different Jews in several different manners, including in the sense of being innately superior to those from the non-Jewish nations, as well as in the sense of being chosen to carry a greater burden and serve G-d in particular ways (through the mitzvot of the Torah), with concomitant reward. Regardless of how it is understood, however, this chosenness—constituting one of the core principles of the entire Jewish
IV. Analysis

4.1 “Zero Degrees of Freedom”—Towards Total Prescription and Proscription of Thought, Speech and Action

faith—has been percolating in the collective Jewish awareness from ancient days through to the present era. According to Judaism’s own teachings, since the world today is in chaos and the Messiah has not yet come, the Jewish nation as a whole must be doing something wrong. Certainly the Charedi, yet perhaps even the Western secular, Jew experiences—whether as a daily reality or as an unconscious pang—some measure of guilt regarding this woeful situation. The “Jewish project” is several thousand years old, and the psychic forces exerted upon its participants—whether willing or unwilling, and regardless of their declared views—by such an ancient project is not to be underestimated.

The second reason that the Jewish milieu constitutes such fertile ground for the particular type of guilt under discussion is simply because a Halakhic-based service of G-d is a very difficult undertaking indeed. From the moment the devotee awakens to the moment they lie down to sleep, their life is prescribed and proscribed by a myriad of stipulations (and indeed, there are even Halakhic rulings on which physical sleeping positions one should and should not adopt, as well as actions to perform following certain types of dreams); Judaism, in essence, is a religion of “shoulds”. In particular, the Charedi understanding of service to G-d, as discussed in this chapter, takes matters to an extreme, with little or no gradation; every act, utterance and thought may therefore be placed either into the camp of “Good” (with its concomitant emotional reward), or onto the side of “Evil” (with the subsequent guilt that it spawns). As has been discussed several times (for example, in Chapter 1.3 on “Methodology”; in Chapter 3.10 through mention of the dual/ambiguous metaphysical “shell”, the qlipah nogah; and above in introducing the idea of a “graded Halakhah”), whilst Judaism in theory usually does accommodate gradations of severity, alternate rulings, and essentially manifold views regarding a particular matter, in practice (at least in the lived realities of Charedi adherents) a black and white approach prevails. And the slip from white into black can be a very easy one indeed.

Metaphysical discussions regarding ultimate (non-relative) Good and Evil are as old as humankind itself, and it is not the purpose of this chapter to give a historical review of Western or other traditions’ thinking on this matter. What is clear from the Breslov lifeworld, however, is that in their daily lives devotees are constantly assailed by questions of good and evil, and by the guilt arising from self-perceived transgressions in this domain. Furthermore and importantly, a specific act is not necessarily defined as good or evil by its observable or logical outcomes, but rather, by whether it is understood to comply with the Will of G-d as expressed through the Halakhah. Thus, moral and ethical questions regarding action in the human world take on an abstracted quality; the Good is not to be determined through the real-world results of a particular action, but rather, through its critique
IV. Analysis

4.1 “Zero Degrees of Freedom”—Towards Total Prescription and Proscription of Thought, Speech and Action

according to a rigorous code that is understood to originate from outside of that human world. In giving charity to a poor person, for example, a Breslover may well feel a sense of rightness arising from helping a person in need. Yet, I would suggest that more often than not, foremost in their mind is the fact that they are performing a mitzvah as dictated by the Halakhah. Conversely, in the Charedi (and particularly Breslov) milieu, great guilt is invariably associated with sexual transgressions, including, for instance, masturbation. This guilt, that a young Chasid will almost certainly experience after performing such an act, will almost never arise from an understanding of the real-world implications of that act; including, for example, the biochemical expenditure associated with it, the dispersal of psychic energy, a sense of shame regarding inappropriate fantasies about a real-world person, and similar. Rather, the deep sense of guilt will arise from the Halakhically taboo nature of the act, as would surely have been emphasised (by various—and often indirect—means) to the Chasid since his childhood.

An excerpt from a discussion with a Breslov friend regarding prohibitions on Shabbat illustrates the extent to which conceptions of good and evil are often, in the Charedi mindset, abstracted from real-world consequences and instead formulated purely on the basis of Halakhic logic. We discussed the imperative to break the Shabbat if it involves the saving of a human life; indeed, according to Jewish law, almost any commandment (bar three particular ones) may and must be transgressed in order to save a life. This Chasid, however, corrected me, pointing out that the Shabbat may not be broken to save just any life, but only a Jewish one. I asked him directly whether he actually would not, for example, extinguish a fire in a burning building on Shabbat to save the life of a non-Jewish baby; he replied directly that indeed, he would not. Regardless of the extent to which this declaration is taken to be predictive of action in a potential real-world situation, and the philosophical problems generally associated with any kind of hypothetical scenario aside, this man’s response was indicative of a particularly Charedi approach to the understanding of good, evil and moral action in the world.

***
IV. Analysis

4.1 “Zero Degrees of Freedom”—Towards Total Prescription and Proscription of Thought, Speech and Action
4.2 “Barbarians at the Gates”—The Charedi Constitution of Self through Other

But as I pursue these games... I see vividly that I depend on your being down for my being up. I would never be able to know that I belong to the in-group of “nice” or “saved” people without the assistance of an out-group of “nasty” or “damned” people. How can any in-group maintain its collective ego without relishing dinner-table discussions about the ghastly conduct of outsiders?... Even Saint Thomas Aquinas let it out that part of the blessedness of the saints in Heaven was that they could look over the battlements and enjoy the “proper justice” of the sinners squirming in Hell. All winners need losers; all saints need sinners; all sages need fools—that is, so long as the major kick in life is to “amount to something” or to “be someone” as a particular and separate godlet.

Alan Watts (1989 [1966], pp. 117-118)

The inspiration for this present chapter emerged from a realisation during fieldwork that for a relatively insular and self-absorbed people, the proportion of daily conversations amongst Breslov friends in Safed that make a point of contrasting G-d’s Chosen People and their future beneficent Redemption with the goyim (non-Jews) and their spiritual demi se, is remarkable. Some specific examples of such conversations were documented in Chapter 3.8, and in some cases are referred to again below. In time, it became apparent that the conception of a spiritually inferior—yet nonetheless threatening—other, is a core constituent of the Charedi community’s sense of its own identity.

The idea that it is the separation between opposing poles that gives rise to the very existence of the world is as old as religion and metaphysics itself. Urbach (1987, p. 474), in a specifically Jewish homiletic example, writes:

But in a homily attributed to the Amora Rav or R. Johanan it is narrated that after the prayer for the elimination for the craving of idolatry had been granted, the Sages said: Since this is a time of grace, let us make supplications concerning the Tempter who incites to (sexual) sin. (Accordingly) they prayed and he was delivered into their hands. Said (a prophet) to them: Beware, you will slay the whole world, if you slay him.

The story goes on to relate that the Sages imprisoned him (“him” presumably being the Yetzer Hara—the Evil Inclination—of lust) for three days, and eventually blinded him and let him go. Urbach interprets (also quoting another Rabbinical source of the same era—the Tanaim/Amoraim period—for this explication) this “slaying of the world” as referring to human procreation in the ordinary world of time and space. But I take it also metaphysically, as the idea that the very fabric of the world...
would be threatened if (hypothetically speaking, for in practice and by definition it would not be possible) one pole of dual opposites were to be destroyed.

The idea, then, that a thing co-arises with its opposite is fundamental to human thinking about the world; for example, in parts of Jewish Kabbalah, in philosophical Taoism, amongst Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus, and in modern dialectical thought. This idea has also been fundamental to narcissistic social meaning-making within the world; societies and groups that have predicated a superior conception of their own self upon the conception of an inferior other are historically innumerable and contemporarily many, and such a stance is as old as humankind itself (for a discussion of the psychological underpinnings of this stance, see, for example, Volkan, 1985). Notable examples include the Jews (throughout their history, both Biblical and modern), India and its caste system, modern European civilisation (such as Victorian England), Japanese society following the Meiji Restoration, Nazi Germany, and many more.

The Charedi Constitution of Self-Identity through Demonisation of an Other

Demonisation of an other in order to constitute identity of self is a core characteristic of the Charedi mentality and outlook, as I experienced it through the Breslov group in Safed, and also through sporadic contact over many years with non-Breslov Charedi Jews. This demonisation is well-articulated in the religious canonical texts, such as the Talmud, and is also expressed in an emotive, personal sense by many, if not most, of the individuals comprising Charedi society. Chapter 3.8, discussing Jewish Charedi attitudes towards non-Jews—goyim (in Hebrew, “the nations”)—gave some ethnographic examples of this demonisation; for instance, amongst the children of Breslov families, reproducing the stances of their school teachers and parents and using the word goyim in an entirely derogatory sense, and within a Chabad Chasidic family, the husband and wife of which argued that goyim did not possess a soul in the same manner that Jews did. This particular case shows the extent to which the emphasis on differentiation is taken, for its logical consequence is that Jews are qualitatively different from non-Jews in their very essence, the soul. Recall also from Chapter 3.1 that one Breslover explained that his community’s answer to the enemies of the Jews, both past and present, is to give birth to more children.

The “barbarians at the gates” of the Charedi mentality are and always have been the goyim, but in contemporary Israel have come to include also the secular society of non-religious Jews. Demonisation of the former is fairly straightforward and entails no cognitive dissonance on the part of most Charedi groups; the goyim are almost entirely other to such Jews, as Charedi children are
taught—based on particular interpretations of Torah and Talmud—from infancy. There are, however, subtleties and complexities to this simplistic dichotomy, discussed in more detail below.

Demonisation of non-religious Jews, in contrast, is a somewhat different matter. On the one hand, contemporary Charedi society perceives the secular Israeli sector as one of its greatest threats, due first and foremost to the attractions and temptations that the latter presents to Charedi youth. As discussed in Chapter 3.3, however, the Charedi discourse in this regard runs far deeper, positing a “clash of worlds” in which the objective of the secular majority is to eradicate the Charedi minority and their religion. Public institutions and groups, including the defence forces, the “leftist elite”, the academy, and Bagatz (the Supreme Court of Israel) are demonised, as well as the secular media. On the other hand, however, the secular majority consists first and foremost of Jews. Concepts such as love of one’s fellow Jew, achdut Am Yisrael (the unity of the Nation of Israel), and that the Messiah will arrive only after all Jews have done what is required of them by the Almighty, run deep within the collective Jewish religious psyche. Unless emotions are acutely inflamed by a particular incident, most Charedi (and certainly Breslov) Jews would suggest that the correct attitude towards an individual secular fellow Jew is one of compassion; a gentle showing of the way by example, hoping and praying that the stray sheep will rejoin the flock and discover his or her Father in Heaven.

In contemporary Israel, nonetheless, the Charedi “barbarians at the gates” mentality continues to find a foothold in relation to secular Jewish society taken as whole. One of the most striking testaments to this mentality is the vehemence with which some Charedi groups reject and exile those who break from their ranks. The Breslov group in Safed, and I suggest Breslover circles more widely, do not fit this description in their typical treatment of those who leave the Charedi path. Due probably in large part to the highly diverse composition of the Breslov movement (including numerous ba’aley tshuvah; secular Jews who have become religious), there is substantial leeway for an individual to choose the extent to which they wish to follow or not follow the Torah path, yet still retain social ties with their community. I saw this leeway first-hand and fairly close-up amongst Breslov friends in family settings in Safed.

In contrast, a friend related to me that he knows of religious men, serving of their own free will in the Netzah Yehuda Battalion—the Israeli army unit established specifically to accommodate Charedi men (see Chapter 3.3)—who change out of their military uniforms at the Jerusalem Central Bus Station just prior to returning home for Shabbat, in order not to be ostracised by their community in Mea She’arim (a Charedi stronghold suburb in Jerusalem). This demonstrates the extent to which such
communities generally vilify those who express any type of support for the State of Israel or for its secular majority. At the extreme end of this spectrum, some parents from certain Charedi groups will eject a son or daughter who chooses to give up the Charedi way, to the extent that the deserter’s parents will sit shiv’ah (the traditional Jewish week of mourning) for them, subsequently cutting off all contact with their child. When one’s identity is so deeply constituted by one’s perceptions—both conscious and unconscious—of what one is not, then everything must be done to maintain the abhorrent colouring of that other, in order to continue to shine (at least in one’s own eyes) in contrast to it. In such circumstances, the difficulties involved in continuing to accept a very extension of oneself—one’s own child—after they have defected to the camp of the enemy barbarians may become very great indeed.

The typological scheme, based on the dimensions of interiority and physicality as proposed by Descola (2006, p. 141) to delineate four types of ontologies that serve as “… anchoring points for sociocosmic forms of aggregation and conceptions of self and non-self”, is a useful framework for illuminating, to some extent 26, the Charedi “barbarians at the gates” mentality. From the four ontological types—of totemism, analogism, animism and naturalism—the Charedi, and indeed the broader Jewish, mode of identification is essentially a naturalistic one, the same, according to Descola, as the dominant mode of identification in Modernity. This ontological mode holds that when confronted with an unspecified human or non-human other (“alter”), a typical subject will deem that that object is devoid of interiority, but possesses a similar kind of physicality to the subject’s own (Descola, 2006, p. 141). In describing some of the cultural worldviews that this naturalistic ontology produces within a society that lives it, many of Descola’s points—drawn presumably from the logical consequences of his starting assumptions regarding interiority, physicality, self and other, as well as from ethnography—identify accurately the Jewish cosmo-ontological position. For example, “… that certain entities owe their existence and development to a principle that is extraneous both to chance and to the effects of human will”; this is congruent with the Jewish idea of G-d Himself, and especially with Kabbalistic conceptions of G-d as pure Will. Furthermore, “Naturalism also implies a counterpart, a world of artifice and free-will…”; this is akin to the Jewish notion of human free will, and perhaps, too, to the principle of the Yetzer Hara—the Evil Inclination—that simultaneously

26 Inasmuch as any typological scheme can truly “illuminate” its subject matter, considering that such schemes generally abstract commonalities at the expense of diluted particularities.
enables and subverts that free will. Additionally, since naturalism is “… predicated upon a discontinuity of interiorities and a material continuity… What for us distinguishes humans from non-humans is the mind, the soul, subjectivity, a moral conscience, language, and so forth…” (Descola, 2006, p. 146). Such a description is a fairly plausible one, too, for the Jewish position on the difference between humans and animals27.

Descola’s (2006, pp. 146-147) description of how personhood is granted to an entity under a naturalistic ontology is the key insight illuminating the Charedi phenomenon under present discussion. He writes:

> The ontological discrimination that excludes from personhood non-human organisms that are biologically very close to us is a clear sign of the privilege granted in our own mode of identification to criteria based on the expression of a purported interiority (language, self-consciousness or theory of mind) rather than those based on material continuity.

Similarly, according to the Charedi worldview, goyim do not possess such personhood (or if they do, it is only of an intermediate nature). This assertion was well-illustrated by the debate I had (mentioned earlier in this chapter and originally in Chapter 3.8) with a Chabad couple regarding the existence of

27 To include language as a criterion for distinguishing humans from animals is problematic, for—as discussed in the next chapter—Judaism is replete with references to prophets and tzadiqim (righteous men) who conversed with animals. Furthermore, again illustrating the difficulty of confining almost any Jewish teaching to a clear-cut, black-or-white precept, it is taught in the Torah (Exodus 11:7)—and this teaching was several times repeated to me by Breslov Chasidim and other religious teachers in various settings—that on the night that the Jews left Pharaoh’s Egypt, fleeing in great haste, the dogs did not bark at them, thus not alerting their Egyptian masters to the events transpiring. For this act, dogs as a species received certain Divine beneficences, and this animal is somewhat honoured in the Jewish tradition. This Biblical teaching carries a clear implication of some level of choice, moral conscience, and ultimately free will, on the part of the dogs, thereby negating the idea that a human and a dog possess a complete discontinuity of interiorities. Undoubtedly, Kabbalistic teachings would be able to explain the differences between the decision-making process of a human versus that of a dog, based on differences in their various spiritual structures, such as neshamah, ruach, and nefesh (variously translated as “soul” and “spirit”—see also Chapter 3.8 on the complexities regarding the correct translation of these terms). Accordingly, then, it would be simplistic to suggest that Jewish thought is purely naturalistic. As Descola (2006, p. 147) goes on to emphasise, the different modes of possible ontological identification (animism, naturalism, and so forth) may each be activated by an individual (and in this instance, by an entire socio-religious group, as evidenced by its canonical teachings and by the behaviours of its individual members) in different settings, although one mode will be dominant at any given time and place.
4.2 “Barbarians at the Gates”—The Charedi Constitution of Self through Other

Expressed in etic anthropological terms, the logical consequence of this couple’s belief system—and highly representative of the Charedi outlook generally—is that the Jewish soul is the most privileged interiority available to any being in the world, an interiority that confers the ultimate degree of personhood possible and thereby membership with the in-group that propounds it.

**Universal Consciousness versus Superior Chosenness: Paradoxes in Doctrine and Practice**

Despite the apparently black and white picture portrayed so far regarding Charedi attitudes towards non-Jews (and in many cases, towards non-religious Jews), paradox and contradiction emerge when one delves deeper into the core Jewish teachings on the matter, and into accounts describing the practices and beliefs of seminal historical Jewish figures. This point is well-illustrated by the words appearing on a sign near the tomb (see Figure 13 below) of the Ba’al Shem Tov himself, the founder of the Chasidic movement, located in the town of Medzhybizh, Ukraine. Translated from Hebrew, the sign reads:

The Ba’al Shem Tov was very stringent in the matter of [his] love for [the people of] Israel. And more-so, his love was also for all the nations of the world, as it is told that he even showed love to those of the worldly nations who rob [Israel]. To the extent that his love extended also to the living and growing things in the forest…

This passage exemplifies the opposite half of the “equation” at hand; an enlightened, universalist approach that creates—as I discussed with one particular religious, non-Breslov friend—the tension between the Jewish concept of chosenness and its accompanying hierarchical religious doctrines on the one hand, versus the core Jewish concept that All is One, which is G-d, and its accompanying ethos of universal consciousness and love on the other. The same religious friend pointed out that this tension produces an ongoing paradox within the Charedi lifeworld itself, in that it is an insular, reactionary and regressive world, yet at the same time delves into books and concepts that are radically revolutionary, and that seek to raise the participant above simple dualities. Since the time of the Ba’al Shem Tov in the eighteenth century, a small number of other seminal religious Jewish leaders appeared—through their speech and actions—to have transcended the simple dichotomy of the Jew as G-d’s holy and chosen versus the goy as entirely other. One such leader was Rabbi Avraham Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate in Palestine, a warm supporter of the modern Zionist project, and to a great extent a universalist in his conception of and dealings with non-Jews.
Erich Fromm (1966) exemplifies this ethos of universal consciousness, laying out an interpretation of the Old Testament that is founded upon what he terms radical humanism, “… a global philosophy which emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of man to develop his own powers and to arrive at inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world” (p13). In stark contrast to the descriptions above of the Charedi worldview and its rejection of the other, Fromm interprets major themes in the Jewish religious cannon (including TaNaKH—broadly speaking, the “Old Testament”—and Talmud) according to his iconic humanism. Fromm (1966, pp. 22-25) explains, for example, that the very conception of G-d shifts in Jewish history from one of an absolute ruler, who used force to eject Adam and Eve from the Garden after they challenged His supremacy, to a partner, who made covenants with humankind; with Noah and all of his descendant (that is, with all humans) following the Flood, and subsequently with Abraham and the Hebrew people. G-d and humankind, therefore, entered into partnerships, with both sides bound by certain principles and conditions. Even regarding the Abrahamic, covenant, Fromm (1966, p. 26) once more finds universalism in the words of the Torah, explaining:

“… I will bless those who bless you… and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves.” In these last words we find again the expression of universalism. The blessing will not serve Abraham’s tribe alone; it is extended to the entire human family.
Fromm (1966, p. 15) concludes the Introduction to his book with the following hopeful words:

> But is it not natural that the story of the liberation from slavery in Egypt, the speeches of the great humanist prophets, should have found an echo in the hearts of men who had experienced force only as its suffering objects, never as its executors? Is it surprising that the prophetic vision of a united, peaceful mankind, of justice for the poor and helpless, found fertile soil among the Jews and was never forgotten? Is it surprising that when the walls of the ghettos fell, Jews in disproportionately large numbers were among those who proclaimed the ideals of internationalism, peace, and justice? What from a mundane perspective was the tragedy of the Jews—the loss of their country and their state—from the humanist standpoint was their greatest blessing; being among the suffering and despised, they were able to develop and uphold a tradition of humanism.

Fromm’s words, whilst serving as a platform for his admirable positivity and hope in humankind, are only partially correct. Whilst for a large part of their history Jews indeed experienced only the suffering resulting from force wielded against them—as opposed to perpetrating it upon others—this is not the current reality in the modern-day state of Israel\(^\text{28}\), nor was it the case in Biblical times, when entire indigenous cities in the Land of Israel were apparently razed by the Israelites to the ground in adherence with the so-called Will of G-d.

Many individuals and groups as a whole in the contemporary Jewish world indeed embody Fromm’s (1966) radical humanism; Charedi society as a whole, however, appears to be far from it. On a more metaphysical level, the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* (the coincidence of opposites) is core to Jewish and also to specifically Breslov ontologies; indeed, it would appear that a fundamental purpose of the Halakhic system is to enable the practitioner to harmoniously bridge, in their day-to-day life, between dual pairs of opposites, whether those be man and woman, the Good and Evil Inclinations, Shabbat and the ordinary days of the week, purity and impurity, and many others. The Jew/goy dichotomy is predicated, according to Judaism, on the very structure and mechanics of the soul itself, and on the Will of the Almighty; the abstracted understanding, however, that without

\[^{28}\text{Admittedly, Fromm’s (1966) book was written just prior to the Six Day War of 1967, a seminal event that played a key role in shaping the present landscape of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.}\]
IV. Analysis

4.2 “Barbarians at the Gates”—The Charedi Constitution of Self through Other

the goy there is no Jew and that without the Jew there is no goy, appears insufficient to propel Charedi society to a more benign attitude towards its non-Jewish counterparts.

**Historical Considerations**

The statement made above regarding the failure of Charedi society to embrace a more benevolent approach (with a foothold in some kind of “universal consciousness” or “radical humanism”) towards non-Jews—despite the fact that great Jewish figures, including the Ba’al Shem Tov himself, more recently Rabbi Kook, and others, advocated just such an approach—leads directly to an important qualification that must at least be cited herein, if not discussed at great length. There are very good historical reasons for Jews to distrust and demonise out-groups; at some level, the entire Jewish nation is experiencing a kind of collective post-traumatic stress, following centuries of pogroms and persecution primarily in (but not limited to) Europe. Whilst such scenarios of murder and violence are today non-existent in Israel\(^{29}\) and the United States (the contemporary epicentres of the Charedi lifeworld), their traumatic aftereffects are embedded deep within the Jewish personal and social psyche.

It is also important to reflect, similarly in a historical context, on the social dynamics accompanying the rise of the Chasidic movement in eighteenth century Europe, as well as on the emergence of the Breslov group itself. As briefly discussed in Chapter 2.3, the Chasidic movement was disliked and often reviled by the Jewish orthodoxy, who came to be called the *Mitnagdim* (“those who oppose”); in that sense, the new Chasidim constituted “barbarians at the gates” (or rather, *within* the gates) for that orthodoxy. The Chasidic threat was not one of murder or physical violence, although physical altercations between Chasidim and *Mitnagdim*—especially in the early years of the division—were not uncommon. Rather, and especially coming on the heels of the disastrous Sabbatean and Frankist messianic episodes, the threat of the Chasidim was perceived to be a deeply ideational one; the very integrity and legitimacy of Judaism—as the manifestation and correct observance of G-d’s Will by His people—were at stake. Furthermore, the Breslov group was one of the most harassed within the Chasidic movement itself, and in some contemporary Charedi circles is still frowned upon (see Chapters 2.4 and 3.7). Thus, a Breslov friend in Safed remarked to me that G-d’s chosen are always

\(^{29}\) Violence arising from terrorist acts within modern-day Israel is an entirely different scenario compared to violence perpetrated upon a largely defenceless and persecuted minority, as was the case in Europe historically.
reviled by those around them; therefore, he explained (with some hyperbole), “the Jews are persecuted by the goyim, the Chasidic Jews were despised by their Mitnagdim counterparts, and within the Chasidic world, the Breslov group is scorned”.

**Conclusion**

The same non-Breslov religious friend cited above described the mentality of contemporary Charedi society as that of a “nuclear bomb shelter”. This mentality is very apparent in Israel, where for all intents and purposes Charedi enclaves may be considered an entirely different entity (if not, as some secular Israelis would suggest, a different “planet”) compared to the mainstream secular milieu. This enclave mentality has become so ingrained in the Charedi ethos, and is today so fully associated by that society with correct Torah observance and with the proper service of G-d, that the question of whether it is safe to emerge from the nuclear bomb shelter has not only been discarded, but appears to be a question that Charedi society, by and large, is unable to recognise as even existing. In this regard, Soloveitchik (1999, p. 344) writes: “Once formed, this identity requires vigilant maintenance, for its perimeter is continually eroded by the relentless, lapping waves of the surrounding culture. Assaulted daily by contrary messages from the street and workplace, enclave identity needs ongoing reinforcement: its consciousness of proud difference must be steadily replenished and heightened”.

And yet, the age-old Jewish grappling at the more extreme edges—on the victim’s side—of dichotomies of persecuted/persecuting, that historically gave rise to such enclaves, was surely an important impetus in the significant role that Jewish figures have played in the “revolutionary consciousness” that arose in the past few centuries in modern Europe. It is no random occurrence that—as Fromm (1966) keenly draws attention to—men and women belonging to a people who for millennia have dealt with the “barbarians” sitting at their gates, not as a metaphor but in the flesh and blood, should be at the forefront of humanist, socialist, scientifically free-thinking, and similar modern awakenings. The contrast between such a universal humanist ethos, and the religious enclave mindset that it emerged from, appears paradoxical; clearly, however, both are part of a dialectic that has been unfolding for a very long time.

Charedi society in Israel has been growing in strength and numbers in the past few decades. Anecdotally, the tshuvah (“returning” from a secular to a religious life) movement is only expanding, and the Charedi birth-rate, relative to the secular population (and even in the face of the Arab-Israeli birth rate), ensures that the proportion of Israeli citizens who are Charedi is also increasing. As mentioned in Chapter 3.7, certain suburbs and entire towns across Israel are undergoing a process of
hitchardut; becoming Charedi in terms of their demographic composition, through movements in population and due again to high birth rates. Israeli governments in the Knesset by and large cannot be formed, or cannot obtain a majority to function properly, without the buy-in of the minority Charedi parties. Despite this state of affairs, however (or perhaps because of it, as Charedi society fears a relaxing of its own guard), the “barbarians at the gates” mentality appears to be as strong as ever. Its power attests to its deep roots in the Charedi intrapsychic reality, and this topic is taken up in greater depth, from a psychoanalytic perspective, in the final chapter of this thesis.

***
IV. Analysis

4.2 “Barbarians at the Gates”—The Charedi Constitution of Self through Other
4.3 “Bridges between Worlds”—Judaism and Shamanism

This chapter compares and contrasts elements of the Jewish tradition with core characteristics of shamanism, a category that has been delineated—although in some cases contentiously—within anthropology and related disciplines. The principal argument made herein is that essential parallels may be drawn between Judaism and aboriginal shamanic ontologies and practices. Winkler (2003) maintains that “shamanic” practices, rooted in the Jewish esoteric Kabbalistic tradition, were an intrinsic part of the religion of the Biblical Jews. He writes (pp. xx-xxi):

And so, watching the [American] Indian medicine people perform their ceremonies, I experienced déjà vu and became increasingly conscious of the shamanic traditions of my own people. I would for instance be watching them sprinkle corn meal here and there, praying into the four directions, lifting up the corn meal, setting it down, etc., and my vision would blur and behold a kohain of ancient times doing the same, or Jews in Brooklyn (myself included) shaking palm branches, willow and myrtle branches in all four directions, reciting prayers into the four winds, albeit completely unaware of the aboriginal element to what we were doing. Suddenly, the rites of the otherwise boring Hebrew scriptural book of Leviticus took on a whole new meaning for me; the dead bird/live bird ritual, or the ritual of the water that held ashes of a red heifer along with a cedar twig wrapped in wool and painted with the dye of a worm, and so on.

The Sukot ritual that Winkler refers to—by mention of the palm branches, willow and myrtle—as well as the resonances with nature and “indigenous” rites that were evoked particularly by the Breslov version of this ritual in Safed, were discussed in Chapter 3.7. Putting aside issues with Winkler’s overzealous attempts throughout his book to stretch parallels between Jewish and native North American cultures, he does make a legitimate point, arguing that at core, Judaism has a very strong connection to nature, that many of its practices are distinctly “shamanic” in character, and yet that since the European Middle Ages such traditions have been granted an increasingly reduced and impoverished position within the Jewish religious lifeworld.

A scholarly book by Garb (2011) titled Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah draws substantially on contemporary Kabbalistic scholarship in Israel, which has progressed from Gershom Scholem’s largely philological-historical mode to incorporate phenomenology and comparative religious studies (for example, Idel, 1988a). In attempting to define the term “shamanism”, Garb (2011) suggests that the shaman is one who essentially transcends—on a “mystical” level, transcending consensual
perception through internal means, and on a social level, challenging existing structures, but only in order to revitalise them. In terms of Judaic-Shamanic connections, he states (p. 4):

… I am not in any way claiming that Kabbalistic or Hasidic phenomena are very similar to Tibetan or Amazonian shamanic experiences. Rather, the use of the term “shamanic”, in the sense elected here, is primarily designed to better appreciate the connections between sets of phenomena inside the modern Jewish world, such as rites of descent to the underworld and somatic transformations. My claim is that the term “Jewish mysticism”, used famously by Gershom Scholem but adopted by his staunchest critics, served a similar function.

Interestingly, an Aboriginal Australian friend of mine from the Northern Territory, “Junior”, also drew striking parallels between Judaism and shamanic practices. Junior’s mother is from the Uluru region, and through his father’s line he is kurtungurlu (a “custodian”) for the Wirntiku (curlew bird) dreaming, of the Warlmanpa language group in the Tenant Creek area. Beginning with a copy of the Torah that he received as a gift over a decade ago, Junior has since been deeply interested in Jewish tradition, especially in its Kabbalistic dimensions. He is an avid reader of religious texts ranging from TaNaKH (the combined books of the Torah, Prophets and Writings) to the mystical Sefer Yetzirah (see Chapter 2.2), and draws endless parallels between his own indigenous culture (of which he is quite knowledgeable, having been raised and lived much of his life in the desert) and Jewish teachings. He often pointed out that both the Israelites and the Australian Blackfellas were/are a people of the desert, intimately connected with the natural environment, and custodians of knowledge regarding the seen and unseen forces that control it.

An attempt to build a bridge between Judaism and shamanism may surprise some scholars of the former—theologians, historians, and anthropologists—and would certainly surprise many Jews today, religious and non-religious alike. Is not Judaism primarily a prayer- and study-hall-based religion, with a quintessential Jewish image that of a crowded, semi-chaotic synagogue filled with pious Jews praying, learning or debating (or simultaneously all three; see Chapters 3.3 and 3.5)? And is not one of the religion’s hallmarks the emphasis it places on book-learning? Superficially, these scenes are not particularly congruent with classic conceptions of a shamanic tradition. It is beyond the scope of this work to discuss in any depth why the position of and emphasis on shamanic elements has been greatly reduced in mainstream Jewish practice, although Winkler (2003) suggests that the modes of worship that Christianity sanctioned and those that it considered heretical, over hundreds
of years, played a major role in this process. In any case, whilst superficially it may appear to the contrary, it will be shown that Judaism is replete with shamanic elements. The paradigm of the latter, therefore, may help in illuminating many aspects of the former, and similarly, insights gleaned from an understanding of the structures of Judaism may help to better understand shamanic traditions.

*Origins of the Category “Shamanism”*

The term “shaman” has been used in anthropology and in other academic disciplines, and with increasing popularity in common Western culture, to describe a cosmo-ontological stance and a set of practices, that although widely varying across different societies and continents, seem to have core elements in common. These elements include a positioning of man as an integral part of the natural world (and not above or outside of it), the concept of the shaman as a mediator between the ordinary and the spirit worlds, the practice of initiatory rites, and the often pivotal role ascribed to non-ordinary states of consciousness, induced by different means, in carrying out these mediations and accomplishing various magico-religious tasks.

In a historical sense, broadly speaking, the modern West’s first large-scale encounters with shamanic cultures and practices—across Siberia, central Asia, and the Americas—were interpreted and understood through the lens of Christianity and its associated conceptions of demons, possession and the Devil. By the eighteenth century, although an increasing amount of material was being documented and published regarding such cultures (also including, by then, indigenous Australian groups), that material was being interpreted and understood largely through the paradigm of the Enlightenment; rationalist scholars “… no longer feared knowledge, but shamans still troubled them with their odd behaviour. In their view, shamanic performances and tricks had little to do with true knowledge” (Narby & Huxley, 2001, p. 2). It is interesting to note that this period coincided with the inception of Chasidism, a movement that was far from “rationalist” (in the Enlightenment sense) in its outlook, and that had its own tussles with Enlightenment modes of thinking.

It was only with the advent of modern anthropology that the “cup was emptied”, so to speak (inasmuch as this was possible), and ethnographers began to consider shamanic practices from new perspectives. The anthropological discourse on shamanism proceeded hand-in-hand with the development and increasing sophistication of the discipline as a whole; from a social evolutionist construal of shamanism as an intermediary between magic and religion, to region-specific ethnographies focusing on symbols in their own right (in the cultural anthropological orientation), to
phenomenological approaches, to more recent critiques (for example, by Geertz and by Taussig) questioning whether the category of “shamanism” has any scholarly value at all (d'Anglure, 2008).

The books of Carlos Castaneda, an anthropology student who claimed to have been apprenticed to a native American Yaqui “sorcerer” in the 1960s, captured the imaginations of millions of people in the United States and further abroad, and whatever their factual basis, his magical and compelling accounts fuelled new-Age sentiments and a neo-shamanic movement (Narby & Huxley, 2001). Of prime importance during this time, too, was the full-blown entry into mainstream Western culture of psychedelic drugs—in particular LSD, but also psilocybin, DMT, and others. As millions attempted to understand (and often to intensify, or to recreate through non-drug means) the experiences they were having following ingestion of these “magic molecules”, the traditions of cultures that had fostered similar experiences for thousands of years became a useful explanatory basis and an attractive practical avenue.

Shamanic phenomena have also been studied and analysed by psychiatrists and psychologists, but many of these contributions have been, according to Walsh (1990, p. 5), problematic. He writes:

One source of these misunderstandings has been psychoanalysis. Long the dominant school of Western psychiatry, it fostered a distinctly negative view of shamanism. This occurred because Freud and the psychoanalysts who followed him took a dim view of religious experiences, regarding them as expressions of defense mechanisms at best or severe psychopathology at worst… Yogis, saints, shamans and sages have thus all been chopped down to neurotic size.

Lévi-Strauss (1968) also argued against such narrow conceptions of shamanism, suggesting far broader vistas—that shamans are in fact more akin to psychoanalysts rather than “psychopaths”, for they are able to recreate a patient’s mythic conception of the world and of the patient’s own self, and thereby induce specific experiences and/or healing. Eliade (1964 [1951], pp. xi-xii) cautions that it is “… unacceptable to assimilate shamanism to any kind of mental disease”. In this regard, there is substantial evidence, both scientific and anecdotal, that shamans are often amongst the most physically and mentally healthy members of their communities (Elkin, 1994 [1977]; Narby & Huxley, 2001). The very existence of a debate around the medicalisation of shamanic phenomena is, of course, reflective of the fact that both psychopathology and shamanic phenomena involve the deep recesses of the human mind. It would appear that schizophrenia, mystical and religious experiences, and
non-ordinary states of consciousness occupy shared spaces in the human psychic interior, although the fundamental nature of those spaces is far from clear.

Eliade’s (1964 [1951]) seminal work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, although later subject to numerous critiques, attempted to revive the comparative analysis of shamanism, and—using an approach grounded in the history of religions—to synthesise the results of research the world over. It is an unparalleled work on the subject in terms of the range and wealth of ethnographic detail, garnered from hundreds of studies, that it collates and analyses. The book discusses a wide variety of themes, including becoming a shaman (recruitment, initiatory sickness and dreams, obtaining shamanic powers), the shaman’s costume and magical tools, cosmology (including the three cosmic zones, World Pillar, World Tree, and mystical numbers), mythology, and other, region-specific, topics. At least on a superficial level, many of these themes are reminiscent of those discussed herein in the context of Judaism, and especially of the Kabbalistic tradition; becoming a *mequbal* (a Kabbalist; see Chapter 2.2), mystical dreams, the four Worlds (of Emanation, Creation, Formation and Actualisation), and certainly numbers and *gematriyah*. Judaism, however, receives only three brief specific mentions in Eliade’s book; in a footnote regarding an interdict across many different traditions against breaking the bones of animals, in a discussion of the symbolism of the rainbow, and in a passage on heavenly books and tablets30.

Concerning the relationship between the experience of the numinous in the great traditions of the East and West, and its experience in aboriginal shamanic settings, Eliade (1964 [1951], p. xix) writes:

> But the sacred does not cease to manifest itself, and with each new manifestation it resumes its original tendency to reveal itself wholly... particularly coherent mystical experiences are possible at any and every degree of civilisation and religious situation... Certainly “history”—the religious tradition of the tribe in question—finally intervenes to subject the ecstatic experiences of certain privileged persons to its own canons. But it is

30 Here Eliade discusses, for example, an Oriental “heavenly book”, in which the fates of men were inscribed. In the context of divine inscriptions he also mentions Moses and the Tablets of the Law, but surprisingly does not refer to the Jewish heavenly “Book of Life” and “Book of Death”, both of which are opened and closed during the annual High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur), and in which the names of persons are recorded according to the merit each has attained in the preceding year.
no less true that these experiences often have the same precision and nobility as the experiences of the great mystics of East and West [italics added].

The discussion below compares and contrasts five core aspects, underlying such experiences of the sacred, of the two traditions under discussion—Judaism and shamanism. These core aspects are: the relationship between human and nature; bridging between the physical and spiritual worlds; initiation and the obtaining of knowledge and power; mystical numbers; and non-ordinary states of consciousness. Although the terms “shamanism” and “shamanic traditions” refer to a broad swath of often diverse lifeworlds, they are used in the present discussion in a largely non-specific, general sense. This is because, grounded in a universalist perspective and in disagreement with scholars who dismiss it, this thesis holds the shamanic category to be an anthropologically valid and useful one, referencing the common origins—probably in the human condition itself—of certain ontologies and practices across different groups of people.

**The Relationship between Human and Nature**

One of the core characteristics of shamanic traditions is a conception of the human/nature relationship that is often described as being fundamentally different from the modern Western one. Put simply, whilst the Western zeitgeist appears to have as one of its hallmarks separation—any domain that the ego identifies as its own separated from the All-inclusive totality; including subject from object, life and death from Being, mind from body, and the human and his or her culture from nature—the shamanic worldview is characterised by a conception of humans (and all their accompanying structures, including physical, social and spiritual ones) as an integral part of nature, together constituting a whole with it. This concept, on a metaphysical level, is similarly expressed through the precept of philosophical Taoism that there is nothing outside of the Tao. Viveiros de Castro (1998), through his ideas on perspectivism, also recognises a whole, with different “views” that it experiences depending on which part of that whole is looking in upon itself.

---

31 A non-Breslov rabbi friend, knowledgeable in the teachings of both the Kabbalah and philosophical Taoism, pointed out that the latter tradition does, however, speak of the Tao and its Source; this conception, he explained, and the Jewish conception of creation and its Creator, are mirror images of one another. Other similarities between the Jewish and Taoist models of reality have also been pointed out herein, including the one briefly discussed in Chapter 2.1 regarding the Taoist precept of wu wei (“non-acting”) as being akin to the Jewish ideal of acting in harmony with the will of Heaven/G-d.
Surprisingly for some, nature and the natural environment constitute essential themes within the Jewish tradition, and this topic was discussed at length in Chapter 3.7. The Jewish religion originated several thousand years ago amongst a desert-dwelling people who lived in an area loosely referred to as the Near East. For the Biblical Israelites up until the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. by Roman legions under Titus, probably for a substantial part of the resultant Diaspora as farmers, and certainly long before this period—as desert-dwelling semi-nomads (whether pastoralists, agriculturalists, or both) prior to their settlement in the Land of Canaan—the natural environment and a deep understanding of it was integral to survival.

This natural environment, furthermore, did and still does constitute a fundamental theme in Jewish tradition, not as an object of devotion per se, but as a testimony to G-d’s omnipotence, and to the archetypal attributes (for example—from the Kabbalistic Sefirot system—Beauty, Compassion and Judgement) by which He chooses to emanate into the worlds. Jewish tradition and teachings (both exoteric and esoteric) emphasise that the intricate and harmonious cycles of the natural environment are intertwined with and dictate the movements of human affairs, whether on the scale of the divisions of the day, the procession of day and night, the mundane week and the sacred Shabbat, the lunar months and solar years, the seven-year agricultural shmitah cycle, the twenty-eight-year blessing of the sun (Birkat Hachamah), and so forth. It is precisely this natural environment that is involved in numerous Jewish practices, many of them explicit mitzvot—commandments—that constitute the heart of the Jewish religion.

There are also numerous specific examples, in both a theological and practical sense, of the prime importance accorded to the natural environment in Judaism. A small selection includes the Pereq Shirah (“Chapter of Song”) text, considered as holy or holier than the Book of Psalms, filled with the wisdom of the Heavens, the Earth, the Day, the Night, the Sun and Moon, the Stars, and various Animals and Plants, each expressing a concise verse as an anthropomorphised entity (Pereq Shirah [Hebrew], undated); the week-long Festival of Sukot (Tabernacles), in which Jews spend time in a temporary, vegetation-roofed “booth” and daily wave the Four Species (citrus fruit, palm branch, willow and myrtle) in the six directions; blessings over the moon at the departure of the Shabbat; the practice of hitbodedut—secluded meditative prayer, often in forests and often in the middle of the night; and the use of natural bodies of water (oceans, rivers, springs and wells) as a miqveh, an immersion pool for ritual purification. Of these elements, Sukot, blessings over the moon, hitbodedut, and miqvaot were discussed in this thesis in some detail in the chapters under Part III. “Ethnography”, and the particularly Breslov emphasis upon them was highlighted. Chapter 3.7, for example, describes
the Breslov importance placed on the natural environment during the Sukot harvest festival, even comparing the ambience within the central Nachal Nova synagogue to that of a forest or harvest festival from certain other cultures. Chapter 3.5 discusses blessings over the moon at the departure of the Shabbat, highlighting the ritualistic/performative aspects of the ceremony, that includes formal greetings to at least three fellow congregants and a direct visual sighting of the lunar body.

On a theoretical level, then, Judaism as a religion recognises the natural environment as a marvellous Divine creation that sustains humankind, and through which G-d communicates certain themes and symbolisms to those who have the appropriate level of knowledge to understand them. Overall, nature is to be respected and even revered; and whilst the religious emphasis on it has declined in modern Jewish practice, relative, for example, to what was probably the case in ancient times, certain contemporary groups—such as the Breslov Chasidim—still seem to demonstrate some of this respect and reverence for it.

Does this respect and reverence, however, imply a Breslov and/or Jewish conception of identity, as opposed to separation, regarding the human/nature relationship? In this thesis this question may be answered on the level of Jewish theology and idealised views, as well as, importantly, from the perspective of the lived realities of contemporary Breslovers. In terms of theology, and according to Jewish metaphysics, nothing is ultimately separate from anything, for all is One, which is G-d. Thus, the question of whether the human is identical with or separate from nature becomes a semantic one, with its answer dependent on how the term “nature” is defined. If, as the term has largely been used herein, “nature” is limited to the natural physical environment, then man and woman are both a part of nature and also outside of it. They are a part of it in terms of their physicality, a precept well-expressed by a passage in the classic Mishnaic-era (first-to-third century C.E.) Pirqey Avot text, Chapter 3 Mishnah 1 (Breslov Pirqey Avot [Ethics of the Fathers]: Based on the Teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, 2010, p. 110): “From where you came—from a putrid drop. Where you are going—to a place of dust, maggots and worms”. This continuity of physicality between self and other is the same as defined by Descola (2006, p. 141), under the “naturalistic” ontological mode (see Chapter 4.2).

Ultimately in their essence, however, man and woman transcend and are outside of the natural environment, as the very next line in the same Pirqey Avot passage indicates: “And before Whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning—before the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He”. This is because the essence of the human is the soul, which is G-dlike, eternal,
and beyond time and space. This precept corresponds to Descola’s (2006, p. 141) discontinuity of interiorities across human and non-human entities (and in the Jewish case, across Jews and non-Jews), again according to the naturalistic ontological mode.

A core precept in Jewish thinking is that the created world as we know it, including the natural physical environment, exists as an arena for the testing and polishing of souls, in order that they may merit drawing closer to their Creator (see Chapter 2.1). Accompanying this precept is the idea that, from the human perspective, the world was not created perfect and complete; rather, as part of His grand design and with specific objectives in mind, there are certain “completing actions” that a Jew must perform before he or she makes use of the world that has been given to them. Before drinking water, for example, there is (in the Rabbinic Jewish tradition) only the one simple completing-action of reciting the appropriate blessing. Before eating meat, however, a far more complex set of such actions are stipulated, beginning with how the animal is raised and kept, and through to its subsequent kosher slaughter and preparation. The ultimate completing-action is the brit milah—circumcision—in which the impure foreskin is removed from the newborn baby, thereby “completing” G-d’s creation of the Jewish male and entering him into the Abrahamic covenant.

This idea of Jews performing completing-actions in the world was cited several times by Breslov Chasidim in Safed, and serves as a good pointer to typical, lived-reality (as opposed to theological) conceptions of the human/nature relationship within the group. The Breslov affinity with nature was already discussed in some depth in Chapter 3.7; this affinity is expressed in some of the verbalisations and actions of members of the group, as well as in the content and appearance of certain Breslov publications. Overall, however, Breslov Chasidim do not appear to live in a reality in which they feel themselves to be an integral part of the natural world, nor do they even hold such a view in an intellectual sense. Foremost in their minds is the eternal soul and its journey; accordingly, the crux of their attitude is that the natural world is provided by G-d to be used in the service of that journey. Certainly, there are correct and incorrect—good and evil—ways to make use of the physical world, beginning with the aforementioned idea of “completing-actions” that must be performed upon the appropriate occasions. In the Breslov instance, and particularly amongst certain individuals, there may additionally be present a sense of custodianship towards the natural world. For every example of such an attitude, however, its opposite is also to be found in the community; this theme was explored in Chapter 3.7, in the discussion on disposable plastics and the relative Charedi disregard for his or her immediate physical environment.
The Breslov position then, whilst venerating the natural world more than is the norm in contemporary Jewish practice, falls short of classic accounts in the anthropological literature regarding aboriginal shamanic cultures, in which individuals may experience themselves and the natural world as identical entities. Such a position corresponds to Descola’s (2006, p. 141) animism, wherein self and other are understood to have similar interiorities yet dissimilar physicalities, or—in the ultimate case—totemism, where self and other share similar elements of interiority and physicality.

The Jewish position, in contrast, holds identity between the human and the totality of Creation\(^{32}\); human beings are an integral part of G-d’s Creation, absolutely subordinated—as with the rest of reality—to Him. However, and perhaps as a forerunner to the modern Western hubris that conceives of the human as a prime mover and a first cause and thereby seeks to place him on the throne of G-d (Richter, 1984, p. 14; see Chapter 4.6), the Jewish position goes on to place the essence of the human “I”—the soul—almost outside of even Creation itself. For, and expressing a concept shrouded in mystery and paradox, of which the Jewish tradition holds that only one who is immersed in spiritual practice can even begin to understand, the soul is considered to be a very “part” of G-d Himself, hewn from His Throne of Glory, and as such, infinite. Ironically then (in the sense that Judaism regards the modern Western hubris and its striving for omnipotence as the very antithesis of the Jewish yearning for cleaving—dvequt—to G-d), the “fall” from a phenomenological experience of oneness with the world—a oneness that, perhaps, non-human animals experience in their environments—thereby leading to an almost complete separation of subject from object, may have had as its stepping stone the religious conception of a soul that is infinite, absolutely transcending the natural, physical world that sustains tangible existence. In other words, immortality may only be gained by postulating a fundamental essence—a soul—that is absolutely separate from that which is clearly transient.

**Bridging between the Physical and Spiritual Worlds**

The title of this present chapter, “Bridges Between Worlds”, suggests a bridge between the Jewish and the “shamanic” world. It additionally points, however, to one of the defining characteristics of the shaman and his or her tradition; as constituting a bridge between different worlds and states of being. d'Anglure (2008, p. 507) suggests that, “The shaman appears... as a mediator who transcends

---

\(^{32}\) The gap between Creation as a whole and the physical world as humankind knows it is, according to Jewish tradition, no mere technicality, for the physical world constitutes only a miniscule fraction of the totality.
these levels in a complex and dynamic fusion. The shaman is able to overcome the contradictions between binary oppositions (man/woman, humans/animals, humans/spirits, living/dead)…” Garb (2011, p. 22) writes:

The nature of shamanic transformation can be succinctly captured through … Samuel’s study of Tibetan shamans… as moving beyond the ‘normal experience of the world taken for granted within their social and cultural context,’ precisely in order to view these very contexts from the outside, operate on them, and rebalance them.

Similarly, what emerges strongly from the ethnographic material discussed by Eliade (1964 [1951]) is that shamanic cultures absolutely recognise an unseen world that has definite structure, and that may be comprehended and manipulated by the initiate.

The Jewish tradition, especially in its Kabbalistic teachings and agadic (Rabbinic homiletic) mythologies, is replete with themes of bridging between the living-human and other worlds. Regarding animals, Noah conversed (and in one version of the myth, argued) with the raven that he first sent forth from the ark to search for dry land (Schwartz, 2004, p. 462), whilst 1 Kings 5:13—testifying that King Solomon “… spoke of animal, of fowl, of crawling creature, and of fish” (The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 811)—is often interpreted in Jewish tradition to mean that in his great wisdom, the King was able to converse with birds and beasts.

In terms of bridges to the non-physical realms, the Kabbalah deals in depth with subjects such as the four spiritual Worlds, the hierarchy of the Heavenly Courts, and the subtle forms that constitute a human being—neshamah, ruach, and nefesh, denoting the soul and its accompanying spiritual structures. The father of the Chasidic movement, the Ba’al Shem Tov, started off as an “ordinary” ba’al shem (“master of the name”), before attaining his lofty spiritual heights through faithful dedication and practice. Dynner (2009, pp. 4-5) writes of him, “He was a type of Jewish mystical practitioner comparable to an itinerant witch doctor or shaman, in that he mediated between this world and the other… [italics added]”. In what is today a classic and widely reproduced letter that he wrote to his brother-in-law Rabbi Gershon of Kitov, the Ba’al Shem Tov describes a series of ascents that he undertook through the supernal realms, culminating in the very chamber of the Messiah himself. The following excerpts from the letter convey the esoteric and magical flavour of the man’s deeds (Ginsburgh, 1992, p. 2):
On Rosh HaShanah of the year 5507 [1746 C.E.] I performed, by means of an oath, an elevation of soul, as known to you, and saw wondrous things I had never seen before. What I saw and learned there is impossible to convey in words, even face to face… I ascended from level to level until I entered the chamber of the Mashiach [the Messiah], where the Mashiach learns Torah with all the Tanaim [Mishnaic sages of the first to third centuries C.E.] and tzadikim [righteous men] and also with the seven Shepherds [Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and King David]. I asked the Mashiach: “When will the Master come?” And he answered: “By this you shall know: When your teaching will become public and revealed in the world, and your wellsprings burst forth to the farthest extremes—that which I have taught you and you have comprehended—and they also shall be able to perform unifications and elevations as you, then all the ‘shells’ [qlipot] will cease to exist, and there shall come a time of good will and salvation.”

Werczberger (2011, p. 280), in her analysis of the so-called “Jewish Spiritual Renewal” (JSR) movement, refers to this same account of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s ascent, pointing out that radical JSR thinkers have connected the practice of soul ascent with “shamanic” (in the New Age sense) journeys, thereby seeking to associate early Chasidic practices with the latter category.

Chapter 3.3 discusses the shacharit morning prayer service as a journey of ascent, arranged in such a way to take the genuine practitioner up through the four spiritual Worlds and then back down again. The theme of ascent into the skies or heavens is also very common in the anthropological shamanic literature; Elkin (1994 [1977], pp. 54-55), for example, describes the magical cord, given to the “men of high degree”—medicine men—of certain Australian Aboriginal groups during their initiation or “making”, enabling them to travel up to the sky. Indigenous shamans drinking ayahuasca—the same psychedelic brew that is discussed in Chapter 3.10—in the Andes of South America report a rushing wind or a torrent of water pushing them up into the celestial paradise of the Milky Way, where they are then able to converse with ancestors (Schultes & Raffauf, 1992). Similarly the Shab-e-Meraj...
(night journey) of the Prophet Muhammad, travelling from Mecca to Jerusalem and ascending to heaven both physically and spiritually apparently in a single night, was a seminal event for the Islamic faith. Greek mythological and Christian religious traditions also contain accounts of mystical ascents to heavenly realms.

In a similar vein of ascent into higher spiritual realms and the meeting of revered ancestor figures (who in contemporary time and space are physically dead), a page that appears at the very beginning of some editions of core Breslov works describes the approval that Moses himself gave the author, Rabbi Nachman’s core disciple Rabbi Natan of Breslov, regarding his compositions. Translated from its mixture of Hebrew and Yiddish, the passage reads:

Our Master, Teacher and Rabbi (the Nachal Novea Maqor Chokhmah [Emanating River Source of Wisdom; a common honorific for Rabbi Nachman]) came to me (after his leaving the world) with another man. And I explained before him by way of complaint regarding everything that had transpired upon me, and our Master, Teacher and Rabbi spoke to me with the following words: “But you with your books have done well”. And the one who was with him nodded his head and agreed to this and spoke with the following words: “Yes yes you have done very well”. And I asked our Master, Teacher and Rabbi who is this one, and he responded to me, “this is Moshe Rabeinu [Moses our Rabbi]…”

Garb (2011, pp. 99-100) emphasises that accounts of mystical ascent, especially whilst under trance, have a central place in Chasidic literature. From a contemporary, ethnographic perspective, however, no Breslov Chasid whom I met claimed to bridge directly between the living-human and the animal or spirit worlds in the non-ordinary manner just described for venerated historical Jewish figures or indigenous shamans. These Chasidim, however, often express the idea that the ordinary physical world below and the spiritual realms above are inexorably linked. In order to effect a change in the lowest world, that of ordinary time and space (corresponding to the tenth, lowest Sefirah [Emanation] of Malkhut or Kingship, in the fourth, lowest world of Actualisation), much larger changes must occur.

---

34 The passage explains earlier that Rabbi Natan of Breslov was complaining regarding the “intensification of the storm” of conflict with certain Mitnagdim—those Jews who opposed the budding Chasidic movement—in the Jewish year 5595 (1834-35).
in the higher realms. Conversely, even a small action on Earth has immense ramifications in Heaven. A Breslov Chasid explained this principle using the metaphor of a sundial; for the dial below to indicate a change of one hour, the sun above must move many thousands of kilometres through space.

This principle of connectivity was often emphasised by Breslov Chasidim as applicable particularly to the Jew, in that he or she are “primarily spiritual beings”. Thus, whilst appearing externally as a physical form, their spiritual structures are of far greater import than the corporeal. Taking the physical and the spiritual together, then, the Jewish tradition holds that the Jew is, by definition, a bridge between worlds; he or she performs recognisable physical actions on Earth, and thereby moves—in a manner largely unrecognisable to all but those who have attained high spiritual levels—structures in Heaven. For the Breslov Chasidim, striving always to identify with their spiritual aspect rather than their physical form (in other words, as “souls” rather than “bodies”; see also Chapter 4.5), this is a very important precept. As related in Chapter 3.6, when dipping in the miqveh (ritual immersion bath), for example, Chasidim emphasise that each time the body Below is submerged underwater, the soul Above is likewise submerged in a “spiritual” bath. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 4.5, the idea that the actions of the Jews on Earth cause events to occur in Heaven is especially emphasised on Shabbat. This day—as a particular and holy time and space—does not just automatically happen of itself, but rather, is made or triggered by the physical actions of the Jews below. Such actions in general are considered a precondition for certain spiritual events in the higher-dimensional heavenly realms.

**Initiation, and Obtaining Knowledge and Power**

The anthropological literature is replete with detailed descriptions of shamanic initiation; essentially, the processes employed by each particular society to choose and “make” its shamans, medicine men and women, sorcerers, and so forth. These processes typically involve some kind of selection of adepts from amongst the wider population, followed by their induction into the mysteries and magical traditions of the group. Eliade (1964 [1951]) writes at length concerning the recruitment of shamanic initiates and the subsequent bestowal of powers upon them. The means of recruitment vary widely across different peoples; in Central and Northeast Asia, for example, shamans are typically selected through either hereditary transmission of the profession, or by being “called” from the spirit realms, via signs including sickness, seizures, dreams and ecstatic experiences (pp. 13, 33). Elkin (1994 [1977], pp. 16-17) paints a similar picture regarding Australian Aboriginal groups, concluding that an individual is selected or called to be a medicine man either because elders and other medicine men
noticed in the postulant’s youth leanings towards the profession, his father is a medicine man (although the son must also have an affinity for the role), or the initiate is called through an inner experience, such as seeing visions of ancestral spirits. Subsequent initiation rituals are as varied as the groups who practice them, although a common theme across shamanic traditions worldwide appears to be an enactment of some kind of ordeal of *dying*, from which the initiate emerges as a reborn being, endowed with new knowledge and power (Turner, 1982; van Gennep, 1965 [1909]).

Neither amongst the Breslov community nor in wider Safed did I meet friends who alluded—either regarding themselves or people they knew—to belonging to secret Kabbalistic circles (of the sort that were known to exist in the Sephardi, Mizrachi and Ashkenazi Jewish world, especially prior to the inception of modern Chasidim in the eighteenth century; see Chapter 2.2) with corresponding initiations. This observation is of little import, however, for if such groups did exist in contemporary Safed they would probably be shrouded in secrecy and largely impenetrable to outsiders. Furthermore, individuals from such groups would not be included under classic anthropological conceptions of a “shaman”, in that the latter is usually a revealed and known member of a community, who uses his or her knowledge and power within culturally sanctioned boundaries amongst fellow community members.

Relevant to the present discussion, in contrast to such “secret” groups, is the question of whether Judaism has a recognised tradition that is comparable to the shamanic practice of selection and initiation, and that leads to the acquisition of knowledge and power by the postulant. I suggest that Judaism indeed has such a tradition, yet that—in its own conception of itself—this tradition *extends to every Jew*. In other words, there is no culturally determined selection process; selection has already occurred in that an individual was born a Jew. Accordingly, Judaism holds that every Jew is immanently a “shaman”, so to speak, walking a path towards *dvequt* (cleaving) to G-d, and obtaining increasing levels of knowledge and power as he or she progresses. Idel (1988b, pp. 104-105) makes a somewhat similar point in the context of the “mystical” Kabbalistic movements of Middle Ages Judaism. He points out that in the case of Christianity and Islam, for example, “… mysticism is associated with the formation of brotherhoods or monastic orders, and most of the mystical literature, whether Christian or Moslem, is written within their framework”. In contrast, explains Idel, the early medieval Kabbalists did not differentiate themselves in any way from the Jewish communities to which they belonged. The royal road to the Almighty was, as always in the Rabbinic tradition, the *Halakhic* path and its *mitzvot*, and any other practice was secondary and necessarily complementary to that path. When, in later centuries, specialised Kabbalistic practices did emerge (particularly in
Safed), “…these customs in turn rapidly spread… gradually becoming transformed into part of normative Jewish practice” (Idel, 1988b, p. 141).

The nature of the knowledge and power that the aspirant may attain is not simple to describe, for—as Breslov Chasidim often pointed out—the possession of that knowledge and power is predicated upon an individual’s spiritual attainment; without this attainment (which has infinite possible levels to it, because the Torah is considered infinite), he or she cannot even understand what it is that he or she is not understanding. A similar principle is cited in Chapter 4.5, by way of reference to a quote from Aldous Huxley (2009 [1944], p. x), wherein he expresses the idea that the ultimate Reality cannot be apprehended except by those who have attained to a correspondingly high spiritual degree. I can write, therefore, based almost exclusively on insights gleaned from the experiences and words of others, from the Chasidic mythopoeia, and only in miniscule amounts from personal intuition and comprehension. Knowledge gained may be divided into knowledge with specific content, and into the faculty of understanding in and of itself. Regarding the former, one traditional Chasidic story related by a Breslov friend spoke of a Jewish merchant who barely studied Torah, yet lived his life as a tzadiq (righteous man). One night he dreamt a certain dream, and upon waking discovered that he knew the entire Torah off by heart. Stories such as this are the stuff of legend, and it is unlikely that any contemporary Breslov Chasid truly expects to wake up one day with Divinely-granted access to knowledge in the form of specific content. Rather, the fervent hope of each is to be granted the second type of knowledge referred to above, that of pure understanding. Such understanding is akin to an expanded state of consciousness, in which one operate at levels of cognition and comprehension previously inaccessible.

This expanded consciousness then becomes the basis of the “power” that the seeker obtains. At its most basic level, perhaps, this power bestows upon him or her a newfound experience of the numinous, a re-gained sense of well-being in the world, and a deeper insight into the workings of reality at its various levels. At its most advanced and remarkable, this power enables the seeker to effect non-ordinary, magical outcomes (although, as with the Indian Yogic tradition, such attainments are held by Judaism to be mere side-effects to the one and only objective, of union with the Almighty). Two such outcomes have already been discussed in relation to the Ba’al Shem Tov—in Chapter 3.7, concerning his leaving his wife on Sunday with a bag of provisions to wander the woods, yet returning to her just prior to Shabbat with none of the food eaten; and in the present chapter above, regarding the Ba’al Shem Tov’s ascent to the very chamber of the Mashiach himself. In a similar vein, stories are told of Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari), the great progenitor of Lurianic Kabbalah, regaling that he
could manipulate reality to form, for example, a *miqveh* in the ground at will, or that he was able to step off a cliff and continue walking upon the ridge on the other side of the valley. The canonical Jewish religious works, including the TaNaKH and the Talmud are, of course, replete with such non-ordinary occurrences.

The idea that all Jews are walking broadly the same spiritual path is congruent with the fact that prior to the European Enlightenment, the terms “secular” or “religious” Jew would have made little sense. Certainly, there existed profound differences in individuals from different Jewish communities regarding all possible aspects of religious faith and observance. Yet, whether an individual’s faith in G-d was strong or weak, or whether their observance of Shabbat, for example, was exemplary or superficial, the community they belonged to would almost invariably have recognised a single method that led—according to their emic understanding—to where every Jew was created to go. This path was the *Halakhic* way; a life lived following G-d’s prescriptions and proscriptions, down to the minutiae that the Rabbinic tradition (with variations, of course, across communities in different parts of the Jewish world) had elucidated. In that sense, then, every Jew was a type of “shaman”, walking a path that demanded commitment, fortitude of character, and rigorous self-discipline.

Breslovers certainly conceive of themselves as walking a lifelong and often arduous path, taking upon themselves the “burden of the Torah” and attempting to rise to the tests and challenges that G-d set—and continues to set—for them. The declared purpose of this path is only one—to draw close to the Creator; however, it is well-recognised that as a person progresses he *receives* certain knowledge and powers. The idea of *receiving*—that is, that the individual can receive only what G-d chooses to give—is also implicit in the correct Hebrew term for one to whom Kabbalistic knowledge has been revealed: *mequbal*. This word, denoting “a man who has *been* received” is in the *passive* form, as opposed to the *active* form of the customary English word “Kabbalist” (see also Chapter 2.2). A similar principle is expressed in Proverbs 2:6; “For Hashem [G-d] grants wisdom; from His mouth (come) knowledge and understanding” (*The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English]*, 2008, p. 1569).

If every Jew is understood to be on a spiritual path, how do Breslov Chasidim conceive of modern-day secular Jews, who have abandoned the Torah life? Some Breslov friends expressed the idea that this abandonment is just one more step upon that very same path back home to G-d; for whilst such non-religious Jews may appear to have success and happiness in this life, they are being
set up by Heaven for a harsh lesson, so to speak, a lesson that will finally make them see the truth and lead them to understand that the purpose of their existence as Jews is to seek their Creator. In a sense, according to Jewish and certainly Charedi belief, *all Jews are on the same path back to G-d, although at different stages of it; in the very early such stages the individual does not even understand that he or she is on this path. This line of reasoning is a common attribution made by Breslovers regarding secular Jews, in order to explain their lack of love and fear of G-d.\]

Given this explanation, the generalisation in the sentence quoted in Chapter 3.7, in which a Breslov friend opined that performing *hitbodedut* (secluded meditative prayer) at night and in the forest is “the dream of every Jew”, is more understandable. The man considered this dream applicable to *every* Jew, and not just, for example, to a Breslov Chasid, because according to his understanding, each and every Jew is destined to come close to G-d through a Torah-based life. For Breslov Chasidim, then, and for the Jewish tradition more generally, there is no unique selection and initiation of postulants into a mystical path. Certainly, as per the example of secretive Kabbalistic circles, this did—and might still—occur. And others choose, for example, to become rabbis. But the former is a special case, applicable only to very few, whilst the latter concerns a particular profession in the ordinary world. The key point is that *all Jews are considered to be postulants, walking an exacting and rigorous path in order to get where they are going.*

**Mystical Numbers**

Numerology is an important aspect of knowledge in shamanic traditions the world over. Voget (1995), for example, discusses in some depth the importance of mystical numbers for the Crow American Indians, who historically hailed from the Yellowstone River (a major tributary of the upper Missouri) region, and in modern times live on reservation lands in Montana. The Crow perceived mystical numbers to underlie the essence of their world and to dictate the actions of the spirit beings within it (Voget, 1995, p. 366):

Sacred numbers provided the medicine drum beat for organizing a ceremonial score into four stops, four circuits, three and four days, and repetitions of medicine songs in clusters of four, eight, 12, and 16. Construction of the tepee and ceremonial lodges also made use of two, three, four, seven, ten, and 20. Crow were inclined to multiply sacred numbers by two, three, four, five, seven, and ten in an effort to add to their powers. The sacred numerology was applied to a wide range of personal and community needs relating to control of food animals, weather, health, population increase, social reputation,
IV. Analysis

4.3 “Bridges between Worlds”—Judaism and Shamanism

accumulation of wealth, and defeat of enemies. Men's careers and leadership roles also were governed by the sacred numerology, since public recognition depended on the performance of four daring coups which demonstrated firm relations with a powerful spirit patron.

Moving to another part of the world, certain odd numbers have a significant role in Manchu shamanic rituals in China; this is because the cosmological structure and the gods of the Manchu tradition often appear in odd numbers. Manchu shamanism holds, for example, that there are three regions of the cosmos, further subdivided into additional levels. The upper region, the sky, may consist of five, seven or nine such subdivisions, depending on the beliefs of each particular clan (Li, 1993, p. 100). These numbers go on to dictate the forms of Manchu cultural structures, including physical—such as groupings of idols, and designs of shamanic costumes and drums—and abstract, such as the number of times a trainee shaman must project their soul during trance into different cosmic regions (Li, 1993, pp. 101-102). Ekvall (1959) discusses the significance of the number thirteen in Tibetan and Mongolian cultures. Mongolian Buriat shamans, for example, begin their rituals with invocations to aspects of the world associated with the number thirteen, including thirteen “terrible thunderer” gods or heavens, and thirteen mythological princes of the north (Ekvall, 1959, p. 190). In Tibet, the early kings traditionally began their reigns at the age of thirteen, and furthermore the “shaman susceptibility [such as spirit possession] very frequently manifests itself at the beginning of puberty [the age of thirteen]” (Ekvall, 1959, p. 191).

If numerological systems are a feature of many shamanic cultures, then Judaism and its Kabbalistic tradition constitute an example par excellence of the use of numbers (and letters) to understand the very structure of reality. Gematriyah—numerical manipulations of the Hebrew letters—has already been mentioned several times in previous chapters; the numerical value of the four-letter tetragrammaton (name of G-d) \textit{yud-key-vav-key} as being equal to twenty-six, a number that is therefore Kabbalistically important (and similarly to mystical numbers dictating, as mentioned above, aspects of Manchu shamanic dress, is signified by the twenty-six parts of the Chasidic “zebra” gown—see Chapter 3.2); the letter \textit{yud}, the smallest and humblest of all Hebrew letters, as the quintessential letter of G-d, also corresponding to ten in gematriyah which is the number of the Sefirot (Emanations); and the gematriyah of the word for “wine” (\textit{yayn}) being the same—seventy—as the word for “secret” (\textit{sod}). These “Kabbalistic” fragments, attributing prime importance to the numerical value of Hebrew words, only begin to scratch the surface of a vast body of knowledge predicated on several principles. On a basic level those principles include a conception of the Hebrew letters as
G-d’s fundamental building blocks of reality, a recognition of the correspondence between letter and number, and the idea that structures and/or concepts in Creation bearing the same numerical value are themselves in some way related.

Such ideas are also essential to the Chasidic tradition, and seminal Breslov works based on the teachings of Rabbi Nachman (including Likutey Moharan and Likutey Halachot) are replete with gematriyah-based references. Breslov Chasidim in Safed vary in terms of their interest and affinity for such numerological investigations; all, however, acknowledge their validity. On the New Year’s pilgrimage to Uman I became acquainted with an American Jew (not belonging to the Safed Breslov group, but apparently with strong ties to them), who was also a well-respected Jewish religious scholar and author. This man was known for his mathematical mind and ability to perform near-instantaneous gematriyah computations; speaking publicly, he peppered his talks with insights and anecdotes based on the numerical significance of Hebrew words and names pertinent to the topic at hand.

Overall, the sophistication of the Jewish system of numerology is remarkable, extending well beyond simple associations between single words. When applied to entire passages and key concepts in the Torah, what appears to be revealed are hidden layers of knowledge, coded into the most superficial layer of the text, which is the narrative story. Indeed, a fundamental Jewish precept is that the Torah may be interpreted at four different—yet mutually consistent and never contradicting—levels. These levels are expressed by the acronym PaRDeS, a word itself denoting a “field”. The first level is Pshat—“simple”, referring to the direct meaning of the narrative story. This is followed by Remez—“hint”, and then Drash—“concept”. The final layer, the deepest Kabbalistic level and one that is often related directly to the “code” of the Hebrew letters, is Sod—“secret” (the same word that was cited as equalling the gematriyah of the word for “wine”, seventy). Since the Hebrew letters are considered to represent energies that constitute the building blocks of Creation, and given this multi-layered arrangement of the Torah, Hebrew has often—in contemporary metaphors—been described as a “programming language”. The following passage, one of many from a modern book that conveys some of Rabbi Isaac Luria’s (the Ari) teachings on weekly Torah portions, gives a flavour of the sophistication and level of complexity involved in Kabbalistic numerology (Wisnefsky, 2006, pp. 352-353). This particular example concerns G-d’s destruction of Pharaoh’s pursuing forces, as recounted in Exodus; my comments are included in [square brackets]:
But the Holy One, blessed be He, “removed the wheels of his chariots.” (Exodus 14:25). [Rashi, the great commentator, explains at a pshat—simple narrative—level:] G-d lured the Egyptians into the sea, and they were followed by the pillar of fire which boiled the sea water, causing the wheels of the Egyptian’s chariots to fall off (Rashi on Exodus 14:24 and 25). Another interpretation [from the Ari, at a level closer to sod—secret]: Pharaoh deducted the number 6 from the numerical value of the word for “chariot” (rechev, 222) leaving the numerical value of the word for choice (bachur, 216) in holiness. The phrase “Pharaoh took six hundred choice chariots” can be read “And Pharaoh took six from the letter(s of the word) chariot, (leaving) choice.” This is because the word for “hundred” (mei’ot) can be read: “from the letter” (mei-ot).

Rechev: reish-chaf-beit = 200 + 20 + 2 = 222
Bachur: beit-chet-vav-reish = 2 + 8 + 6 + 200 = 216

G-d then subtracted another 1, leaving the number value of “cast” (215), which became: “He cast the horse and its rider into the sea.” (Exodus 15:1). The word for “cast” is yarrah: yud-reish-hei = 10 + 200 + 5 = 215.

…By subtracting 1 from the power Pharaoh has left in holiness, G-d caused his downfall… The significance of the number 216 will become apparent presently.

Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness

A hallmark of shamanic traditions is their use of altered states of consciousness, induced by various means, in order to carry out magico-religious work. Dobkin de Rios and Winkelman (1989, p. 3) hold that, “Shamanism can be viewed as a universal cultural adaptation in hunting and gathering societies to the biological potential of all human beings to enter into trance or an ASC [altered state of consciousness]”. These researchers furthermore suggest that a common underlying human physiology can produce a range of altered states, that although socially- and culturally-dependent in terms of their external trappings, ultimately share common features in human beings the world over.

Whilst I disagree with the suggestion that physiological structure is an ultimate explanatory level for phenomenological experience, I strongly support the universalist assertion that non-ordinary experiences are essentially common to all human beings, irrespective of the sociocultural milieu in which those experiences arise. In terms of the means of production of non-ordinary states, Dobkin de Rios and Winkelman (1989, p. 3) point to a variety of methods used by shamanic practitioners:
IV. Analysis

4.3 “Bridges between Worlds”—Judaism and Shamanism

These may include the ingestion of LSD-like drugs, fasting, water deprivation, exposure to temperature extremes, and extensive exercise (such as dancing or long-distance running); or may simply include austerities (such as sleep deprivation), auditory stimuli (such as drumming and chanting) or social and sensory deprivation.

Several practices undertaken within the Breslov community, as discussed in previous chapters, may be fitted to categories in the above list. These practices include the esteemed hitbodedut meditation, especially reminiscent of “shamanic” ritual when it is performed in the forest at night (see Chapter 3.7); fasting—practiced on certain religious occasions by the entire community, as well as at any time by individuals for repentance and atonement; sleep deprivation, when the Chasidim stay awake all night, reading holy texts, on the last day of Sukot and on Shavuot (see Chapter 3.6); and the drinking of alcohol to the point of advanced inebriation on the festival of Purim (Chapter 3.10). Some of these practices are undertaken regularly by Breslov Chasidim (for example, hitbodedut), others less frequently (such as fasting), and some—from an individual perspective—not at all (not all Chasidim, for instance, remain awake the entire night on Sukot or Shavuot, nor do all become inebriated on Purim).

There is one practice, however, universal to the Jewish religion and unfailingly observed in Charedi (and certainly Breslov) communities, that far outweighs all of those just mentioned. I suggest that, when undertaken in a certain manner, it constitutes the royal road in Judaism to at least some of the non-ordinary states that Dobkin de Rios and Winkelman (1989) refer to; this practice is prayer. As discussed in Chapter 3.3, the sheer amount of time that Breslov Chasidim engage in prayer, every day of the year, is remarkable. On a normal weekday the devotee might spend—across the morning, afternoon and evening services combined—approximately three hours on formal prayer (“formal” is used here to distinguish from individual/personal prayer, such as undertaken during hitbodedut); on Shabbat five hours is typical, whilst on seminal occasions such as Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) or Yom Kippur, almost the entire day, well into the evening, is utilised praying in synagogue.

Borrowing once more from the drug literature, as with the metaphor at the opening of Chapter 3.10 (comparing the shifted states of consciousness experienced during different Jewish religious festivals to particular psychoactive “trips”, in that both represent changed energy states or “vibrations” in the practitioner), the particular phenomenology of a given prayer session may be said to be dependent upon three things: occasion, set and setting. The psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Norman Zinberg (1986) first coined the phrase “drug, set and setting”, a phrase—used extensively ever since—to
identify the three main factors that determine the phenomenology of a given psychoactive experience. His work drew attention to the fact that the experience is dependent only in part upon the molecule consumed, because set—the total physical and psychic reality that constitute the individual at the commencement of the drug session—and setting, being the environment in which the session takes place, are highly significant, yet commonly underestimated, determining factors.

The present metaphor substitutes the religious occasion for the drug. According to Jewish tradition, each religious occasion, such as Shabbat or Yom Kippur, represents a different reality that penetrates into the ordinary world of time and space, subtly but significantly altering that world. A rationalist perspective might hold that it is simply the devotee’s knowledge of the occasion and its seminal importance to them that alter their experience of it, and thus that the religious occasion is already included within the definition of “set”. The occasion, however, is a single factor of such significance in determining the experiential quality of a particular prayer session, that—just like the “drug”, and irrespective of whether the occasion’s effects are (from a religious perspective) an alteration of the very essence of time and space, or (from a rationalist viewpoint) an alteration upon the mind of the individual (or indeed, whether both explanatory levels are valid)—the occasion merits its own category. All other factors being held constant, prayer on the holy days of Yom Kippur or Pesach (Passover), for example, are very different experiences for a religious Jew compared to prayer on an ordinary weekday. In terms of set, a Chasid who has just had a child born, for instance, and is undertaking his morning prayers, is likely to feel a very different connection to G-d compared to his experience during any other day. And finally regarding setting, a Breslover praying on Shabbat during pilgrimage in Uman, for example, is likely to have a very different phenomenological experience compared to prayer on a “regular” Shabbat in Safed.

The intense Charedi engagement with formal prayer is paradoxical and somewhat ironic, in that on the one hand it is supposed to elevate the practitioner to expanded states of consciousness—in emic terms, closeness to G-d—yet its very repetitiveness constantly threatens to do the exact opposite; to reduce the practice to a banal, robotic exercise of daily recitation by rote. Discussions regarding how to pray are, accordingly, very common at the Breslov kolel; these discussions invariably focus on (according to the above delineation) the set of the practitioner; advice would be given to me, for example, on how to maintain appropriate kavanah (intention or mindset) during prayer, what to do when the mind wanders, the importance of focusing on the printed shape of the Hebrew letters, and much more. A prayer session that opens the heart, brings tears to the eyes, elevates the soul, and gives one a feeling of unmistakable closeness to the Creator, is the holy grail of every Chasid regarding
IV. Analysis

4.3 “Bridges between Worlds”—Judaism and Shamanism

prayer. Whilst rare, these states are indeed achievable at certain times—whether for a minute, an hour, or more—and almost every Breslov Chasid is able to recount at least one such personal occasion on which he experienced them. Chapter 4.5 gives a richer description, based on the author’s personal experience, of such an expanded state of religious consciousness.

Conclusion

More importantly than “proving” or “disproving” the basic idea that core elements of Judaism are “shamanic”, this chapter has provided some insights into parallels between the two traditions, insights that may enable anthropological and other understandings gleaned from one tradition to illuminate the other. This chapter furthermore suggests a somewhat novel frame from which to construe Judaism as a whole.

In summary, the relationship between the Charedi Jew and their natural world is a complex one; he or she generally conceives of that world as created by G-d for their personal use in His service, thereby obligating them to respect that world and utilise it only in certain, religiously sanctioned ways. Charedi Jews do not see their own essence—their soul—as being an integral part of the natural world, but rather, as an element of Creation as a whole, or—even outside of Creation itself—as a “part” of the Almighty. The Chasid, like the shaman, constitutes a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, and every action that he or she performs Below has great significance Above. The Jewish tradition, furthermore, conceives of every Jew as most aboriginal traditions conceive of the selected and initiated “shaman”; each Jew is understood to have been created to walk the path of dvequt (cleaving) to their Deity/ultimate reality (G-d), with the ever-increasing knowledge and power that comes of that walking. Judaism articulates one of the most sophisticated numerology systems known to humankind, and the Jewish religion includes within it—as demonstrated by the Breslov community in Safed—socially sanctioned practices for subtly altering consciousness through a variety of means.

It is interesting to note similarities between the theme of redemption as it finds expression in the Breslov milieu, compared to the same theme expressed (although usually more indirectly) in neo-shamanic circles. Beyond a preoccupation with the Jewish Messianic ideal (a preoccupation characteristic of the Jewish religious lifeworld generally) involving, for example, ongoing references to hope and yearning for the coming of Mashiach (the Messiah), Breslov Chasidim closely identify Rabbi Nachman of Breslov with redemptive ideas. Putting aside his construal as a manifestation of, or alternately belonging to the same soul cluster as, the soul of Moses (and therefore the Messiah), Rabbi Nachman is seen as a great tzadiq, who arrived, brimming with love for G-d and His nation, at
a time of great malaise for the Jewish people. Breslovers see the Rabbi as a shining light who teaches them every day how to come closer to G-d, and as a beloved leader who will continue to do so until the Messiah finally arrives. A phrase archetypally attributed to Rabbi Nachman, and printed on the covers of common Breslov books, expresses this sentiment; “My fire will burn until the coming of the Mashiach”.

This redemptive mindset is reminiscent of the construal of “La Madre” or “The Mother”—the term commonly used by some to refer to the psychedelic brew and to some conception of the deity/energy underlying it—in “neo-shamanic” ayahuasca circles, of the type that have sprung up in the last two decades across much of the developed world (see Chapter 3.10). The Mother, together with the psychoactive experience she facilitates, is frequently regarded in a redemptive vein; members of such circles often believe that ayahuasca will enable healing on a personal and societal level, and that She has come at a time—given the current state of worldwide ecological and geopolitical crisis—of great need for humankind. As entities who have arrived at such crucial points in human history, who are closer to the underlying Source and essence of Reality than is accessible to most ordinary human beings, and who continue to teach the faithful, often in mysterious and esoteric ways, the ayahuasca La Madre and Rabbi Nachman of Breslov may be said to be similar religious “objects” to their devotees.

Whatever the ontological status of these objects and the learning experiences they facilitate, both—each within its particular sociocultural sphere of influence—are bringing desperately needed self-awareness and a path of hope and action into dark places, at both a personal/psychic and a social level. Seeing beyond specific culture-bound paradigms that seek to reduce the immensity of the psychedelic experience into tangible religious/cultic forms (for example, ayahuasca as “La Madre”), although at the same time recognising the necessity for and intrinsic value of such paradigms, and writing from a place grounded in a metaphysical realpolitik and a vision of authentic social change, Job (2014) emphasises the potential of the psychedelic experience to facilitate healing at all levels of the human experience, and to aid in averting ecocide and self-destruction as a species. I entirely agree with such a view regarding the potential of the psychedelic experience, and apply it also to the ecstatic religious experience—as may be manifested through Breslov, wider Jewish, and more generally other religious practices—as a means for positive transformation on both a personal and social level.

In the ongoing anthropological study of shamanic and related phenomena, I advocate strongly for an approach that contends with such phenomena on their own grounds. Functional, etic explanations
have their place, as do structural ones that generally relegate the array of non-ordinary shamanic phenomena to the structures of the human mind. Beyond these explanations, however, researchers must recognise that the shaman, as well as the religious “mystic”, delve into regions of existence in which scientific, post-Enlightenment paradigms—perhaps by definition and of necessity, in order for those paradigms to sustain themselves—may carry little traction. An approach that has as its foundation the idea that many shamanic systems of knowledge emerged from absolutely legitimate insights into the structure of reality, thereby themselves constituting “scientific” systems, may bear rich fruit for our continued efforts to understand ourselves and the world.

Elkin (1994 [1977]), in his seminal work on Aboriginal “men of high degree”—essentially, indigenous Australian shamans—conveys this point elegantly. Whilst he does indeed write from an academic perspective, seeking to explain experiences and phenomena associated with Aboriginal “sorcerers” in a rational, post-Enlightenment manner, he does not hesitate also to say (p. 68):

… Aboriginal medicine men, so far from being rogues, charlatans or ignoramuses, are men of high degree… the various psychic powers attributed to them must not be too readily dismissed as mere primitive magic and “make-believe”, for many of them have specialized in the working of the human mind and in the influence of mind on body and of mind on mind.

In a similar vein, Eliade (1964 [1951], p. xiv) muses upon shamanism from an ontological perspective. His “kernel that remains refractory to explanation” seems to point to the mysterium tremendum; a Mystery that, perhaps, must always be present as a pre-condition for the existence of the human world of finitude as we know it:

All these dreams, myths, and nostalgias [concerning a specific motif, for example, ascent or flight] cannot be exhausted by a psychological explanation; there is always a kernel that remains refractory to explanation, and this indefinable, irreducible element perhaps reveals the real situation of man in the cosmos, a situation that, we shall never tire of repeating, is not solely “historical”.

***

210
IV. Analysis

4.4 “The Show Must Go On”—The Torah and the Jewish Religion as a Self-Replicating Entity

4.4 “The Show Must Go On”—The Torah and the Jewish Religion as a Self-Replicating Entity

The Torah—the principal blueprint and cornerstone of the Jewish religion—may be thought of as a replicating unit, operating through the medium of the very society that accurately transmits it from one generation to the next. In the course of my work with the Breslov Chasidim, and as I myself pursued the Jewish religious path, I began to understand that this religion—in both its theory and practice—contains mechanisms that serve to maximise the adherence of its followers to itself, and thereby ensure its own survival. The idea that elements of a given entity (in this case a religion) play a key role in the reproduction and thus perpetuation of that entity is nothing new—this principle operates at different levels, including the biological, in terms of genetic replication, and the social, in terms of the particular mechanisms of every society for the ongoing reproduction of its institutions and structures.

The remarkable point about Judaism that bears examination, however, is the variety and sophistication of these mechanisms, operating—as will be seen—on both physical-world and cognitive/ideational levels. Some of these mechanisms have their origins directly in the Torah itself, whilst others clearly evolved in response to pressures exerted on Jewish societies at different points in historical time and space. It would appear, however, that all of these mechanisms (of which, of course, this discussion can identify only a partial list) combined are what have enabled the Torah and Jewish identity to survive, often in the face of severe adversity, for a remarkable length of time.

Diverse yet Simultaneously Valid Explanatory Levels

Two important points should precede this discussion. Firstly, speaking of the Torah as a “replicating unit” may imply that it possesses some independent agency, or that the Jewish religion as a whole is a conscious and teleological entity. These are subjects that constitute entire and lengthy discussions in and of themselves, and are outside of the present scope. I do not wish to accept nor reject these possibilities; rather, the purpose of this chapter is to use the idea of the Torah as a replicating entity as a valuable metaphor, in order to explain an array of specific ethnographic and psychological observations.

The second point to be made is that just because there is an explanation for a cultural element or process at one level, does not mean that other explanations, at other levels, do not also exist, and that they cannot be simultaneously valid and correct. In fact, this idea of simultaneous explanations—at
physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual levels—is the bread and butter of Judaism, whilst many modern conceptions entirely trivialise or miss this point. For example, common etic explanations regarding the Jewish stipulations around food—laws of kashrut; kosher—tend not only to focus on the functional aspects of these stipulations in terms of physical health and hygiene (particularly the proscription against pork and shellfish, and against the mixing of milk and meat), but having done so, then go on to dismiss all other explanations as “merely mystical”, theological, or similar. This occurs at an anecdotal popular level, and also at a scholarly one (for example, in an intriguing early-twentieth century article in the Public Health Journal, Toronto; Fauman, 1923). In contrast, from a religious perspective, Judaism provides a cascade of explanations, each at a different level yet just as valid as the other, for its kashrut laws. These include:

- First and foremost, the fulfilment of a commandment from G-d.

- The ritual slaughter of kosher mammals (such as a cow or goat) for meat, carried out by a highly trained specialist (a shochet; see Chapter 3.6) with a sharp knife passed across the animal’s neck to sever the main structures, including the jugular vein, is said to be the most humane way possible to kill, inflicting minimal pain on the animal.

- It was also explained by a Jewish teacher that this kosher method of killing, if carried out properly, avoids the mass-release of sympathetic hormones—particularly adrenaline—into the animal’s body, a release characteristic of all other modern methods of slaughter, including those involving pre-stunning the animal with electricity, gas, or a fired bolt or hammer to the head. If true, this fact has direct biochemical consequences regarding the effects of the meat on the human being consuming it.

- From a spiritual perspective: the physical world contains Divine sparks that have become entrapped within it. Eating—when done according to Halakhic Law—is one means by which those sparks are released and elevated back to their Source. However, in some animals, such as a pig, these sparks are “knotted up”, to use a metaphor, in such a way that a Jew eating that animal cannot release them; they remain “knotted” even after slaughter and consumption. The eating of such an animal would constitute, therefore, not an act of holiness, but essentially murder.

This partial list illustrates the concept of differing yet simultaneously valid explanations, operating at various levels of the structure of reality. Spero (1992, p. 107) makes a similar point regarding cohesion between explanatory systems, giving the example of the morning hand-washing ritual—
necessitated by the soul’s nightly departure from and return to the body (see also the footnote on this topic in Chapter 3.3)—and microbiological, sociological and ultimately psychological explanations thereof.

Regarding the above rationales for kashrut laws, essentially all except the first are a form of science, in that they are potentially falsifiable claims about processes occurring in the structure of the world (this applies too to the last explanation, regarding Divine sparks—whilst the paradigm it takes for granted is incongruent with that of modern science, the explanation given is still describing a cause-and-effect process, and if that level of reality were accessible and measurable, the claim could be tested). In the forthcoming discussion, then, I wish only to point out that several cultural elements play a prime role in the replication of the Torah and thereby the reproduction of Judaism; in explaining the function of those elements at this level, however, I do not claim to explain them away—they may, and probably do, have other functions at other levels.

The mechanisms to be discussed in this chapter may be divided into two broad categories. Firstly, those based on the Jewish commandments—detailed stipulations of dos and don’ts covering all aspects of life—and secondly, mechanisms that function on a cognitive/ideational level. The first category affects primarily social structures, encouraging forms that facilitate the transmission of the Torah and thereby the religion, and discouraging those that impede it. I will further divide this category into two sub-categories—injunctions that lead to the minimisation of social interactions between Jews and non-Jews, and precepts relating to the Torah itself. The second broad category of mechanisms affects primarily psychological structures and thereby the motivations of the individual.

**Injunctions that Lead to the Minimisation of Social Interactions between Jews and Non-Jews**

The Jewish emphasis on maintaining a social separation between Jews and non-Jews is as old as the Torah itself, and is an emphasis that continued throughout the diaspora and into modern times (see also Chapters 3.8 and 4.2). The Torah in Genesis 43:32, for example, relates that Joseph, after being appointed viceroy over all of Egypt, ate separately from the Egyptians in his household (*The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English]*, 2008, p. 113). Another striking example is found in Deuteronomy 7:1-5 (*The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English]*, 2008, p. 445):

> When Hashem, your G-d, will bring you to the Land to which you come to possess it, and He will thrust away many nations from before you—the Hittite, the Girgashite…—seven nations greater and mightier than you, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver them before
you, and you will smite them—you shall utterly destroy them; you shall not seal a covenant with them nor shall you show them favor. You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughter to his son, and you shall not take his daughter for your son, for he will cause your child to turn away from after Me. Rather, so shall you do to them: Their altars shall you break apart; their pillars shall you smash, their sacred trees shall you cut down; and their carved images shall you burn in fire.

In contemporary Israeli Charedi communities this emphasis on separation between Jews and non-Jews has become, to some extent, re-expressed as an imperative to differentiate from non-observing Jews, as they have become the prime threat to the Charedi lifeworld (as discussed in Chapter 4.2). Both the positive and negative commandments that constitute the essence of Judaism contain mechanisms for encouraging separation between the observant core and the non-observant periphery (whoever they may be); reducing intermingling, and thus preserving the religion and its Torah (the source itself from which these commandments are derived) across the generations.

Perhaps the foremost mechanism in this category concerns a domain of life that has already been mentioned above in the discussion on explanatory levels—eating and drinking. Kosher dietary laws and customs are extremely complex, including stipulations regarding animals that may or may not be eaten, the correct slaughter and preparation of meat, the separation of milk and meat (to the degree of exclusive dishes and utensils), rules around the seventh, sabbatical year of the seven-year agricultural cycle in which land owned by Jews in Israel must be left fallow and no crop produced upon it, the correct washing of fruits and vegetables prior to consumption to remove all insects, the commandment that a tenth of all agricultural produce be tithed to the poor, and many more. The result of these complex stipulations is that observant Jews will not eat at any restaurant that does not possess a certificate of kashrut, and similarly, often not at the house of another Jew whom they deem does not keep kosher to the same standard as themselves. This is especially true, and is observable in the Breslov community, during Pesach (Passover), due to the additional and exacting food-related laws and customs of this festival.

Eating and drinking are a core feature of basic human social interactions, and when these activities cannot be shared between persons, existing social boundaries and segregations are enforced (Kraemer, 2009, p.123, for example, also makes this point specifically in regards to Jewish eating). Buckser (1999, p. 191) writes: “Ethnic cuisines act as one of the most vivid ways through which group identities are recognized and reinforced”. In his ethnographic paper dealing with kosher
practice (and non-practice) amongst Danish Jews in Copenhagen, he emphasises food practices as a key point of contention or solidarity, as the case may be, across both Jewish and mixed marriages. Throughout Israel today, and in other parts of the world that are home to sizeable Jewish communities, the direct effects of kosher laws in producing social separation are plain to behold. In Tel Aviv especially, many restaurants and cafes do not possess (often because they are not interested in paying to acquire) certificates of kashrut, even though by basic standards the food served by them may actually be kosher. Many Jews who consider themselves observant, and certainly Charedi Jews, therefore, would not set foot inside of these eateries.

A similar mechanism that fosters separation between Jews and non-Jews is very related to kashrut law, but constitutes an even more sophisticated instance thereof; the injunctions around wine. As discussed in Chapter 3.10, this grape product is of key importance in the Jewish tradition, in terms of the mystical properties attributed to it, as well as almost every festival, and certainly the Shabbat, involving blessings over wine. Clearly, wine must be kosher in the first place, but because of its power also has numerous additional injunctions surrounding it. One set of these relates specifically to non-Jews; according to the Shulchan Arukh, the sixteenth century code of Jewish law, if a non-Jew drinks from a bottle of kosher wine, then the whole bottle is considered to be non-kosher, unless it has been heated to a certain temperature in advance. This injunction may also be applied in a more strict form (although there is Halakhic debate on this point) to non-observant Jews who drink from the same bottle, especially those who do not observe the Shabbat. This practice may sound somewhat bizarre, yet an explanation of the Jewish laws regarding wine alone, as well as discussion of their origins and rationales, could fill an entire volume.

Here again is a cultural practice that clearly separates between Jews and non-Jews, and furthermore in a key domain—associated with inebriation and festivity—that tends to play a substantial role in relations between the sexes and subsequent reproduction. In summary, kashrut laws have undoubtedly been significant throughout Jewish history in keeping Jewish communities separate and distinct from their non-Jewish neighbours, and in thereby ensuring social and cultural continuity.

The third and last cultural element to be discussed as a mechanism for keeping one social group isolated from other, dominant groups is that of dress. Whilst historically this element played an important role in differentiating between Jews and non-Jews, in contemporary Jewish society (and certainly amongst the Breslov Chasidim) it identifies and reinforces the divide between Charedi and non-Charedi communities. Chapter 3.2 gives an ethnographic account of clothing norms amongst the
Breslov community in Safed, and in Charedi society more generally. As discussed, Breslovers are themselves aware of the fact that clothing is a key element in distinguishing themselves from surrounding communities. Two friends, including Rav Ephraim Kenig, the brother of the Rav, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig, responded to my questions about the distinctive Charedi dress by citing a Talmudic teaching; they explained that in Egypt, even as slaves on the lowest of spiritual levels, the Jews kept their identity separate from, and did not dissolve into, the general Egyptian population, through three things; their unique names, their own language, and their distinct dress.

There is no more obvious and ubiquitous marker of belongingness to the Charedi lifeworld than the distinctive black-suited garb worn by the men. Charedi women, of course, also dress within certain parameters, but their belongingness to a particular community is less obvious, and certainly so to the uninitiated observer. As discussed in Chapter 3.2, the men of some Chasidic groups have specific features (usually with historical origins hearkening back to their communities in Europe) in their manner of dress that identify them as belonging to that particular group. This is not the case regarding the Breslov Chasidim; their clothing is simply typical of the Chasidic style in general.

Such distinctive clothing as worn by Charedim, in stark contrast to the usual Western styles favoured by secular Israelis, ensures that even before a verbal interaction between two persons commences — in any imaginable situation, ranging from in a shop, on public transportation, between children at a park, and so forth — both sides are aware of the Charedi or non-Charedi belongingness, with all that it entails, of their counterpart. Positing three hypothetical men—a Charedi Jew, a religious Zionist Jew (of the type broadly referred to in Israel as a kipah srugah—a “knitted skullcap”) and a secular Jew—almost certainly, the psychological gulf upon first contact between the Charedi and both the religious Zionist and the secular Jew would be substantially greater than the gulf between the latter two. This is despite the fact that, in following a life of Torah-observance, the lifeworlds of the Charedi and Zionist Jews may have substantially more in common with each other than with the secular individual. The impact of the distinctive Charedi dress in segregating these communities from the mainstream non-Charedi Israeli population cannot be underestimated. To dress in this particular fashion is, of course, not stipulated by the Torah (see again Chapter 3.2 for a discussion on the origins of Charedi dress); rather, it is a specific cultural norm that has been adopted by certain Jewish societies in a particular time and space. It is another prime example of a cultural element acting as a mechanism to safeguard the social structures that reproduce the Torah and the Jewish religion from generation to generation.
Precepts Relating to the Torah Itself

This first sub-category just discussed focused on injunctions that maintain a separation between observant Jews and their neighbouring social groups. The second sub-category, as mentioned beforehand, involves precepts relating to the Torah itself (see Figure 14 below). The first is the imperative in Judaism, and especially in the Rabbinic tradition—the dominant and almost exclusive form of Judaism today—that the study of the Torah is holy of holies, and of the same spiritual value as a whole set of other commandments combined35. “Torah” here refers to the written Torah, the Oral Law, and especially the Talmud, which in most yeshivot constitutes the central focus of ongoing study. This is not just some minor precept, but an ideal that Charedi children are indoctrinated into from an early age; for most it becomes a patently obvious and unquestionable value throughout their lives. Thus, the very entity that is being replicated stipulates that the study of its own self is the loftiest, most meritorious activity that a Jew can engage in.

The second precept relating to the Torah itself is the directive to give charity to Torah scholars. The historical origins of this practice, and the highly contentious State-funded institutions that it has given rise to in modern Israeli Charedi society, are discussed in Chapter 3.3. Rabbi Nachman, in Likutey Moharan I, 204, is quoted as saying (Rabbi Natan of Breslov, nineteenth century, p. 112):

> The money given to wise scholars [meaning Torah scholars] is the same as supporting Torah. But in truth, the money given to wise scholars is the same as actual Torah, and no sin can extinguish the money given to wise scholars, for no sin can extinguish the Torah….

The connection to cultural replication is a direct one; observant Jews give on the basis of such precepts, the money given supports more scholars spending more hours studying Torah, and the impetus behind the transmission of the Torah and reproduction of its religion is thereby strengthened.

35 According to an explanation taken from the Talmud and read every morning as part of the “Morning Blessings”, these other commandments are “precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in This World but whose principal [sic] remains intact for him in the World to Come” (The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Nusach Sefarad [Hebrew and English], 2005, p. 19). These precepts include honouring one’s parents, acts of kindness, hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, and several others. Yet, “the study of Torah is considered equivalent to them all.”
Mechanisms that Affect Psychological Structures

The second broad category of mechanisms to be discussed are those that affect psychological structures. This category is particularly fascinating, as its mechanisms shape the cognition and ideation of the individual, thereby manipulating motivation and ultimately guiding actions in a manner favourable to the Torah’s reproduction. Perhaps the first and foremost mechanism in this category is one that, interestingly, became dominant too in various streams of Christian theology throughout the centuries, although usually with key divergences from the Jewish conceptions of it; this is the concept of the Evil Inclination (the Yetzer Hara). It is perhaps the most effective and ingenious of conceptual or ideational mechanisms, in terms of its ability to bind the believer, and indeed the partial sceptic, to the religious path.

According to Jewish belief, the Evil Inclination operates at all levels of Creation. Historically it is associated with the figure and peoples called Amalek/the Amalekites, regarding whom the Torah in Deuteronomy 25:19 commands the Jews to “…wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven—you shall not forget!” (The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 487). In the individual it is associated with the physical body, which is trying to drag the radiant soul down into darkness. The soul in turn must try to elevate the body to the soul’s own level of spiritual radiance. Essentially, the Evil Inclination is the force in Creation whose task it is to obscure and conceal knowledge of G-d from the world, with this concealment being the root of all evil; conversely, the revelation of G-d is said to be the root of all good. Importantly, the Evil Inclination is absolutely...
IV. Analysis

4.4 “The Show Must Go On”—The Torah and the Jewish Religion as a Self-Replicating Entity

a creation of G-d; it plays a crucial role in the grand design of the world, namely to allow man free will (as covered in Chapter 2.1) (Urbach, 1987, p. 472).

The idea of this Yetzer Hara, and one’s constant grappling with it, permeates the cognitions and conversations of Breslov Chasidim (see, for example, the account in Chapter 4.5 of the Chasid whose thinking was dominated by themes of the war between Good and Evil). Improper inclinations and desires, in situations ranging from minor to major—including, for instance, telling a falsehood, skipping or performing a lesser version of some religious obligation, and certainly dwelling on forbidden sexual desires—are all ascribed to the Evil Inclination, and seen as tests for the individual, who is constantly being challenged by G-d at the threshold of his or her ability to resist and overcome.

This conception of the Evil Inclination is applied especially to explain a Jew’s decision to leave or take a major step back from the Jewish religious path. One Chasid used an intriguing metaphor to explain to me the Yetzer Hara’s operations in this domain; so long as a Jew is not on the path and not keeping the mitzvot (as is the case with the secular Jew), the Evil Inclination within him/her is at rest—“lounging in a deck-chair on a warm, sandy beach”, so to speak. However, as soon as some level of religious awareness is awakened within the individual, re-connecting them with their soul’s yearning for closeness with the Almighty and motivating them to begin keeping the commandments, that awakening is akin to overturning the Evil Inclination’s comfortable deck-chair and throwing sand over it. The Inclination is now roused to fight back, seeking as always to keep the body and its desires dominant over the soul, knowledge of G-d concealed, and the individual in spiritual darkness.

Here, then, is an ingenious Pandora’s box, a cognitive net of entrapment (or conversely, from within the box or from the point of view of the net itself, a precept of ultimate liberation), that I observed in others and that I myself grappled with on a deeply personal level. For once a person accepts this premise—that the Evil Inclination is striving to keep one away from G-d and from the ultimate purpose for which one was created—then from that point onwards any impulse to leave the religious path (whether due to disbelief/scepticism, hardship, apathy, or other reasons) becomes interpreted as the work of that very same Evil Inclination. In a social and cultural sense, this point illustrates the

36 In the context of the Jewish conception of G-d as the Ground of all things, the Source of all sources, and so forth, this point almost does not bear making, for it could not be otherwise. Indeed, in Kabbalistic thought the Evil Inclination is regarded as a holy angel, although one “clothed” in the impure shells.
power of this cognitive platform in keeping the individual—through a combination of fear (of the Evil Inclination) and hope (of overcoming it and thereby drawing close to G-d)—engaged with the work of religious action and reproduction.

The second mechanism of replication that functions on a cognitive/ideational level is the well-known precept, fundamental to Charedi belief and practice, of “na’aseh venishmah”, literally meaning, “We will do and we will hear”. These words are taken directly from the Torah, from the passage in Exodus 24:7 describing the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 195). The most common interpretations of this phrase explain it as acting first—that is, in accordance with the mitzvot—and asking questions about/understanding those actions only later. This precept, often quoted with some sense of pride and also used as an admonition within the Breslov community for the shirking of religious duties, is directly related to the basis of what a Western Enlightenment view might label as “blind faith” and unfounded obedience.

A classic example frequently related by Charedi Jews in the context of na’aseh venishmah is the application of tefillin. To the average person, this is a peculiar and arbitrary act; daily placing small black boxes that contain scrolls of writing upon one’s arm and forehead, and wrapping those parts of the body in the black leather straps attached to the boxes. Yet to a religious Jew, the act is first of all a commandment of G-d, as stated in the written Torah and explicated in the Oral Law. There are deep Kabbalistic explanations regarding the functions of tefillin, but irrespective of these, the Jew is obligated to perform the commandment in the spirit of “we will do and we will hear”—in other words, we will carry out the commandment first, and only afterwards seek to understand it. Indeed, it is usually emphasised that the act of wearing tefillin, as with the other commandments, is part of the process of purifying and refining the spiritual structures that comprise a person. It was explained to me several times that only after those processes reach some level of progression can the individual even begin to understand what it is that the fulfilment of the commandments is actually doing. In other words, the average Jew today is on a radically reduced spiritual level, such that they mostly do not even understand the mitzvot they are carrying out; it is only after actually performing those mitzvot—presumably consistently for many years (or lifetimes?)—that the practitioner’s level of consciousness is raised, and he or she can finally begin to perceive the cause-and-effect relationships fundamental to their actions. The precept of na’aseh venishmah, then, is supposed to goad one ever onwards, through the gloom where there is no understanding and into the promised light of cognisance.
IV. Analysis

4.4 “The Show Must Go On”—The Torah and the Jewish Religion as a Self-Replicating Entity

As with the previous mechanism of the Yetzer Hara just discussed, there is a distinct Catch-22 flavour to this act-first-ask-and-understand-later precept. Apparently, one cannot evaluate a religious obligation properly without first performing it, all the way. If an individual has pursued it, yet not achieved the promised outcomes, well then, clearly he or she was not carrying it out sufficiently or properly. When such a precept is normalised within a culture from an early age, as a value to aspire to, it carries an immense power to counter rational and logical thought processes, and to motivate the individual to continued religious action in an ongoing fashion.

The third and final mechanism to be discussed in this context is the concept in Judaism of “his or her reward being paid out in This World”, an idea that was repeated to me by several teachers. This idea was also touched upon briefly in Chapter 4.1. To understand this mechanism, a basic familiarity is required with the Jewish concept of “This World” (Olam Hazeh) versus “The World to Come” (Olam Haba) (see Chapter 2.1 for a more comprehensive discussion). The world as we know it now—“This World”—is a place of testing and earning, containing all the necessary elements to allow the devotee to reject evil, to choose to cleave to G-d, to become more “G-d-like” in his or her attributes, and to thereby earn their true reward. That true reward is received in the “World to Come”—the eternal state of rest and delight for souls, each soul according to its own level of earned merit, in union with the Divine (Luzzatto, 1997 [18th century], pp. 45-59).

The world as we know it today, then, is an arena for testing and polishing souls, for only as they become perfected can they merit approaching the Perfect Being that is G-d. These themes of testing and earning are related directly to the Evil Inclination (Yetzer Hara); as discussed above, by offering a person ongoing choices between Good and Evil, free will comes into being, and thus the individual truly earns (or forfeits) his or her reward. If a Jew is on the right path, then what may seem like “bad” events in this life are in fact simply a part of this testing and refining process, and should be accepted—joyfully—as such. However, if a Jew is not on this path (for example, one who appears to have abandoned the religious way), a problem exists; on the one hand, they are not on a trajectory to merit the World to Come, yet on the other, they have surely performed some good deeds in this lifetime (there is almost no human being who hasn’t). According to the Divine blueprint, these deeds must be rewarded, as their performance was done in the “arena” of earning—This World—and G-d’s justice is omnipresent; every last act must be accounted for and paid out in full. This concept is similar to Eastern conceptions of karma, and to the scientific notion of cause-and-effect in the world.
These lines of reasoning are then used to support the following cognitive platform: we often see those who are not on, or who have left, the religious path, or those who are engaged with some other “evil” in the world, and they are absolutely flourishing—in terms of family, finances, and general success and happiness in life. And we often see others, who apparently are on the path, suffering great hardship. This raises the classic (and simplistic) question of “why do ‘bad’ things happen to ‘good’ people?” The religious explanation for this perplexing state of affairs is simple; the former are having their reward paid out in This World, although it is a limited reward, decreed by G-d to satisfy the requirements of justice. The latter, the devout, are suffering only as part of their testing against the Evil Inclination; their eternal reward awaits them in the World to Come, a joy and bliss on a level tremendously beyond anything that can be conceived of in this world as we know it. Such modes of thinking are employed—especially by Charedi individuals themselves—to maintain motivation for their demanding religious journey.

**Conclusion**

Chapter 3.3 quoted and discussed the venerated Shema prayer, in the context of the passage therein detailing the wrathful response of G-d to the Jews if they turn astray from His ways and serve the gods of others. An earlier passage in this prayer, in contrast, instructs the devotee to love G-d, to teach these passages to his or her children, and to speak of these matters throughout the day (The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Nusach Sefarad [Hebrew and English], 2005, p. 97):

> You shall love Hashem, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources. Let these matters that I command you today be upon your heart. Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, and when you retire and when your arise.

Once more, what is perhaps the most venerated of all prayers in Judaism—read in full by the religious Jew twice daily, and additionally twice more in a shorter form—contains a mechanism for self-replication, in its reflexive urging of the believer to teach its words to his or her children, and to speak those words throughout the day.

In summary, the mechanisms just discussed—each operating at different levels—combine to generate substantial power in order to reproduce the social structures of Judaism and to sustain the cultural reproduction of the Torah from generation to generation. The bread and butter of this undertaking is the bodies of the men and women who constitute the living matrix that forms those social structures,
and their minds in which those cultural forms are expressed. The allegiance of those bodies and minds is obtained by separating the faithful from the non-faithful through food and wine stipulations and distinctive dress; by exhorting the faithful to study the very blueprint for the entire system as holy of holies and to give ongoing charity in support of those who do; and by guarding against rational objections to this state of affairs through the use of concepts including the Evil Inclination, the principle of performing the commandments and only then questioning “why” as a high ideal, and the notion of the reward of non-believers being paid out in This World. These concepts constitute, it appears, a panacea for the perennial doubts and fears that must come part and parcel with the promise of a Redemption that is never quite here.

***
IV. Analysis

4.4 “The Show Must Go On”—The Torah and the Jewish Religion as a Self-Replicating Entity
4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

The preceding chapters of this thesis have provided ethnographic observations and theoretical analyses of elements of the Breslov, and by extension the Charedi, lifeworld. I have endeavoured to paint a picture that reveals the most salient aspects—often in terms of what it itself considers “salient”—of that world, but also to focus on certain elements that are quite “other” compared to its secular, modern Western counterpart. To the ethnographer and to the secular reader, therefore, these aspects stand out as figures upon a ground, emphasising the variety and breadth of possible human experiences, and especially experiences associated with what might be considered (by the researcher), alongside self, the ultimate psychological object—G-d (Spero, 1992). Whilst the previous chapter took a functional approach to various aspects of the Breslov lifeworld, this present one is interested in the experiences themselves—in other words, in the phenomenology of “being Breslov”. This chapter also serves as a foundation for the succeeding and final analysis, which seeks to develop a psychoanalytic perspective on the Charedi phenomenon.

The Social Construction of the “Torah Lifeworld”

Whilst occupying the same time and space as his or her modern, secular counterpart, the Breslov individual inhabits an experiential world in many ways very different to a typical secular one. One domain already discussed in Chapter 3.3, for instance, regarding which Charedi and secular Israeli society hold radically contrasting conceptions, is military service and its underlying logic (or illogic, as the case may be). As explored in some detail by Berger and Luckman (1966), the idea that each society has its particular body of knowledge that constitutes that society’s particular reality—in other words, the idea that reality is socially constructed—is eminently applicable in the context of the Charedi lifeworld. This construction includes several essential elements; the Breslov (and by extension, Charedi and generally Jewish) understanding of cosmogony—the origins of the world—are rooted in the Torah, and these people’s attitude towards the historicity—in some cases affirming, yet in others pointedly denying—of elements of their tradition is also a particularly Jewish religious one. Furthermore, the Breslov understanding of how the world runs in terms of causality differs radically from typical secular conceptions.

The first part of this chapter will outline the key features of Jewish religious cosmogony, historicity, and understanding of causality in the world; taken together, they constitute what I have termed the “Torah lifeworld”. I will then seek to describe the “religious experience” of friends in the Breslov
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

community, embedded as it is within this Torah lifeworld, from a phenomenological perspective. The difficulty of defining what “religious experience” means, let alone penetrating and documenting it from the first-person perspective of another, must be recognised. I also acknowledge that empirical data, no matter how much of it is available, is ultimately limited. My attempts to describe the religious experience of Breslov friends must involve, therefore, some degree of speculation and interpretation on the part of myself as an ethnographer. I suggest, however, that my own depth of personal involvement and immersion in their religious world has allowed me to carry out this hermeneutic exercise in a plausible manner. Finally, and extending the idea that some of my own, first-hand experiences approximated those of Breslov Chasidim, I describe certain aspects of the phenomenology of the religious reality based on my own experiences during the Uman pilgrimage in the Ukraine.

The Idealised “Torah Lifeworld” versus Individual Realities

If the “Torah lifeworld” is taken as an archetypal, idealised religious position, then clearly not all individual Jewish religious men and women inhabit it fully and completely. Depending on each one’s particular set of total life circumstances—both past and present—some elements of their reality may be perfectly aligned with this idealised religious position, and yet others closer to secular conceptions. For example, a salient feature of the Torah lifeworld is its grasp of the Biblical story as actual historical fact; accordingly, a Chasid may (and as I observed, often did) begin a sentence with a phrase such as, “In the generations before Noah…”, evoking an image and a feeling—an actual experience—in themselves and in their listeners of the dawn of human existence. In the secular world, in contrast, a vision of the “dawn of human existence” might include, for example, hominids upon a savannah, or some conception of “cave men”.

This assertion—that a given stimulus is likely to evoke very different experiences for a “secular man” versus a “Breslov Chasid”—assumes that these two persons actually exist as perfect representatives of their respective archetypes; in the real world, however, this is rarely the case. Amongst men typically described by contemporary society as “secular” will be found an entire spectrum of attitudes towards a matter-of-factly uttered sentence of the type “In the generations before Noah…” Likewise, a group of hypothetical Breslov Chasidim shown, for example, Jean-Jacques Annaud’s classic film Quest for Fire—depicting Palaeolithic hominids coming to understand and control fire—might react in different ways. Based on conversations with friends, I suggest that those who were born into and grew up in a completely Charedi milieu may actually never have been exposed to the theory of
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created...”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

Darwinian evolution and humanity’s primate ancestry, nor even to the idea of geological and evolutionary timescales. The film, therefore, would probably constitute a mystery to them. Other Chasidim (especially those from secular backgrounds) who do have an understanding of some of these concepts might react to the film with anger, over what they recognise as themes at the heart of the dominant paradigm that is almost diametrically opposed to—and thus threatens—their own (indeed, I heard it said that such evolutionary theories, since they belong to the camp that is striving to conceal rather than reveal G-d’s presence in the world, are truly Evil). Finally, for yet other Chasidim who might be struggling with their faith, the film may be thought-provoking and stimulating, yet also anxiety-arousing, as it brings into perspective their personal cognitive dissonances. Clearly, then, there exists a heterogeneity of views, even within a community as small as the Breslov one in Safed.

Therefore, whilst in the discussion below the term “Torah lifeworld” is used to describe an archetypal, “idealised”—in terms of its cosmogony, historical conception, and understanding of causality—construct, I am not suggesting that every Breslov Chasid experiences this lifeworld to its fullest extent at every point of time in their lives (or, in the case of ba’aley tshuvah—secular Jews who have become religious—at every point in their post-tshuvah lives). Rather, as explained, each experience is clearly dependent upon an individual’s total life circumstances. If the Torah and the secular lifeworlds are each taken to be “reality tunnels” located at near opposite ends of some continuum, then each personal experience clearly occupies a point somewhere along it.

By and large, nonetheless, it appears that the subjective realities of Breslov Chasidim in Safed are so different in some of their fundamental elements compared to typical secular ones, that they warrant being described as a “different world”. As discussed in Chapter 4.2, it is the encroaching of secular realities on that “different world” that constitutes probably the greatest existential threat to Chareidi society as perceived from within, yet at the same time plays an essential role in that society’s construction of its own identity.
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

**Cosmogony and Historical Conception**

Eliade (1973, pp. 100-101) suggests that mythology:

...provides an explanation for what the West terms ‘history’ and ‘historical events’… the cosmogonic myth and its sequence, the myths of origin, help a ‘primitive’ population to find out the meanings of a series of tragic historical events; furthermore, such myths provide the means to resist the terror and despair brought by the catastrophic historical events.

The Torah lifeworld takes the Biblical Creation story and all that follows it—including the creation of the world; the creation of human beings; the affairs of primordial humans up until Noah in the tenth generation after Adam; the beginnings of the “Jewish story” with Abraham, a further ten generations following Noah; Moses, slavery and liberation in Egypt; the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai; and the eventual conquest of the Land of Israel—as absolute historical fact. For those persons truly embedded in the Torah lifeworld, this Biblical account constitutes their actual conception of history, in the same way that a modern Westerner might conceive of history according to the dominant version of his or her particular cultural milieu. This reality is especially highlighted by the manner in which Breslov Chasidim sometimes—often during fairly mundane conversation—refer to Biblical events and persons with the same casual intimacy usually reserved by a non-religious person for “historical” events and persons, as that term is understood and used in the secular world; for instance, when speaking of the 1960s hippie counterculture, or Rembrandt, or the medieval Crusades. In the *kolel* or at the dinner table one might hear, for example, the abovementioned phrase, “In the generations before Noah…”, followed by some statement or other. Or a Chasid may refer to “Avraham Avinu” (“Our father, Abraham”) in the same way that a modern English citizen might reference Winston Churchill; as an actual person, with whom they feel they have—if only indirectly—some level of affinity.

Conversation with the young children of Breslov families further emphasised how completely the Biblical story is taken as accurate historical fact. Logically this is expected and unsurprising amongst those children, considering that at their schools they are exposed *only* to the Torah lifeworld, and do not study history or science in the modern sense of the terms. Encountered first hand, however, this outlook was always somewhat surprising to me; one child, for example, wishing to express a superlative, referred to “Og, King of the Bashan”, a Biblical Amorite king whom the Torah (and later the Talmud) describes as a giant of superhuman dimensions. It may well be possible that the child
mentioned this king in a mythological/fantastic mode, as a Western child might cite, for example, Alice in Wonderland or Batman. My experience of the conversation, however, led me to conclude that this child was speaking in a realistic/historic mode, about an actual person that he believed had existed in the past. Similarly, at the Shabbat table of a religious but non-Breslov friend, conversation turned to some ethical dilemma or other. The father asked his children questions such as, “What would Avraham Avinu do? How might Ya’akov (Jacob) have handled the situation?”

Whilst under the traditional Breslov (and Charedi) worldview there exists a seemingly intractable gap between the cosmogonical and historical accounts of Judaism versus modern models, some scholars have pointed out parallels between certain fundamental aspects of the two. Attempts to build such bridges between the different worldviews are usually based on esoteric and mystical Kabbalistic formulations on the religious side, and require of both sides—if these ideas are to have any traction—an open mind and flexible thinking. Perhaps, as such, there were only a few rare friends from the Breslov group (although a handful more from wider Safed), who were aware of and could/were prepared to intelligently discuss such themes. One of the most common ones, and a very fundamental theme from a metaphysical perspective, is that the “Big Bang” and the Kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum (the “contraction” of the Infinite in order to create finite time and space; see Chapter 2.2) are one and the same thing. In this context, the ten dimensions of reality as posited by some formulations of modern string theory, and the ten Sefirot (Emanations through which the Infinite establishes finitude) are often likened to one another. Many modern books, on a variety of topics including general Kabbalah, Jewish philosophy, and the intersection of Judaism and science, deal with or at least mention these ideas. Some of these sources are almost academic in nature, whilst others would be described by that same academia as being of a “New Age” or similar variety. Regardless of the legitimacy of each source, however, it is a fascinating theory, that helps bring new perspectives to the clichéd, simplistic, and often misled idea that “science” and “religion” (whatever each is taken to mean) cannot be reconciled. Within the typical mainstream Breslov community, however—and I would argue, by extension, within the typical mainstream Charedi lifeworld—there is little interest in such ideas, and moreover, little capacity to think in a way that could even allow them to be examined.

Historical consciousness is a fundamental aspect of Judaism, and through its doctrines and rituals dealing with various festivals and other temporal events (such as the weekly, monthly and yearly cycles), as well as in its veneration of the Creation story and subsequent history that it ascribes itself,
much of the Jewish religion revolves around historical aspects. Sobel (1993, p. xv) emphasises this point, writing:

What was—the past—has resonance and meaning for all people, and not just the Jews. But Jews have made remembrance numinous with little parallel among the nations; the command to remember, whether historical event, sacred chastisement, characterological peculiarity, communal destiny, or personal sanctity, runs deep in Jewish consciousness and occupies the center of Jewish spirituality and faith.

Brandon (1972, pp. 370-371) suggests that religion in general developed from the human grappling with the experience of time. As consciousness became more organised and sophisticated, humankind was able to improve its lot through forward planning; paradoxically, however, this sophistication also led to a clear apprehension of the inevitable mortality of all living things. Religion emerged to provide some sense of security regarding, or escape from, this demise. Brandon (1965, p. 30) expands upon this theme, arguing that the “ritual perpetuation of the past” is used:

… to render the participant eternally secure in some desired mode of existence… this purpose is achieved by assuming that the time-process can be so manipulated that the efficacy of a past event can be perpetuated or reproduced so as to be available whenever desired… thus defeating or transcending the all too obvious logic of Time.

From this perspective, Judaism constitutes a ritual perpetuation of the past par excellence. An important Jewish idea is that the Jews in their festivals are not just commemorating events as a past historic occurrence, but are actually re-making and renewing the cosmic cycles—through appropriate observances—both Above, in the higher-dimensional heavenly realms, and Below, in ordinary Earthly time and space.

This concept of active renewal has a definite Kabbalistic flavour to it, and its “eternal contemporaneity”—a phrase employed by Soloveitchik (1999, p. 336) in a similar context—is a fairly salient one in the lived realities of Breslov Chasidim in Safed. Thus, the celebration of Pesach (Passover), for example, is understood not only to commemorate the historical event of the Jews going forth from bondage in Egypt, but to renew, in the here-and-now, that original act of going forth into freedom, on both a national-social and a personal-psychological level. Eliade (1973, p. 101) writes, on a similar point regarding mythology in general, “… the ‘sacred history’ revealed in the
traditional mythology enables an archaic society to *live historically* and even to ‘make’ history [original italics]”.

Perhaps even more explicit on this point, and just as salient to most Jewish religious practitioners, is this idea of “making it”—through appropriate fulfilment of the commandments—as it is applied to fundamental *temporal* events. Such events include the Shabbat, the new moon, and the New Year (Rosh Hashanah). Regarding the Shabbat, one of its prayers, for example, includes the passages (*The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Nusach Sefarad [Hebrew and English]*, 2005, p. 357):

> The Holy One, Who is One above, does not sit on His royal Throne of Glory until (kingship below) is made over in the secret of Oneness like His, that they may be a Oneness parallel to a Oneness… (This occurs during) the evening prayer of the Sabbath, for then the holy Throne of Glory (representing His Kingship) becomes unified through the secret of Oneness, and becomes ready for the Supreme Holy King to rest upon it.

One basic interpretation of this prayer is that Shabbat—as a particular and holy time and space—does not just automatically happen of itself, but rather, is *made or triggered* by the actions of the Jews on Earth, actions that are a precondition for higher-order events in Heaven.

Similarly regarding temporal events, the new moon—marking the beginning of the Jewish month—is an important occasion in the religious calendar, and around which a whole tradition existed during the Temple periods. As a part of that tradition, witnesses had to sight the first crescent of the moon at the start of the month and then report that sighting to the Sanhedrin (Rabbinic court), whereupon—following appropriate cross-examination and confirmation—the court could declare and *sanctify* the new month. Whilst today the Jewish calendar is determined purely by calculation and not observation, vestiges of this sanctification practice still remain; for example, on the Shabbat prior, the precise date of the upcoming *Rosh Chodesh* (Head of the Month) is announced in synagogue, and special prayers read. Moreover, and as with Shabbat, the idea that as part of the ordained Divine order the fulfilment of these rituals and the performing of certain operations below on Earth are a necessary precursor to cosmic events above in the Heavens—enabling cyclical time to be renewed—is an essential concept for Jewish religious thinking. Thus, another characteristic of the Torah lifeworld is a deep historical conception, that includes an understanding that it is G-d’s plan to have his creatures *participate* in the work (*melakhah*) of sustaining and unfolding His Creation.
Conversations with Breslov friends and also non-Breslov religious Jews revealed yet an additional theme—again with Kabbalistic overtones—that illustrates the Jewish emphasis on cyclicality; in this instance concerned with the historical trajectory of the nations of humankind. The basic idea, explained in various versions, is that the nations (the *goyim*) are more than just a collection of human beings. Rather, each of the seventy nations postulated by the Jewish tradition has an angel—a higher-dimensional being—sitting over it. Each nation has a different standing and a particular task to fulfil in the ordinary world of time and space, and each nation’s fate is ultimately bound to its angel. When that angel’s strength shines forth Above, so too the good fortunes of its nation Below; conversely, when the light of the angel dims, dark times descend upon its people. Regarding the Jews, the tradition explains that not an angel, but G-d himself, stands over them. The particular roles that the nations—and especially the major ones, including Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome—play in Biblical and/or Talmudic accounts are understood to symbolise their very essence and energy, an essence and energy that is as real and relevant now as it was then. These ideas are accordingly invoked by the more mystical-minded when trying to make sense of the geopolitical map of the contemporary world, especially as it relates to the Jews. For example, many Breslovers (and non-Breslov religious Jews as well) draw parallels between Iran’s radically belligerent stance towards the State of Israel today, and the Purim story, which relates the attempt and failure of Haman, a vizier of the ancient Persian empire, to exterminate the Jews of his land (see Chapter 3.10).

In a similar vein, I heard conversation regarding Amalek/the Amalekites, the nation in which—as explained in the previous Chapter 4.4—the Evil Inclination is objectified and whom the Jews are commanded to annihilate utterly. The identity of Amalek today is a question of some speculation; one rabbi explained to me that at a basic, layman’s level of understanding the matter, the essential purpose of Amalek is not the destruction of the Jews per se, but rather, their corruption and conversion to the dark side. This point may be gleaned even through a basic reading of Deuteronomy 25:18, relating of Amalek “that he happened upon you on the way [of the exodus from Egypt], and he struck those of you who were hindmost, all the weaklings at your rear, when you were faint and exhausted, and he did not fear G-d” (*The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English]*, 2008, p. 487). In other words, Amalek devours those weak of faith, converting them to the side of evil. This rabbi speculated that the United States, in fact, is one likely candidate for the contemporary Amalek, as that country is the foremost representative of the dominant culture of G-dlessness in the world today. This idea is unrelated to the relatively high proportion of contemporary Americans proclaiming themselves to be religiously Christian; rather, it goes to the heart of the Euro-American culture as the Charedi world
conceives of it: as an inversion of religious values, an enthroning of the material and of money—and ultimately of the human self—as a god, and by-and-large as representing an abandonment of the spiritual.

The accounts given above are neither theoretical nor academic; they give an indication of the “flavour” of the thinking and beliefs of real people, and of their most implicit understandings of how the world runs (a theme explored in more depth under “Causality”, below). This discussion has so far emphasised the sacred importance that Judaism attributes to history and to historical consciousness, an attachment exemplified in the conversations and practices of the Breslov community in Safed. Conversely, however, there are certain elements of its tradition for which Judaism staunchly denies historicity, refusing to acknowledge any kind of historical development thereof and instead ascribing to such elements an eternal existence outside of ordinary time. The first such timeless element is the Torah itself: that the Torah is the sacred blueprint of Creation; that it contains within it infinite levels of wisdom, beginning with the simple level of story, progressing through allegory, and leading eventually—through its intrinsic code—to the deepest Kabbalistic secrets; and that the Torah was given in its precise entirety—down to the last vowel point and cantillation mark—by G-d to Moses, are all cornerstones of the Jewish faith. The eternal, ahistorical nature of the Torah is often referenced by Breslov Chasidim, and without doubt these people would be horrified by the entire body of modern scholarship that seeks—through archaeological findings and textual examinations—to understand when various parts of the Torah were written, or through stylistic analyses to attribute distinct authors to various sections of the text.

Similar to the timelessness of the Torah is the eternal essence of the Halakhah, a word meaning, as discussed in Chapter 2.1 and 4.1, “a walking” or “the path one walks”, and denoting the vast body of Jewish law derived from the Torah. More fundamental, however, than just a word referencing this extensive set of prescriptions and proscriptions extracted from the Five Books of Moses and the Oral Law (and later extended, almost ad infinitum, by the Rabbinic tradition; see Chapter 4.1), Halakhah signifies at an essential level the Will of G-d regarding how His Creation is to operate harmoniously. As such, the Halakhah is timeless and ahistorical. Spero (1992, p. 24) writes:

As described, the Halakhah would appear to be a form of governance beginning at a specific point in history; namely the Sinaitic Revelation. In fact, Jewish philosophy maintains that halakhic observance emerged on a voluntary basis already during the Patriarchal [denoting Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] era… This tradition, taken literally,
suggests that the Patriarchs, aided by prophecy, practiced Halakhah to the full extent of its eventual post-Sinaitic form—“down to the rabbinic enactment of the intermingling of prepared foods”…

Here is another tradition that emphasizes the ahistoric element of Halakhah. According to doctrine, the Halakhah, inasmuch as it is the expression of God’s desire, transcends time and is immutable. Its basic structures, therefore, are not coterminous with reality as we know it and must be considered in some sense contiguous with the initial will of God to initiate those creative processes we identify with creation.

An additional aspect of its tradition for which Judaism denies historicity is the Kabbalah. According to religious belief and to the Kabbalistic tradition itself, two things were given by G-d upon Mount Sinai to Moses; the nigleh—revealed and visible—tradition, consisting of the Written and Oral Torah, and the nistar—hidden—tradition, which is the Kabbalah. Whilst most religious Jews who delve into these matters would probably acknowledge that the Kabbalah has been expressed through different metaphors at different historical points in time, they would vehemently reject the idea that the underlying system of knowledge itself has undergone any evolution or development through human hands; rather, the Kabbalah always was and always will be an intrinsic property of the world. Accordingly, for example, Breslov, Charedi and religious Jewish scholars hold the Zohar (“Splendour” or “Radiance”)—the central work in the literature of the Kabbalah—to have been revealed by G-d to Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochay, the second century C.E. sage of the Holy Land, whilst he hid from the Romans in a cave for thirteen years. This belief was several times directly expressed to me by Breslov Chasidim, and in fact, referred to quite casually as well-known historical information. The fact that the first ever manuscript of the Zohar was published at the end of the thirteenth century in Spain by Rabbi Moshe de Leon, as well as subsequent modern scholarly attempts (for example, Scholem, 1978) to trace and attribute authorship of the work, are of little consequence to the faithful. Similarly, the idea that Platonic thought and Greek philosophy more generally have influenced the development of the Kabbalah—a well-established academic hypothesis (for example, Idel, 1988a, pp. 2-3)—is anathema to the ordinary Charedi Jew.

Causality

Living the Torah lifeworld entails not only an understanding of the past that is very different from typical secular conceptions, but also a different understanding of cause-and-effect in the present here-and-now. Implicit models of causality are the structures through which an individual human
being comprehends how events in their phenomenological experience are linked together in chains of causation. There are, of course, myriad different occurrences that a person may think of as discrete events; from an apple falling from a tree, through to a bushfire that destroys houses, through to, for example, the Holocaust. According to the Jewish understanding, all events, from those at the level of the fundamental interactions of physical matter, through to those at the level of human action—and everything in between and beyond—are manifestations of the Will of G-d. In this discussion I seek to describe the Breslov (and Charedi) model of causality, as I came to understand it, in its apprehension of events that have personal significance to an individual. This category of “personal significance” also encompasses a spectrum from minor to major; for example, from slipping on a wet pavement, through to a family relative being killed in a car crash. It seems to differ, however, in the weight of its subjective experience—an experience that is personal and intense to varying degrees depending on the magnitude of the occurrence—as compared to a “neutral” event, such as observing a rock rolling down a hill, or a bird flying overhead. Such neutral events, too, of course, are a manifestation of the Divine Will, and indeed, it may be argued that the distinction between a “personally significant” event and a “neutral” one is false, for every single detail in the experiential universe of an individual is, by definition, personal and therefore significant. If the landscape is to be described in that way, however, then there still exists a definite spectrum between personally significant and neutral; in the present discussion I wish to focus on the former.

The overriding principle underlying the Breslov—and Charedi/religious—conception of causality is G-d’s Providence. In Hebrew this providence is most commonly referred to as hashgachah pratit; translated literally it means “personal (that is, for each individual person) oversight”. Living with a genuine, innate recognition and appreciation of hashgachah pratit is one aspect—both a requirement

---

37 The question of human free will, and the Jewish understanding of it, arises here, along with all of its accompanying paradoxes. As briefly discussed in Chapter 2.1, that humans act out of free will is a cornerstone of Jewish belief. At the same time, however, and absolutely paradoxical from the ordinary, limited human perspective, all outcomes—all that was, is, and will be—are known to G-d. No amount of intellectualisation will overcome this paradox; the level of insight required to achieve even a foothold in understanding it is contingent, I suggest, upon the individual’s “spiritual attainment” (whatever that phrase is taken to mean). This is the general conception of the matter that was also expressed to me by most Breslov friends when questioned about it. Similar ideas, regarding the dependence of access to ontological knowledge upon spiritual attainment, are conveyed by Aldous Huxley (2009 [1944], p. x): “But it is a fact, confirmed and re-confirmed during two or three thousand years of religious history, that the ultimate Reality is not clearly and immediately apprehended except by those who have made themselves loving, pure in heart and poor [humble] in spirit”.

235
of and a testament to—the devotee’s progression on an authentic path towards G-d. Therefore, at least according to their verbal declarations, it would appear that Breslov Chasidim take each and every event in their lives as part of a perfectly choreographed (from Above) unfolding journey, the purpose of which is to lead them back to the Infinite. Indeed, one metaphor that was used in this context is that life—as we know it in the present reality—is a school for the soul. This school imparts the lessons that the soul needs to learn in order to divest itself of the impure shells (qlipot)—essentially the dark side (see Chapter 2.2)—and to shine forth once more in its intrinsic, radiant splendour. An alternate metaphor is that these lessons teach the soul the fundamental attributes that it requires in order to become once again “G-d-like”, and thus more able to cleave to its Creator; these fundamental attributes are those same qualities as expressed by the Sefirot (Emanations)—including Wisdom, Compassion, Strength/Discipline, Perseverance, and so forth—through which G-d creates the world.

Accordingly, I would frequently hear of events, of both a happy and a sad nature, being described as the “Will of G-d”. Often accompanying the former is the phrase barukh Hashem, meaning “Blessed be G-d”—in the Charedi and religious lifeworld it constitutes an automatic and often robotic slogan. In contrast, in the case of a death, the phrase barukh Dayan emet (“blessed is the true Judge”) is widely used. The two phrases reflect the belief that both types of event are choreographed by the Divine Will for an ultimately good—and therefore blessed—purpose. A genuine acceptance of adverse events as constituting the Divine Will, and a belief that that Will is ultimately good (and that only from a limited, human perspective is this fact so difficult to apprehend) is clearly at the heart of the arena in which faith grapples with doubt. Early on in conversations on such topics, secular Jews would often reference the most extreme example of evil in the collective modern Jewish consciousness—the Holocaust as perpetrated by the Nazi Germans. The murder of six million Jews is often cited as an occurrence putting to shame and ridicule any fancy metaphysical footwork that still tries to maintain the crumbling belief in an all-powerful and all-loving G-d. Interestingly, one secular friend opined that the history of the Holocaust is barely taught in the schools of Charedi communities (an assertion that has, to my understanding, some substantiation), because doing so would destabilise the faith of the younger generations, and eventually of the community as a whole.

In Chapter 3.1 the experiences of one friend were described, in which he pointed out that although he and his family live in ongoing financial insecurity, with constant question marks hovering over whether they will have enough money to see themselves through the month, he considers the fortunate events that occur for him—time and time again—in the financial domain as being akin to miracles from G-d. To this Chasid, such events are a sure sign of His Divine Providence. Similarly, Chapter
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

3.3 discussed the certainty of a Breslov friend that Divine Providence was at work during some of Israel’s wars, including in guiding bombs apparently hand-dropped from Israeli fighter planes onto Arab aircraft sitting on the ground at the beginning of the Six Day War, and through to a Torah scroll deflecting a Scud missile in the First Gulf War.

In light of the present discussion, those beliefs raise the fundamental question of just how experientially and emotionally significant the concept of Divine Providence can be to a devotee, if the entirety of the system under discussion (that is, the entirety of existence)—from the most minute to the most cosmic level—has already been postulated to be an expression of the Divine Will. In other words, saying that G-d intervenes to help a Breslov Chasid put food on the table for Shabbat, or that He directs the outcome of a war, is really saying nothing at all, because we already know that everything has its source in G-d anyway. The answer to this question may be articulated in two complementary parts. Whilst this discussion is not suggesting that the average Breslov Chasid thinks about this subject in this way, it does represent a hypothetical model of the explanatory structure that, were he to probe more deeply and tease out the logical connections in his thinking and beliefs, he might perhaps arrive at.

Firstly and simply, it is indeed significant to a devotee that the purpose of Divine Providence, at whichever level it is apprehended, is to direct Creation towards the ultimate good (inasmuch as a human being can understand what “good” means)38. Secondly, it is significant that the Divine Will manifests at every level of existence with a “consciousness” appropriate to that level. This statement requires some clarification. When an apple falls to the ground from a tree, we may describe the event using a model called “gravitation”. The word “gravitation”, however, is simply a label for a highly regular and predictable outcome in the human phenomenological experience; according to the Jewish view, the true cause underlying that phenomenon of gravitation, or underlying any sub-phenomenon that human models may further break gravitation down into, is the Divine Will. This is because the

38 This is in direct opposition to relativist theories that hold that the essence of existence is and will always be a dance of good and evil, or white and black, or Yin and Yang, or whichever pair of opposites is postulated. In other words, Judaism holds that there is a Source to the apparent duality underlying all things, and that that Source is entirely Good, outside of the conceivable, ordinary, day-to-day human “good”, that has as its dual pair “evil”. In effect, this dream—whether it correctly reflects the true nature of reality or not—of a Good beyond the good/evil dichotomy, is the dream of the Jewish “World to Come” (Olam Hababa), the Christian Heaven, the Eastern Nirvana and Moksha, and all such similar concepts of ultimate completion and unity.
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

objects upon which gravitation seems to operate, and indeed, the entirety of existence itself, may be said to constitute (to use a common Kabbalistic metaphor) a “thought” or a “dream” in the Mind of G-d. Higher phenomena beyond the simple physical, such as the timely donation of charity to the aforementioned Breslov Chasid just prior to Shabbat, are on one level simply an amalgamation of elementary physical occurrences, of the category that gravitation belongs to. In that sense, then, whilst the Will of G-d is understood to underlie those elementary physical occurrences, and therefore in an indirect sense is also logically responsible for the more complex phenomenon of the donation, there is nothing particularly experientially and emotionally significant about this piece of knowledge.

Crucially, however, the Breslov Chasid does perceive a deep significance to the timely donation that he received, because he intuits that G-d’s Providence is acting—as a force of good—not only as the driving reality behind that entire set of simple physical events that made the donation happen, but simultaneously, at the very same level of complexity, emotionality, and intentionality—in other words, of consciousness—at which the Chasid himself experiences the donation. In other words, G-d’s Providence exists also at a genuinely human level (and of course, infinitely more beyond), and therefore, far from being just a purely metaphysical Supreme Cause—the ultimate “blackbox” that all conceivable explanatory theories must tie themselves to—G-d, to the Chasid, is a conscious Being who loves and interacts with him in a personal sense.

This distinction, between G-d driving the world at what from a human perspective appears to be a basic physical level, and His Providence at a human level, is somewhat reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard (1968 [1937], pp. 69-70) classic account of the role of witchcraft in granary collapses and subsequent injury or death in Zandeland. That old granaries collapse due to termites and decay is a well-known and unremarkable process. In the present discussion, this physical process is akin to that set of elementary physical occurrences that caused an envelope of money to be placed into the Chasid’s palm (processes that this particular Chasid actually described, as recounted in Chapter 3.1, as “al-pi hateva”—“according to the natural order”). G-d is indeed the Mover of those physical processes, but there is nothing out of the ordinary about them, for they are normal events in the regular human experience of the world. Returning to Evans-Pritchard, what is extraordinary, and in Zande “philosophy” an indication of witchcraft, is that the granary collapsed precisely at the moment when particular people were sitting beneath it. This is indicative of a consciousness and a will (the witch’s) operating at the highest common denominator of those events, and thus somehow able to produce a coincidence of two chains of cause-and-effect—the elementary physical processes of decay and collapse, and the higher order human processes of particular people choosing to sit in a certain place

238
at a specific time. In the Breslov case, this is akin to a person choosing to make the donation to that particular Chasid when the latter needed it most; however, this fortunate coincidence occurred, in this case, not through the conscious intervention of a witch, but as a result of the conscious Will of G-d.

Mark (2009, p. 86) addresses another dimension to this personal human relationship with the conscious Divine Will, one that occupied Rabbi Nachman at length; the dialogue of hints—in the form of the co-incidence of ordinary day-to-day events—flowing from G-d to the human, and reciprocated by deeds flowing from the human back to G-d. The author goes on to relate one of the Rabbi’s key teachings; that if such hints are a manifestation of the Divine Will, then the individual’s hearkening to them constitutes a living, personal communication with that Will (Mark, 2009, p. 89).

In contrast to the suggestion herein that at least some Breslov Chasidim live with a genuine sense of such Divine Providence as an intrinsic component of their understanding of causality in the world (granted, of course, with the unavoidable back-and-forth grappling between faith and doubt at different times), Soloveitchik (1999) argues that such a belief is no longer a significant component even in the most religious circles of the modern Jewish world. He suggests that whilst the theological principle is still passionately believed in, it is no longer lived as a simple, personal reality, in the same manner that it was under the old world religiosity (presumably, both Jewish and Christian) of Europe for millennia. Soloveitchik (1999, pp. 349-351) is quoted here on this topic at some length, because his words are directly relevant to, and further illuminate, the preceding discussion on causality and the Torah lifeworld:

God’s palpable presence and direct, natural involvement in daily life (and I emphasize both “direct” and “daily”), His immediate responsibility for everyday events, was a fact of life in the East European shtetl, so late as several generations ago. Let us remember Tevye’s conversations with God portrayed by Sholom Aleichem…

Tevye’s outlook was not unique to the shtetl, or to Jews in Eastern Europe; it was simply one variation of an age-old cosmology that dominated Europe for millennia, which saw the universe as directly governed by a Divine Sovereign. If regularity exists in the world, it is simply because the Sovereign’s will is constant, as one expects the will of a great sovereign to be. He could, of course, at any moment change His mind, and things contrary to our expectations would then occur, what we call “miracles.”…

239
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

There are, understandably, few Tevyes today, even in haredi [Charedi] circles. To be sure, there are seasons of the year, moments of crest in the religious cycle, when God’s guiding hand may be tangibly felt by some and invoked by many, and there are certainly occasions in the lives of most when the reversals are so sudden, or the stakes so high and the contingencies so many, that the unbeliever prays for luck, and the believer, more readily and more often, calls for His help. Such moments are only too real, but they are not the stuff of daily life. And while there are always those whose spirituality is one apart from that of their time, nevertheless I think it safe to say that the perception of God as a daily, natural force is no longer present to a significant degree in any sector of modern Jewry, even the most religious. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that individual Divine Providence, though passionately believed as a theological principle—and I do not for a moment question the depth of that conviction—is no longer experienced as a simple reality. With the shrinkage of God’s palpable hand in human affairs has come a marked loss of His immediate presence, with its primal fear and nurturing comfort. With this distancing, the religious world has been irrevocably separated from the spirituality of its fathers, indeed, from the religious mood of intimate anthropomorphism that had cut across all the religious divides of the Old World.

Whilst not to say that a small number of individuals in the Breslov community in Safed constitute “a significant degree of any sector of modern Jewry” (a phrase used by the author in the last paragraph quoted above), I suggest that these individuals are relatively close, in their lived experiences, to what Soloveitchik describes as “Divine Providence… as a simple reality”. It is interesting to note that in the Notes following his essay, Soloveitchik (1999, pp. 351-352) points out that his paper applies primarily to Mitnagdim ("those who opposed" the Chasidic movement; see Chapter 1.1), and not Chasidim. Furthermore, the Breslov Chasidic movement in general was and still is known for its piety and efforts towards a genuine personal engagement with religious ideals. Finally, it is likely that I as an ethnographer gravitated towards the more authentically pious and “spiritually” minded Chasidim, and they in turn towards me. These observations may help to explain my assertion that at least a pocket of Chasidic Jews exist in Safed who do strive and often succeed in living with an authentic and immediate sense of Divine Providence, and why this assertion seems somewhat contradictory to Soloveitchik (1999). Perhaps parts of this community epitomise, as he writes, “… those whose spirituality is one apart from that of their time…”
Radical differences in the understanding of causation within the Torah lifeworld compared to a secular one are to be found not only in the apprehension of cause-and-effect as it pertains to discrete personal events (as just discussed), but also through what may be termed “explanatory schemata”—models of explanation, grounded in the Jewish worldview, regarding how the contemporary world runs. One such schema was already discussed under “Cosmogony and Historical Conception” above—the idea that the relationship between the Jews and the goyim (the other nations) is cyclical in nature, extending all the way back into Biblical times. What happened back then, therefore, may be used as a powerful explanatory model for understanding what is happening now, and for predicting what will occur in the future. Three more ethnographically derived examples will illustrate such explanatory schema, adding hopefully richer detail to the canvas of the Torah lifeworld that has been painted so far.

Firstly, since G-d consciously directs events in the world, He may be coerced—or to use more subtle language, entreated or persuaded—to direct them in a certain way. Accordingly, the power of prayer is constantly emphasised in the Breslov community; by the Rav in his sermons, by teachers at the kolel, and by individuals in general conversation. That genuine, heartfelt prayer may be effective in changing the outcome of events in the world is a bedrock of the Torah lifeworld, although other practices may also be similarly used to influence the Hand of G-d. Breslov Chasidim visit the graves of tzadiqim (righteous men)—including the Ari in Safed, and Rabbi Nachman and the Ba’al Shem Tov in the Ukraine—to pray that the tzadiq intercede with the Almighty on their behalf. This practice raises fundamental questions regarding that most heinous of sins in Judaism; avodah zarah, idolatry. For how does one draw a clear distinction between praying to the tzadiq for intercession with G-d, as opposed to praying to the tzadiq (and bowing, crying and prostrating oneself upon his grave) as if he, and not G-d, were the effector of the desired outcome? Whilst this topic is theologically treated and explicated by Judaism in a number of texts and modern books, what goes through the mind and heart of each individual devotee as he or she engages in such practices is an entirely different matter. In any case, the Chasidic worldview especially (as opposed to the more general Charedi one) holds that these practices may influence causal processes in the world in a very real manner. In a similar vein regarding prayer, one Breslov Chasid told me that when he wanted to get married, years ago, he read the Biblical Song of Songs (Shir Hashirim) every day for forty days in a row; this practice is known to confer merit upon the practitioner, such that his mission of finding a bride will be assisted.

The second example of an explanatory schema arising from the Torah lifeworld relates to the city of Safed itself, and to ideas about its holy and rarefied status in the world. Breslov Chasidim, and indeed,
the wider religious population there, make frequent reference to the holiness and special status of this city, as being located within sight (across a valley) of the tomb of Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochay, the mythical author of the Zohar, in the venerated town of Meiron (see Figure 15 below); as an incubator of Kabbalah in modern times; and as home to graves of the Ari, Yosef Qaro (author of the Shulchan Arukh, the code of Jewish law), and other tzadiqim. The city is not just important, however, from a historical perspective, but also has a central role to play in the cosmic unfolding of the contemporary world, all the way up to the coming of the Messiah. One Breslov friend used the metaphor that Safed is akin to a “laboratory for tzadiqim”, explaining that whilst on the outside the city goes about its mundane business, beneath the surface powerful men and women (such as “the Rav” of the community, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig) are engaged with the business of the Almighty—with the destiny of the Jews and indeed the world in a fundamental sense, and in a manner that ordinary human beings are incapable of understanding. Such descriptions immediately bring to mind the classic Kabbalistic stories regarding the Lamed-Vav Tzadiqim (Thirty-six Righteous Ones); hidden, anonymous men and women of awesome spiritual attainment and humility, scattered throughout the world, who continue to justify the existence of humankind in the eyes of G-d. Such beliefs, fairly dominant amongst the religious inhabitants of Safed, lend the city an almost palpable air of mystique. These conceptions regarding their city and what goes on inside of it are very real for the Breslov Chasidim, and form an intrinsic part of their understanding of how the world is directed by G-d.

Figure 15: The Breslov group from Safed enacting a ritual in the nearby city of Meiron

The ritual is the traditional lighting of a bonfire on Lag Ba’Omer (the 33rd day of the Omer count between Passover and Shavuot). This day marks the death of Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochay, the mythical author of the Kabbalistic Zohar, whose tomb is located in Meiron. Despite being the anniversary of his death, Lag Ba’Omer constitutes a joyful celebration of this revered Rabbi’s life and legacy. In the photograph on the left, the figure in a fur shtrylemel hat making final preparations to light the torch is the head Rav of the Safed Breslov community. On the right, a Fire Department official in a red vest ensures that correct safety precautions are being observed.
The final explanatory schema to be mentioned here relates to the Internet. Within the Breslov community I heard contradictory ideas regarding this sweeping modern technology, with opinions—regardless of which side they were on—usually quite polarised and passionately expressed. The Breslov group in Safed, incidentally, runs several websites, some of which have been referenced in this thesis (for example, Nachal Novea Mekor Chochma, undated-a). These websites provide information on a variety of topics, including the community’s history, its institutions (such as synagogues and schools), projects it currently runs, and also a portal for making donations. Within the community itself, some homes (especially those of ba’aley tshuvah) do contain a computer with Internet access; however, the majority do not. The dominant view is that the Internet is a creation of Amalek, the force of evil in the world. One Chasid pointed out the name of the World Wide Web; it is a product of the dark side, designed to ensnare the weak like a spider does, and cut him or her off from G-d. This idea of cutting down the weak is in line with the conceptual essence of “Amalek”, as discussed above under “Cosmogony and Historical Conception”, and similarly the same Chasid further remarked that the Web is there to “distract”. He went on to explain that the Internet is a massive gamble of the “Sitra Achra”—the “Other Side”—into which “it has placed all of its cards”; this idea was then linked to further messianic and apocalyptic concepts.

In contrast, a minority view espoused by at least one friend in the Breslov community holds that, although acknowledging its potential pitfalls, the Internet is a wonderful tool for spreading knowledge of G-d in the world; the Web may be used to disseminate religious teachings, gives instant access to holy texts, may provide answers to questions that previously one had to consult a rabbi or other religious authority about, enables collaboration across the globe, and so forth. As with the previous Chasid, this friend also linked the Internet with messianic and apocalyptic concepts; however, their particular view was a positive one, construing the Web as a possible means by which the Messiah will make his coming known to the world.

The themes discussed above, including G-d’s Providence, the influencing of cause-and-effect through prayer, the mystical role of the tzadiqim of Safed in guiding the cosmic trajectory of the world, and contention over whether the Internet is an apocalyptic force of good or of evil, constitute the bread and butter of the religious thinking of many Breslov Chasidim in Safed. To the strictly secular reader, these passages may sound mythological and fantastical; descriptions of extreme religious fanaticism and fantasy. These ideas, however, form a logical, coherent and highly elucidated structure within themselves, and rest upon foundations—such as the Torah and Talmud—that are several thousand years old. When discussed not in the context of modern academia, but during a lesson in the Nachal
Novea *kolel* dealing with Rabbi Nachman’s teachings, for example, and by highly intelligent and morally exemplary Chasidim, the ideas are imbued not with the tone of religious fantasy, but with the weight of an advanced, esoteric, and highly developed *gnosis* of reality. Certainly, the faithful regard their particular model of reality as such—with the same religious reverence that much of the secular world reserves for the model that is particularly dear to its heart, modern science.

**The Phenomenology of the Jewish Religious Experience**

Having delineated some of the key parameters of the Torah lifeworld, the discussion will now seek to paint in between those lines, by describing what the religious experience might “be like”. Previous chapters of this thesis have already touched upon this space; for example, in discussion in Chapter 3.3 on prayer (including the concept of ascending and descending through four spiritual levels, and the experience of the *vatikin/netz* dawn service), in Chapter 4.3 quoting the Ba’al Shem Tov’s personal account of his “elevation of soul” to lofty metaphysical realms, and in Chapter 3.5 relating the experience of the Shabbat as a “time outside of time”. To describe the phenomenology of the religious experience is nonetheless a challenging endeavour, for several reasons. Firstly, the willingness of individuals to speak about experiences they consider intimate and close to their hearts is not always forthcoming; I felt able to respectfully broach such subjects only with those friends with whom I had developed a good level of rapport. Secondly, even when friends were open about it, any attempt to penetrate their first-hand phenomenological world was clearly difficult; to then describe that world to a third party—as is the present objective—is even more so. One Breslov Chasid suggested that it is not possible to relate personal religious experiences to another person, pointing out (based on a classic Breslov text, *Sichot Haran*) that even the great King David did not know how to recall to himself the true experiential quality of what had transpired in his own life a day or even an hour previously. This friend went on to emphasise that “there is no one religious experience—it’s different for every human being”.

Along similar lines as expressed by this last statement, the third difficulty in describing the phenomenology of the religious experience is that the term “religious experience” is an unclear one. To the secular observer it may connote ecstatic states, mystical feelings, and numinous experiences. To the typical Breslov Chasid, however, there is no such thing as “religious” versus “non-religious”, for every experience in their world is subsumed under the category of the former—all things come from G-d. Thus, a moment of ecstatic joy that produces tears of gratitude at a Shabbat synagogue service is certainly a “religious” experience. However, so too is a weekday morning in which the baby is sick, the hot water not working, and everything feels like a little bit too much; or a few days
before Passover in which one is running short of money to buy basic groceries for one’s family for the upcoming festival feast. Indeed, the Breslov approach in particular emphasises the idea that it is the events in the latter, apparently adverse, category, that are to be regarded as perhaps more holy and “religious” than the ecstatic tears in the synagogue. This is because those adverse events are clearly a product of Divine Providence, designed to test and teach the devotee in just the manner that he or she requires. Whether the devotee is able to generate the required faith to maintain that perspective of higher consciousness and thereby accept the seemingly adverse event with a cheerful barukh Hashem (“Blessed be G-d”), or whether they succumb to feelings of depression and despair, is of course another matter. In hindsight, however, the religious individual will always acknowledge that the former was the correct attitude, and will resolve to do better next time.

For the purpose of this discussion, in order to provide at least a basic working definition of “religious experience”—problematic as it may be—I follow the approach of Spero (1992, p. 5):

The subsumptive term “religious phenomena,” in the strict sense, refers to any fantasy, belief, idiom or practice that has as its object a representation (whether actively representable or not) known as God or is related to such an object representation [italics added].

Accordingly, a mosaic of personal accounts of friends, as well as my own observations, are provided in the following, in order to paint a picture of the phenomenology of “being Breslov” as it pertains to the experience of G-d.

One Breslov Chasid spoke of his ecstatic experiences on his very first Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage to the tomb of Rabbi Nachman in the town of Uman, Ukraine. This friend reported barely eating nor sleeping for the entire week, and feeling that he was me’al ha-zman; “above/outside of time”, a not uncommon term in the Breslov parlance, used to indicate—with overt Kabbalistic overtones—the idea of a higher state of consciousness. In Uman his every act was imbued with meaning and connection to Judaism and to G-d. He also felt very connected to Rabbi Nachman during the entire holiday period. This Chasid pointed out how difficult it was to put his experiences into words, but emphasised that his first time in Uman was the greatest Jewish experience of his life. On another occasion, the same man spoke about the coming of Mashiach (the Messiah), and as he talked about concepts such as the light, blessedness and joy of Shabbat representing one-sixtieth of those same aspects of Olam Haba (the “World to Come”), I perceived a smile and an inner joy illuminating his face and his being. For this man, then, a hope and faith in the coming of the Messiah and the
subsequent transformation of existence—in the most radical sense of the word “transformation”—appear to constitute a daily lived reality.

Another friend, a religious but non-Breslov and indeed non-Charedi Jew, gave some insight into his own personal mystical experiences. Despite his non-affiliation with the Breslov group, I suggest that his accounts could be eminently representative of a typical Breslov Chasid who engages in similar practices. This friend was a very focused, insightful and knowledgeable man, who had had substantial experience with Eastern meditative practices before committing himself more fully to the Jewish path. By placing his hands on the graves of tzadiqim (“righteous men”—for example, the Ari), he sometimes—although not always—had what he described as an expanding experience. He felt similar shifts in awareness when he sometimes sat in caves in the hills surrounding Safed, performing various meditational practices. This man remarked that inner experiences of this type take the individual out of a “dry, exoteric experience”, and bring the Torah alive as a vital, lived reality. This statement is immediately evocative of the above discussion, under “Cosmogony and Historical Conception”, regarding the Jewish concept of “making it”—that the Jew does not just commemorate, for example, the Shabbat or Passover, but actually triggers them through observance of the commandments. I have heard it said that the strength of, and conviction in, this feeling of “making it” is both a consequence and an indicator of one’s flourishing relationship with the Creator; it is what brings the Torah alive, and turns it into a living religion, gushing with energy and vitality. One’s life becomes, then, not an insignificant speck amongst several billion other specks, but a precious journey imbued with deep meaning. Such a sense of meaning is also a hallmark of drug-induced psychedelic (for example, LSD or psilocybin) states, and in fact, this friend made certain comparisons between such drug-induced non-ordinary states of consciousness, and the religious experience.

The same friend also reported hearing on occasion a “guiding voice”. At this point it must be emphasised that this individual, a successful professional with a vibrant family, was in my humble opinion generally more psychologically stable, self-reflective, and self-critical in the positive sense, than many other human beings I have known. Immediately upon mentioning this guiding voice, he downplayed it to some extent, emphasising that he did not for one moment think that it was “prophetic” or similar; rather, he understood it to be an objectification of some inner (and/or outer) wisdom that was able to guide him. He explained that he used his body state as an indicator, when such a guiding voice was perceived, as to whether it was something meaningful, or just one random voice out of many; if he felt calm, relaxed and at ease, then he tended to attribute greater import to its
words. Sometimes the advice was generalised, yet at others it was more specific, relating to a particular issue or dilemma. In the past, he reported, it had yielded “really good” results.

Another Breslov friend tended to focus very much, at least in his interactions with me, on the theme of the war—the internal struggle between good and evil and between faith and doubt—that he understood every Jew (and especially those who are engaged with the religious path) to be on the front lines of. He and I would often greet each other in jest (or semi-jest) with the words, “How’s the war going?!”. This friend emphasised that the greater and more elevated a particular soul is, the more challenges it is sent by G-d, in order to polish it—across years and lifetimes—to a diamond radiance. He put much emphasis on the concept of ratzo vashov, literally meaning “running and returning”; this is a frequently referenced concept in Breslov society, and an important Kabbalistic principle in general. The phrase is taken from Ezekiel 1:14, from a passage relating how mythical creatures, the Chayos, “…ran to and fro like the appearance of a flash” (The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 1209). In the Kabbalistic context the phrase may be interpreted at the highest of metaphysical levels, referring to the idea that all of Creation is “pulsed” into existence by the Infinite, in a back and forth process between Yesh (Being) and Ayin (Void). So too, Divine worship consists of the ratzo or ascent phase, which expresses the desire of the worshipper to annihilate their separate selfhood and merge with the Infinite, and the vashov or descent phase, in which the supernal Light is drawn back into the world of duality and created things (Elior, 1993, pp. 44-45).

Themes of the inner battle between faith and doubt, and the cyclicality of constricted versus expanded consciousness that underlies the whole saga, were apparently too at the core of Rabbi Nachman’s personal journey and life project. Green (1992, pp. 24-25) writes:

The life and teachings of Nahman of Bratslav… [go] on to portray inner life and inward struggle to a degree otherwise unknown in Jewish sources. Here it is made utterly clear that the true core of religion is that struggle for faith which goes on within the heart of the individual believer… and that the single most important model for the religious life is the tortured young master himself, one who spent all his years engaged in a life-and-death battle over the issues of faith and doubt…

Mark (2009, p. 218) suggests that the founder of the Breslov movement reflected and spoke at length on the dialectic between “ultimate knowledge”, and states of constricted consciousness or “loss of self-consciousness”. The author goes on to explore Rabbi Nachman’s extensive personal grappling
and treatment of a related theme that was especially close to the Rabbi’s heart; that of “not knowing” (including in the most ultimate sense), and its implications.

In the Safed Breslov context the phrase *ratzo vashov* is most often used at a personal-psychological level, to indicate the emotional highs and lows that every human being experiences, in this case in direct relation to their *avodat Hashem* (the work of worshiping G-d). This concept was illustrated in the passage above, which contrasted, as a hypothetical example, tears of gratitude at a Friday-evening Shabbat service, versus a weekday morning in which the baby is sick, the hot water not working, and everything feels like a little bit too much. Whilst either reflecting upon such vicissitudes of life, when encouraging a fellow Chasid during a “down” phase, or indeed, when gently cautioning somebody at the peak of an “up” phase that it will not last forever, the concept of *ratzo vashov* often serves as a source of strength for the Chasidim, in that it reminds them that these ups and downs are the way that G-d wants things to be; these are the “rules” of the “game”, so to speak. The same friend who focused on war emphasised that when an individual is in the *vashov* (descent) phase, particularly when his or her faith in G-d feels weak and all of the familiar doubts are resurfacing, they are as if “shell-shocked” in combat—dazed and confused. In times like that, he explained, “we do not act, speak nor think from the high places we would want to”. During times of ascent, in contrast, everything in the day-to-day world feels deeper and more meaningful to him. Another Breslov Chasid commented that the “highs” cannot last forever, and it is precisely during the times of descent that one must rouse oneself to continue fulfilling the *mitzvot* (commandments), as best he or she can.

Whilst to the external, secular observer, the life of a typical Breslov Chasid may seem relatively “easy”, in that he does not work, and appears—as discussed in Chapter 4.1—to have a clear set of rules for how to think, speak and act in every situation, in actual fact I do not believe this depiction of “easy” to be accurate. The average Chasid experiences ongoing financial strain, alongside (and very much as a result of) responsibility for providing for a large family. He is constantly grappling with a keen internal barometer of good and evil, that—depending on how he perceives himself to be performing on that exhaustive set of rules that bind him—may be a source of acute feelings of guilt (this theme was discussed in some depth in Chapter 4.1). Furthermore, he is surrounded by a secular world that whispers to him of material comforts and an apparently easier life, in which he would no longer need to carry the “burden of the Torah”—for to properly fulfil that exhaustive set of prescriptions and proscriptions is no easy feat, by any means. Finally, despite his outward behaviour and verbal declarations, his faith in his entire religious project is of necessity—as just discussed—given to ebbs and flows. On the other hand, however, if his belief and practice are authentic, the
typical Chasid experiences moments and periods of great and deep joy, and an inner peace, born from
the pure conviction that he is doing—to the best of his ability—precisely what his Creator wants of
him. And what, more than that, can a man do? Additionally, his certainty in G-d’s hashgachah pratit
(individual Divine Providence), when that certainty stands firm, is a liberating and even intoxicating
experience; for safe in the knowledge that G-d controls all outcomes for the ultimate good, there is
absolutely nothing to fear—neither man nor beast, fire nor flood—except the Almighty Himself.

An absolutely essential aspect of the Breslov ethos, derived from what is considered one of Rabbi
Nachman’s most elementary and important teachings, is the principle of being “always in joy”
(lehiyot besimchah tamid). This principle is often cited and discussed within the Breslov community,
and sometimes expressed in the form that, “For one hour a day, whilst doing hitbodedut (secluded
meditative prayer—see Chapter 3.7), one may feel sad and pour out one’s tears. But for the other
twenty-three hours, one must live in joy!” The dancing circles formed by the Chasidim after prayers,
as discussed in Chapter 3.3, is one distinctive Breslov practice that appears to have this principle of
joy as its prime objective. Whether such devices, alongside constant verbal encouragement, can
actually effect a substantial increase in personal feelings of joy remains, clearly, an open
psychological question.

Another key Jewish precept is first to understand (despite the fact that ordinary experience of the
world frequently suggests otherwise) and then to strive to live always in the awareness, that one is
essentially a soul and not a body. In other words, that the physical body is like clothing to the eternal
essence, the soul (see also Chapter 2.1). This precept was emphasised to me by an elderly religious
(non-Breslov) man living in the Old City of Jerusalem, a man of some fame because for many years
in his youth he had followed a rigorous spiritual path in the Hindu tradition, apparently sitting for
long hours in Central Park in New York, immersed in meditative practice. Later in his life, however,
he reconnected with his Jewish roots, subsequently abandoning his Eastern practices and embracing
the Charedi way of life. This man asked me to consider the difference in connotation and in the feeling
generated by the declaration “I am sitting here”, versus “It is sitting here”. The “it” refers to the body,
and comes to emphasise that that body is separate from the true “I”, the soul. This man also explained
that one who lives in complete identification with the body perceives a chaotic world, in which he or
she is thrown this way and that, as if upon a surging and unpredictable sea of waves. In contrast, one
who comes to identify with the soul, and truly understands that the body is but a garment to it, realises
that the still-point, the very centre of one’s universe—immovable, unchanging and eternal—is that
soul, always right Here, right Now. And in fact, it is the world that moves and swirls around that

249
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

still-point, rather than the other way around. In his book on the scientific study of prayer, Dossey (1993, p. 36) discusses a similar idea; the apparently enlightened attitude that “… physical illness, no matter how painful or grotesque, is at some level of secondary importance in the total scheme of our existence”. Regarding an ill individual who can truly internalise and manifest this awareness, the author goes on to suggest that:

The disease may regress or totally disappear… for reasons we may not understand. When this happens it comes as a gift, a blessing, a grace—but again, this is of secondary importance. The real cure is the realization that at the most essential level, we are all “untouchables”—utterly beyond the ravages of disease and death.

Whether any human being can truly maintain such a level of expanded consciousness for a prolonged period of time also remains an open question. Breslov Chasidim in Safed speak of very similar themes regarding identification with the soul and not the body, but practicing such identification is an ongoing and probably lifelong challenge. Whilst some friends certainly experienced moments or periods of such expanded consciousness, I was not aware of anybody who lived in such lofty spiritual realms as a matter of course (if questioned, however, most Breslov Chasidim would certainly insist that their Rav, the head Rabbi of the community, experiences such spiritual elevation constantly). The question of how a person who truly internalises and lives through such an awareness goes on to experience the world remains a fruitful one to pursue39.

The contours of phenomenological experience may be pointed to not only by the experiencer’s words, but also hinted at by their appearance, body movements, and actions. Some Breslov Chasidim pray, especially at the qabalat Shabbat (Reception of the Shabbat) synagogue service, with great enthusiasm and verve. At the climax of particular prayers, voices are raised in ecstatic song, arms lifted heavenwards, and bodies gyrated. At other points, Chasidim go deeply into prayer, with eyes closed, body still, and a sense of complete concentration. My accustomed seat in the Breslov Nachal Novea synagogue was located a short distance from the seat of Rav Ephraim, one of the brothers of Rav Kenig, the head of the community, and himself a venerated spiritual leader. I was able to observe him on many occasions, and was often struck by several of his mannerisms during prayer. Firstly, he

39 Regarding such states of pure spiritual Being, the descriptions of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (1973) are the most plausible and believable that I have come across to date.
would always stand when the Torah was being read, indicating his sense of gravity and respect for
the occasion. Secondly, he would often pray with eyes closed, body motionless, and an expression of
deep immersion and concentration upon his face. In such moments I was reminded of the idea of
prayer as a *journey of ascent*, as discussed in Chapters 3.3 and 4.3. Finally, Rav Ephraim seemed to
exemplify the Breslov ethos of being “always in joy”—in his tone of conversation, in his frequently
being the first congregant to lead dancing circles (following prayers) with a song, and in his general
mien and bearing. He is a classic example, I believe—both in his external actions, and also and
especially in his emotional temperament—of what Breslov Chasidim aspire to.

“Being in Orot (Lights)”—Phenomenology from the Ethnographer’s Personal Experience

My own pilgrimage to Uman in the Ukraine, undertaken together with the majority of the men in the
Safed Breslov community in accordance with their annual custom, during the Rosh Hashanah period
of my fieldwork year, marked the zenith of my personal religious experience. During Uman and in
the several weeks that followed back in Safed, I experienced a “G-d trip” (as, with hindsight, I came
to call it) like never before; I was, to use a term frequently employed by Breslov Chasidim in this
case, “in *orot* (lights)”. This experience is said to be especially typical of *ba’aley tshuvah* (secular
Jews who have become religious) in the early stages of their “return” to religion, and particularly in
the context of formative events and experiences, such that the Uman pilgrimage indeed constitutes.

Chapter 3.1 estimates that approximately fifty percent of the Breslov community in Safed are *ba’aley
tshuvah*. One common and defining characteristic of the “journey of return” to G-d typical of such
individuals, when he or she chooses to undertake it in a Charedi context, is a significant severing of
secular social ties that the individual previously held. Several secular Jewish friends commented to
me on this phenomenon, from their own personal experiences with people who were previously their
friends. One religious (non-Breslov) and particularly insightful friend in Safed explained the topic
well, remarking that when fresh *ba’aley tshuvah* join a Charedi *yeshivah*, they are typically greeted
with a certain prevailing attitude—with variations, of course, across different *yeshivot*—that they
themselves come to adopt. This attitude holds that everything that occurred in their lives up until that
point indeed constituted the Will of the Almighty, in order to bring them to that seminal moment of
taking upon themselves repentance, and a new or renewed resolution to live according to the Laws of
G-d. From that moment on, however, the past is not so important; neither in its social connections,
nor personal interests, nor even experiences it consisted of. Somewhat reminiscent of descriptions in
the anthropological literature regarding liminality and initiation, the new devotee is considered almost
a new creation, who leaves behind a sinful secular life in order to walk renewed in the ways of G-d. Some even go so far as changing their first names—commonly to Avraham for a man and Sarah for a woman (the first Jew and Jewess)—in order to mark the beginning of their new life, in imitation of an established practice for converts who formally join Judaism from another religion.

Although not to the extent of seriously considering a change of name, my G-d trip included most of these elements just described, to greater or lesser extents. Feeling some measure of abhorrence now as I write these words, I certainly envisaged a reduction in the intensity, if not a cutting off, of previous secular social connections, as well as an abandonment of certain personal interests that constituted (and continue to constitute) a vibrant part of my life. Alongside what I felt to be a cosmic religious awakening, the importance and relevance of my anthropological fieldwork, and indeed, doctorate as a whole, plunged—for a while—to very low levels indeed. The essence of such “G-d trip” processes (occurring in any religion or tradition) is captured with rich creative talent in one particular episode of the popular BBC television series, The Mighty Boosh (King, 2005). The protagonists are momentarily wooed away by a cult of Yetis promising dreamy-eyed enlightenment; the lyrics of a song the converts sing include: “Follow me, forget the world... Never fear, everything is here. And you don’t need your friends, or family... Hey ho it’s easy let it go. Where nothing before was real...”

I am of the strong conviction that my experiences as described were very similar to those of many ba’aley tshuvah in the Breslov group when they first began their religious journeys, and indeed, quite comparable to those of tens of thousands of men and women in the Jewish world more generally. As such, this personal foray into the tshuvah world was an important experience that enabled me to better describe that lifeworld herein, and hopefully to say something of value about it. Upon my return from Uman to Safed I was asked by a friend in the Breslov community to write a short piece about my experiences, for a quarterly magazine they publish (Tzaddik: Healthy Jewish Living for Body and Soul). The piece was written and submitted; however, for reasons unknown to me, never published. I include it below in full, as an authentic first-person account—in this case written by myself, but that could be taken as originating from any new believer—shedding light on the phenomenology of the tshuvah experience. The passage especially seeks to describe aspects of the orot state, “being in lights”, in this instance catalysed by the Uman pilgrimage experience. Once more, the potential distinctions between the experiences of individuals who were born into Breslov society (and who may have attended the Uman pilgrimage many times in their childhood), and those who joined as ba’aley tshuvah, must be emphasised. The account below, of course, is more reflective of the latter.
Charging the Batteries

Jewish Awakening in Uman

Tears welled in my eyes as I stood inside the vast Kleuz Synagogue in Uman, chanting prayers along with several thousand others to welcome the Shabbat. I was experiencing a special moment—very emotional, deep and immediate—in which I realised that my coming to Uman was one of the most important things that I had done in my life. Now that is quite a statement to make, and had someone said it to me only days earlier, I would have been quite sceptical of its sincerity. My entire journey to the town of Uman in the Ukraine, to visit the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov during Rosh Hashanah, had in fact been tinged with an air of hesitation and scepticism. In the months previous, which I had spent in Tzfat in close contact with the Breslov community, I had heard many stories about the Uman pilgrimage, and the apparent wonders and miracles arising thereof. Some of these stories spoke of successful matches between men and women after a visit to the Rabbi’s grave. Others of great hardships encountered during the pilgrimage, yet of a powerful longing to return there as soon as they stepped off the plane at Ben Gurion airport. And yet others told of a great infusion of joy and strength from Rabeinu (“our Rabbi”; the term used by Breslovers to refer to Rabbi Nachman) following the annual event.

To me these were just stories, and I usually assumed that the glowing outcomes they related were the result simply of an enthusiasm generated by the whole affair of the pilgrimage itself. In other words, I explained-away these outcomes by attributing them to human psychology, and nothing more. I myself had been uncertain about making the trip, until a good friend of mine, who had been going annually since childhood, looked me in the eye and said, “there is no way that you’re not going to Uman this year!” So that settled it—I booked my flights, and off I flew. In my week or so there I experienced, unexpectedly, some intensely profound and moving moments, and, I believe, significant insights into myself and Judaism. I would like to share some of those moments and insights, in the hope that somebody else might find them relevant, interesting, and/or inspiring.

The first really touching experience occurred when I entered the site itself (the tsiyun) of Rabbi Nachman’s grave, in order to recite a combination of Psalms known as the Tiqun Ha-Klali. Rabbi Nachman was the first to establish (or rather, in the Chasidic tradition, to discover) this specific order of ten Psalms, and it has become highly significant not only to Breslov Chasidim but to Jews in general. There is a great inyan (significance) to recite the Tiqun Ha-Klali specifically at Rabbi Nachman’s grave, followed by donation of a coin to charity—for the Rabbi promised that whoever does this, he would exert himself “far and wide” to help them, no matter how low their soul had fallen. As I prepared to recite the Tiqun at the tsiyun, it struck me that millions of people the world over, who read it every day, were somehow connected to the moment that I was about to experience, for I was about to do what those millions every day dreamed of and prayed for. The subjective emotions and significance I felt in that moment were very real, and I realized that here was a true demonstration of the power of Rabbi Nachman, in that his legacy could produce such a moment for me, hundreds of years after his leaving the world. This was the first point at which I began to think, “maybe there is something real after all, to this Uman/Rabbi Nachman thing that everybody is talking about”.

Another powerful experience occurred during my walk to the Kleuz Synagogue for the evening Shabbat service (the same as mentioned above at the beginning of this article), a few days prior to Rosh Hashanah. I had gone through the usual rush to get ready on time; to squeeze myself into the huge but very crowded miqveh, to prepare my cramped bed-space, room and house in general (Rosh Hashanah accommodation in Uman tends to squash as many people as possible into the
least space!), and to get dressed in Shabbat finest. A special feeling came upon me as I left the house to walk to the Kleuz—all was done and ready, and now the magic and peace of the Day of Rest was about to settle on the town. I felt very connected to this feeling as I walked, and it suddenly struck me that here I was, in a small town in the middle of the Ukraine, doing something that my grandfather, and his grandfather, and on and on back through the generations, would have done in other parts of Eastern Europe—walking to synagogue on the eve of Shabbat. I suddenly felt intimately connected to my European Jewish heritage, in a way like never before. Previously, even during a fairly intense process of tshuvah, I had shied away from and rejected the image of the shtetl Jew, dressed in black garb, speaking Yiddish and living compliantly and submissively amongst his often aggressive neighbours. Rather, for me, the Jews were strong men and women, Hebrew-speaking people of the desert, who dressed in bright colours and were intimately connected to the land—to the valleys and mountains, rivers and fields—as opposed to the urban sprawl. In that moment, however, something clicked in my mind; I somehow perceived with a level of clarity the significance and the very holiness of the whole Eastern European “thing” in the cosmic unfolding of the history of Israel. And in that moment, almost unbelievably for me, I wanted to embrace and to be a part of that “thing”—to be walking down the street dressed in black, with peyos, a shtreimel, the lot.

The Kleuz itself was a momentous experience, both this Shabbat, and on the days of Rosh Hashanah itself. As I wrote at the beginning, I experienced a profound moment of insight there, in which I understood that my coming to Uman was one of the most important things I had done in my life. This understanding was prompted, on that Shabbat-eve service, by the realisation that my process of tshuvah, back to a path of Torah, was probably the one greatest challenge for me in this lifetime, and indeed, what the circumstances of my life had been arranged to test me with. Our Sages suggested that in every lifetime—every cycle or gilgul that the soul passes through—each person has a unique challenge, or puzzle in a sense, that they must rise to, transcend, solve. Of course, we experience many challenges and puzzles daily during our lives, but here I refer to something more overriding, more basic, and usually directly connected to the most fundamental issues and imbalances that we experience as a human being. A crucial part of each person’s Avodat Hashem (and indeed, of one’s process of personal healing, which ultimately are one and the same thing) is to work hard to discover what this central life-theme is for them, and to then act upon it accordingly. For me, to understand in the Kleuz that one of my central such themes was probably a return to Torah—a process which I was in the midst of grappling with, and that had made for a very turbulent two years in my life—constituted a huge and emotional moment. To the accompaniment of the Shabbat chanting, I felt an outpouring of joy and gratitude for being able to experience it.

A final event that I would like to share was a visit to the burial site, located in the town of Medzhybizh, of the Ba’al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chasidic movement. I cannot overstate the awe in which I hold this figure—a man who reached spiritual heights that most of us, and certainly myself, cannot even begin to comprehend. He invigorated Judaism with a fresh spirit, emphasising the importance of each man and woman’s direct connection to G-d, and the importance of “bringing down” Kabbalistic teachings to the level of every Jew—for only through such teachings can we really understand what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. I also admired and felt connected to other aspects of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s way—for example, his love of and connection to nature, his enlightened (especially during his era in the eighteenth century) attitudes towards women, and his often radical and un-orthodox interpretations and practices. I was very pleased to see the following proclamation printed on a large sign near the entrance to his tsiyun (I translate here from the Hebrew):
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

The Ba’al Shem Tov was very stringent in the matter of [his] love for [the people of] Israel. And more-so, his love was also for all the nations of the world, as it is told that he even showed love to those of the worldly nations who rob [Israel]. To the extent that his love extended also to the living and growing things in the forest...

This was such a refreshing approach, especially the emphasis on his love for “all the nations of the world”; an emphasis quite in contrast to the prevailing attitudes that I had encountered to date amongst many religious Jews. Inside, I felt some kind of a momentary “zing” as I kissed the simple yet stunning white marble grave, and I was all awe and wonder to be there with the Ba’al Shem Tov.

Uman for me constituted a week outside the “Matrix” of day-to-day life, and a period of intense Avodat Hashem. This intensity was, in this case, a function of quantity (although, I hope, of some quality too!); the amount and length of synagogue services, tfillot, brachot, hitbodedut in the countryside, miqveh, and so on. I would find myself at the end of a long day, exhausted and ready for bed, with the dilemma of, will I read Qriyat Shema Al Ha-Mitah, or go straight to sleep? And this was after a day in which prayers were “coming out of my ears”, so to speak. Yet, as in those moments of dilemma I made an effort to rise to the occasion and spend another ten minutes doing the “right” thing, an interesting thing began to happen; the sheer volume of all of this work began to build something inside of me—a different space, a new feeling, a special awareness. And I began to realize that Avodat Hashem is, in some ways, like a “trip” (to borrow a phrase from the drug world); one can’t know what it’s about until one does it, properly, with one’s whole heart. Then, things begin to happen that cannot be expressed properly in words, for words are a subset of those things, and not those things a subset of words.

Having waxed enthusiastic, I must also add a word of warning based on my post-Uman experience. I returned to Tzfat “on fire”, so to speak, full of dedication, commitment and joy. I felt that my “Tshuvah bus”, which I had previously only loitered around—or repeatedly boarded yet alighted before it could even leave the terminal—had finally taken off on its journey with myself on-board. In actual fact, what was happening was that I was becoming attached to doing a daily checklist—of prayer, Tehilim, study, hitbodedut, and so forth—in the hope of hitting that Uman high again. In other words, I was seeking an experience or a feeling, and forgetting the purpose of it all… even though I was apparently immersed in Avodat Hashem!

The hard fall came several weeks later. One of the things I learned from it (and still fight to re-learn every day) is that a true connection to Hashem is something that one carries in one’s heart—it is being in flow with the Source of all Sources, the Ground of All Things. And, as my teacher puts it, it is about being, not doing. Now, I don’t purport to fully understand what this being versus doing emphasis means, but I sense that there is a deep wisdom there, and it certainly applies to my “checklist” experience. Of course all the practices themselves (mitzvot and others) are important; the former are commanded, and generally, it is only through practices in the physical world that we can purify ourselves, show that we’re really sincere about our voiced intentions, and come closer to G-d. Yet one can become so focused on the practices that one forgets their purpose, which is one thing only—to bring one to cleave to the Creator. And one can become so immersed in this checklist of practices, that it actually takes him or her away from true surrender to Hashem. A pasuq appearing in the Ma’ariv service and again in Qriyat Shema Al HaMitah asks of Hashem, “and remove spiritual impediment (“Satan”) from before us and behind us”. There are many interpretations for this passage; in one of them, the “Satan behind us” can be understood to refer to the Yetzer Hara pushing one forward, encouraging him/her to go
IV. Analysis

4.5 “In the Beginning G-d Created…”—The Torah Lifeworld and the Phenomenology of the Religious Experience

overboard. “Do more!” in terms of Avodat Hashem, it whispers, knowing all too well the precipice that awaits the one who does not build gradually.

I would recommend the Uman experience to anybody who has the inclination to go, or who feels drawn there for some reason. It is advisable (although certainly not mandatory) that somebody going for the first time travels together with another who has already been, for finding one’s feet there can be a little bewildering at first. Go with minimal expectations and with an open mind… and may every step lead us closer to greater harmony with the Infinite.

***
4.6 Towards A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Charedi Phenomenon

Here it was understood that most mythological figures, especially the Shekhinah, were ultimately aspects of the Godhead, despite their apparent mythological independence. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if all of Jewish myth (and perhaps all of existence) were the epic fantasy of one Divine Being, or, as Lurianic kabbalah suggests, a kind of divine illusion, similar to the Hindu concept of maya. For what sometimes appears to have mythic independence can also be understood as an emanation of the Godhead.

Schwartz (2004, p. xliv)

The ethnographic material presented in the first half of this thesis has been analysed and interpreted through a number of theoretical frameworks. The Charedi conception of their own identity was discussed in terms of a dialectical relationship precisely with what Charedi thinking construes as its opposite—non-Jews, as well as non-religious Jews. A comparative approach was taken in exploring parallels between Judaism and shamanism, followed by a functional analysis of a number of Jewish practices, acting in social, emotional and cognitive domains, in order to ensure replication of the religion—and specifically its core “template”, the Torah—from generation to generation. The last chapter sought to provide some insight into the phenomenology of “being Breslov”. The purpose of this present and final chapter is to explore a theoretical framework that can begin to tie the bulk of this previously examined material together into a coherent whole.

Psychoanalysis as a Sociocultural Explanatory Framework

Psychoanalysis, as a theoretical framework for understanding the structures and functions thereof of the human personality, is also of great value in illuminating processes occurring at the sociocultural level of reality. Carl Jung wrote extensively on the idea of the collective unconscious, which may be said to stand in the same relationship to a species or to a particular human society as the personal unconscious stands in relation to an individual. Structuralists, including Claude Lévi-Strauss, attributed patterns in sociocultural systems to the essential structures of the human mind, and in Chapter 1.3 the idea of the “psyche, unconscious, and imagination as the generative matrix of human cultural life-worlds” (Mimica, 2009, p. 40) was affirmed as a guiding principle for this entire research project. Similarly, Richter (1984, p. 20) writes:

Rash as it may appear to attempt to establish a link between the intellectual-historical processes we have examined and concepts drawn from the modern psychoanalytic investigation of narcissism, there nevertheless exists some cause to apply psychoanalytic interpretive categories to the task of elucidating social-psychological phenomena.
Interestingly, the Jewish and the psychoanalytic traditions are historically, and some would suggest conceptually, linked. Historically, all members of Freud’s original psychoanalytic circle in Vienna, around the turn of the twentieth century, were Jewish (Frosh, 2006). Spero (1992, p. 52) points out that whilst Freud appears to have intended “…the psychoanalytic demolition of the foundations of religious belief… based on the great Freudian equation of religion with infantile magical thinking and obsessional neurosis” (the latter being reminiscent of Charedi obsessional practices as discussed in Chapter 4.1), a closer examination reveals a more complex picture regarding Freud’s stance on religion and G-d. Spero (1992, p. 55) continues, “Freud, in fact, envisaged—sometimes ruefully, other times in what seems like farsighted resignation—a reversal of roles whereby the study of religion might ultimately elucidate psychological processes…” Bakan (1958) seeks to explain the sudden emergence of psychoanalysis—as a novel mode of thought in the Western intellectual tradition—through a detailed exploration of Freud’s interest in and relationship with the Jewish mystical tradition. Meyer Fortes, the psychologist, ethnographer and anthropologist who was one of the first to have “…attempted to confront and transcend the ‘unbridgeable’ gap between psychoanalytic theory and anthropological studies” (Morris, 1994, p. 124) was also of (Russian) Jewish descent. More recently, Frosh (2006, p. 206) suggests that “What psychoanalysis and Judaism share more deeply… is a fascination with depth interpretation, with seeing ‘beyond’ or ‘beneath’ what is readily available, and a concern with, even promotion of, the bounding of desire by law”\(^{40}\).

Much of the Charedi mindset, as I observed it, is defined by themes of obedience and punishment\(^{41}\), good and evil, right and wrong, and service to the Almighty. In this regard, and from a rudimentary psychoanalytic perspective, the Almighty is the classic parent figure. Indeed, as cited in Chapter 3.7, the phrase “*Oy Tatti!*” (in Yiddish “Oh Daddy!”)—used by adults to beseech G-d, especially over a

---

\(^{40}\) One striking symbolism for the binding of desire by law is the application of *tefilin*, the scroll-containing boxes and accompanying leather straps that—wrapped around the left arm, hand, and the head according to specific procedures and with particular prayers—constrain the Evil Inclination and the desires of the body through which it operates.

\(^{41}\) Interestingly, and in contrast to this theme of obedience, punishment, and—as will be discussed—surrender, the word “Israel” (*Yisrael*) is the name that was given, as recounted in Genesis, to Jacob after he wrestled with a being that has variously been described as a man, an angel, or as G-d Himself. The word *Yisrael* means “defeating/triumphant over G-d”.

258
difficult matter or accompanying an upwelling of painful emotion—is frequently vocalised by Breslovers.

This chapter will present two psychoanalytic perspectives on the Charedi phenomenon. The first utilises the concept of narcissism, and is based on the work of Richter (1984), wherein he argues that in the wake of modernity’s abandonment of G-d, begun with the European Renaissance and cemented through the Enlightenment, the project of modern society has been to usurp His power and to attempt to “possess infinity” (Richter, 1984, p. 14). Richter’s (1984) psychoanalytic explanation for the why of this project and the how of its particular forms serves as a point of inspiration for my formulation of a similarly psychoanalytic interpretation regarding Charedi society. I argue that the central project of that society has been to deal with the same fundamental problem that prompted secular modernity’s original abandonment of G-d—namely, an increasing recognition of and dissatisfaction with the impotence of humanity in the face of the reality that cradles it—yet in a radically different manner. Whereas the Enlightenment world responded to this impotence and its fear thereof with a project to usurp G-d’s position and become its own prime mover, the Charedi world epitomises a diametrically opposite approach; one that seeks to please and appease the stern and vengeful Father by becoming the perfect child. It is from this approach that the obsession with the minutiae of Halakhic observance and self-perfection arises. Somewhat ironically, however, this Charedi ethos has fostered a grandiosity—in terms of self-perceptions of chosenness, and subsequent differentiation from the non-chosen (as discussed in Chapter 4.2)—no less impressive than that of modern secular societies.

The second psychoanalytic perspective to be presented is based on the work of Spero (1992)—himself a religious Jew, deriving much of his theoretical insight from clinical work with Charedi patients—and his application of object relations theory to the matter of religion and G-d. I suggest that the Charedi phenomenon, as I observed and characterised it, may be understood as a stage in the development of the relationship between the self and the G-d object. This stage is part of a progression of ego-G-d dynamics, a progression that emerges out of and is congruent with the classic developmental sequences—essentially, stages of self-other separation and individuation—that psychoanalysis has mapped out for the human personality.

It is important to acknowledge that these two psychoanalytic perspectives do not, at first glance, hold primacy for the group under discussion; that is, the Breslov group specifically and Charedi society generally would not describe itself, nor its fundamental project, in psychoanalytic terms. Rather, psychoanalysis (including object relations theory) is being used herein as a vehicle to gain and convey
insight into the dynamics of the lifeworld under discussion. Having acknowledged this point, however, I emphasise again the conceptual relationship between Jewish thinking and depth psychology, as pointed out, for example, by Frosh (2006, p. 206). In this regard, and in the case of particularly open-minded Charedi individuals, the psychoanalytic framework might indeed be acknowledged from an emic perspective as a legitimate one.

The idea of such a relationship between Judaism and depth psychology has been developed into a novel and insightful theory by Spero (for example, 1992 pp. 93-129), which he calls the “halakhic metapsychology”. This theory holds that the Halakhic structures (laws, customs, prescriptions and proscriptions, and other religious concepts) delineating the human relationship with G-d are congruent with the intrapsychic structures that constitute the relationship between self and the G-d object; furthermore, therefore, that the concepts and terminology of Halakhah and that of psychoanalysis share much common ground. In Spero’s (1992, p. xvi) words: “… the hypothesis that psychological processes have an inherently religious nature or quality. According to such a hypothesis… religious concepts would be conceived of as having a unique, specifiable psychological identity, and psychological concepts, structures and mechanisms as having an intrinsic religious identity”. This hypothesis lends additional legitimacy to the present attempt to illuminate the religious Charedi phenomenon through psychoanalytic theory.

The concluding section of this chapter will go on to formulate, beginning with consideration of this halakhic metapsychology, and then based on material and insights derived during the course of my entire research project, the concept of Judaism as a fractal structure. As explained in a footnote in Chapter 3.3, a fractal is an object in which a core template is repeated, with variations, throughout all levels of its whole. Amalek, for example (as discussed in Chapters 4.4 and 4.5) is a “historical” (Biblically speaking) physical man, being the son of Eliphaz and Timna; a mythological figure, in terms of copious Midrashic material on the topic; and a metaphysical concept, as a representation of the cosmic forces of Evil in Creation. Amalek, importantly, is also representative of the psychological manifestation of the Yetzer Hara, the Evil Inclination. I suggest that similarly, many of Judaism’s core concepts and components are abstracted ideals or templates, possessing concrete reality at various levels, including historical, mythological, temporal, physical, and metaphysical ones. Almost all such concepts and components, crucially, also possess a primary psychological identity. In this regard, therefore, the psychological/psychodynamic level constitutes if not an ultimate, then at least a very valuable, explanatory level.
Perspective 1: Obedience and Surrender as a Narcissistic Response to Impotence and Fear

Richter (1984) metaphorically compares the psychosocial zeitgeist of Middle Ages Europe to the intrapsychic reality of a young child who, at a certain age of intellectual development, comes to distrust his parents. The child’s feeling of complete protection and safety under their benevolent wings is replaced by a feeling of helplessness and concomitant anxiety, as “their [the child’s] sense of self has developed to the point that they understand quite well what it would mean to lose the care their parents afford them” (Richter, 1984, p. 3). The child now seeks to take on the parental role unto himself—to become utterly independent and reliant upon nobody but himself, in an unconscious effort to conquer his own helplessness. Thus, he seeks to control every aspect of his life, asserting this control in large part through rebellion, refusing even to eat when he is hungry or to sleep when he is tired. He becomes engaged in a “flight from narcissistic feelings of impotence into narcissistic feelings of omnipotence” (Richter, 1984, p. 7), and the more powerful the former, the greater will be his overcompensation with and obsession for the latter.

Continuing from this reasoning, Richter (1984, p. 6) suggests that modern European society developed a megalomaniac “G-d complex”:

It appears that, during the Middle Ages, the feeling of being cared for and protected like a child by one’s father, God, was steadily waning, while at the same time the need to exorcise a growing sense of uneasiness intensified the urge to acquire personal power over one’s circumstances. Man’s distrust of God was nourished not only by the fear of being found unacceptable in His eyes, but also by anxiety concerning the evil or punitive side of God’s nature. Man’s announcement of his refusal to go on blindly obeying took the form of an intensified demand for knowledge and the right to self-determination.

The author goes on to explain that this turn of events, however, only enmeshed man more deeply in his dilemma, for now—due to his rebellion—he had more reason than ever to fear punitive action from on High, and his anxiety was accordingly heightened. A further twist was provided by the particularly Calvinist doctrine of the Elect. This doctrine holds that man is saved by grace and not by deeds; an impenetrable Divine Providence decides who, when the final bell tolls, will be saved, and who might be subject to horrific punishment. Good deeds in this world, therefore, should be taken as a testament to, rather than a causation of, the grace of G-d. In this regard Dumont (1986, p. 55) writes: “Calvin went further [than Luther], maintaining with iron consistency the complete impotence of man in the face of the omnipotence of God”. Accordingly, man’s fight to assert control at all costs, as with
the metaphorical child mentioned above, intensified. Man’s self-imposed perception of his separation from nature, and his gargantuan and vaunted efforts to control it—or rather, to *convince* himself of that control—is one of the hallmarks of modernity, and its origins are to be found in man’s inability to engage in the painful process of confronting an insecure relationship with the Infinite. Man sought, rather, to avoid this pain by appropriating G-d and seizing His throne. Richter (1984, pp. 12-13) thus writes:

> The moment when man stepped out of the Middle Ages and into the modern era, long celebrated as a sublime act of self-emancipation, was in reality a neurotic flight from a sense of narcissistic impotence into the illusion of narcissistic omnipotence. The psychological root of modern civilization, which appears so impressive on the surface, is in fact an infantile megalomania nourished by deep-lying, unmastered anxieties.

One neurotic consequence of this condition (and similar, perhaps, to the aforementioned child who is sickly hungry and morbidly tired, yet refuses neither to eat nor sleep) is that when the very science and technology that humanity is using to apparently seize the throne of G-d warns of impending doom, or itself threatens to constitute the instrument of that doom (whether ecological, militaristic or other), societies as a whole and individuals within them are largely unable to re-evaluate their fundamental ethos and actions, beyond mere lip-service (Richter, 1984, p. 14).

The Charedi phenomenon, too, is reminiscent of this original and seemingly insurmountable problem—the impotence of the human condition—that post-Middle Ages Europe tackled in its own particular way. By “Charedi phenomenon” I refer to the essential aspects of that lifeworld that were discussed in previous chapters, and especially to the contemporary Charedi drive towards “zero degrees of freedom”. This is the desire to control absolutely every action, word and thought—and indeed, to have the parameters of what that control entails clearly spelled out in *Halakhic* writing—in order that the individual may feel they are serving G-d to the n°th degree. Conversely, if they are not able to engage with this feeling of adequately serving G-d, Charedi devotees are very likely to experience anxiety and guilt over their *Halakhic* non-compliance. This obsession with control and

---

42 That the *theological* origins of secular modernity, and indeed, of the whole modern project itself, are largely denied by that modernity (see, for example, Gillespie, 2008, p. 2) appears to be congruent with the idea of this fight that Modern Man wages, so to speak, against G-d. Denial and rejection, of course, are defining features of similar conflicts that we human beings wage with our more mundane and mortal counterparts.
structure is reminiscent of modern secular man and his project of seizing control from G-d; Dossey (1993, p. 67), for example, writes: “Underlying the desire for total personal, conscious control and responsibility… is frequently a narcissistic desire for power”.

The Charedi consciousness, then, shares the same overarching anxiety as its counterpart, Richter’s Medieval man, regarding feelings of helplessness and the horrible possibility of punishment from, or abandonment by, the Almighty Father figure. But whereas the late Middle Ages (or early Modern Age) man rebelled, fled the house (or sought to take it over), and resolved to chart his own course, the anxiety of the Charedi world prompts it to do the opposite. It has come to devote its entire efforts—indeed, a hallmark of Jewish and certainly Charedi thinking is that with every breath and thought—to serve and to please G-d. As with the “emotional dynamics of overcompensation” described by Richter (1984, p. 41) for modern secular society, the greater Charedi society’s anxiety, the more it immerses and loses itself in this particular strategy. The six-hundred and thirteen commandments of the Torah are not enough for a Jew to prove his or her love and adoration (and indeed, fear and awe—as commanded) of the Father. He or she needs to extrapolate more prescriptions and proscriptions, to apply the Torah to every waking moment and beyond—to know how to think, speak and act—in order to earn Divine love and light, rather than be castigated with their opposite. Recall that, as discussed in some depth in Chapter 2.1 and in stark contrast to Calvinist doctrine, the concept of earning is a primary one in Judaism. In making these assertions, of course, the heterogeneity and recent historical vicissitudes of the Charedi lifeworld must be kept in mind.

Secular modernity’s project, then, is one of control and independence, whilst for the Charedim it appears to be one of surrender. At the heart of the secular psychosociality lies a determined resolve, now characteristic of most developed societies across the globe, to control “everything” through mathematics, science and technology. In contrast, as discussed in the previous Chapter 4.5, a basic tenet of Jewish religious belief points to hashgachah pratit (Divine Providence) as the prime mover of reality. This tenet is expressed particularly by the Proverb 19:21, that was often cited to me by

43 “To understand oneself as new [in the context of the modern age] is also to understand oneself as self-originating, as free and creative in a radical sense, not merely as determined by a tradition or governed by fate or providence” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 2).
religious Jews in Safed: “Many designs are in a man’s heart, but the council of Hashem [G-d], only it will prevail”44 (The Torah/Prophets/Writings [Hebrew and English], 2008, p. 1597).

In Safed an allegory—probably derived from aggadic (Rabbinic homiletic) or Talmudic sources—was several times related to me, about a wise rabbi who would walk around with a lump of gold in one pocket and a lump of coal in another. On days when he was feeling particularly worthless and lowly, he would pull out the lump of gold, reminding himself that the eternal soul that is his essence is precious beyond measure in the eyes of the Lord. On days when, in contrast, he was feeling especially pleased with himself and arrogant, he would handle the lump of coal, reminding himself that he was lower than a worm in the grand order of things, and that his transient life was of no consequence. Broadly speaking, modern Western society has become obsessed with the lump of gold, whilst the prevailing reality in Charedi Jewish communities is that of the coal. Many Charedim would protest this statement, pointing to innumerable elements in their doctrine and practice that emphasise the love G-d feels for every Jew, and the precept that each soul is as precious to Him as all of Creation combined. These elements are indeed present, but as stated several times throughout this thesis, my primary purpose is ethnography—illuminating a real and existing lifeworld and its phenomenology—and not theology and its accompanying doctrines. In the face of a conception of a Being so omnipotent as to defy any possibility of human understanding, a conception reinforced by the literal meanings of the majority of the daily prayers, I suggest that the conclusion that percolates down to the average Breslover from an early age is predominantly of the coal variety—awe and insignificance in the face of the Father—rather than of the gold.

The lack of a middle—or perhaps more appropriately, a transcendent—path inherent in this allegorical gold/coal dichotomy is keenly recognised by Richter, as he points out that man has tended to see himself as either a zero (essential impotence) or to fantasise of himself as infinite (supreme omnipotence). In the Christian religious context, Richter (1984, p. 69) critiques the similar, and in his eyes limited, view expounded by Blaise Pascal; the French philosopher, mystic, mathematician and physicist who spoke of a dichotomy in which man could either surrender himself absolutely to G-d, or alternately deify himself in ultimate hubris. Interestingly, one friend in Safed (not belonging to the Breslov group, but a religious man of very high intellect and spiritual accomplishment) spoke of Realised Beings in Judaism—such as the Ari and the Ba’al Shem Tov—who in my friend’s mind had

44 An oft-quoted phrase in Hebrew: Rabot machshavot belev ish veatzat Hashem hi taqum.
transcended beyond this simple dichotomy of nothingness/infinity, and were thereby able to live in This World (*Olam Hazeh*) in a sublime state that went beyond words to describe or ordinary human ability to comprehend.

The above discussion has taken an essentially synchronic approach, and has deliberately avoided delving into the historicity of the Charedi phenomenon, which constitutes an entire topic of itself. In this thesis I am not suggesting that the secular modern consciousness, and the Charedi ethos and worldview, grew up together, so to speak, in a shared time and space, for it would appear that Judaism has pursued some kind of project of “zero degrees of freedom”—certainly in comparison to the cultures around it—since Biblical times. Ever since the Jewish religion’s emergence there has been a sustained effort to explain, expound and extrapolate the commandments of the Torah down to the minutiae of daily action. The modern secular world, in contrast, appears to have at least its direct origins in the European Renaissance, closely followed by the Enlightenment. It is interesting to note, however, that the *Shulchan Arukh*—to this day the most widely consulted code of Jewish law—was published in the sixteenth century, during the time of the same Renaissance; its publication may be taken to reflect some kind of shift in the collective Jewish unconscious in response to the first stirrings of the non-Jewish European abandonment of G-d. It may be argued, perhaps, that this shift in the Jewish unconscious (and shortly afterwards, indeed, in the Jewish consciousness) would eventually metamorphose into the Charedi position. Caution, however, must be exercised in tying this shift, in a Jewish historical sense, to events in mainstream European society. The *Shulchan Arukh* was written not in Europe but in Safed, by Yosef Qaro, a scholar who was born in Spain yet spent most of his life in the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, this code of Jewish law did not emerge from a vacuum, but was based on an earlier work by Qaro, which itself was a commentary on a fourteenth century code of law called *Arbaʼah Turim* (“Four Rows”). In addition, another important and closely consulted summary of laws had already been in existence since the twelfth century—Moses Maimonides’ (the *Rambam*) *Mishneh Torah*. In terms of historical development, then, perhaps the best statement that may be made at this point is that the modern secular and Charedi consciousness have each emerged through a complex relationship with one another, in ways that were in some cases independent, and in others, undoubtedly, closely dependent.

Richter (1984, p. 41) discusses how the modern G-d complex reached a certain culmination in the philosophies of Frederick Nietzsche, and how his ideas supposedly paved the way for or heralded one of the darkest attempts in modern history to externalise, on a political and social level, the illusion of
unrestrained narcissistic omnipotence—that of the German Nazi regime\textsuperscript{45}. This theory, alongside that of the Charedi position presented here, suggests a psychological explanation for why the Nazi regime was so obsessed with wiping out the Jews, and why such substantial resources were expended on the project, at the same time that the Germans were stretched thin engaging in war on a scale hitherto unknown to humankind. Richter (1984) proposes that the Nazi regime required, as with all groups of its sort, hatred of an external group in order to convert and objectify the very suffering, anxiety and depression that lay at its own heart. The witch, as a scapegoat in medieval times, was increasingly being replaced by the Jew. The religious Jew was the opposite of the Nietzschean “Superman”, a living testament of sorts to the impotence of man in the face of G-d. The stereotypical Charedi Jew today lives in relative poverty, often with substantial reliance on charity, and is essentially the antithesis of the Superman. Indeed, pain, suffering, and ultimately death have held a central position in Rabbinic thought in regards to atonement for sin, and more fundamentally in the context of “sanctification of the Name” (\textit{qidush Hashem}), the classic Jewish term for martyrdom. Fishbane (1996, pp. 87-88) discusses the commentaries of sages on a Biblical passage, Psalms 44:23:

\[
\text{… its elaboration through the psalmist’s remark “For Your sake are we killed all day long, and regarded as sheep for the slaughter” (Psalm 44:23)… the passage should rather be taken to mean that God credits the righteous “as if” (\textit{ke’ilu}) they are slain daily for His sake—that is, the deeds of the righteous, who “kill” their evil desires out of devotion to God, are deemed a more spiritualized realization of martyrlogical values.}
\]

Unsurprisingly, then, the Nazis sought to exercise their “naked barbarism” (Richter, 1984, p. 38) on the “other” who represented their precise opposite—the lamb who embraced helplessness, rather than the wolf who hungered for omnipotence. “Race ideology dominated the thinking and action of the

\textsuperscript{45} The adoption, for a time, of Nietzsche’s ideas by the National Socialist German Workers’ (Nazi) Party, decades after his death, has led to subsequent scholarly debate regarding the type of connection that may be drawn between Nietzsche and Nazism. Jaspers (1997 [1936], pp. xiii-xiv), in defence of Nietzsche, writes:

\[
The essence of his [Nietzsche’s] life and thought is so utterly magnificent that he who is able to participate in it is proof against the errors to which Nietzsche momentarily fell victim and which at a later date could provide phraseological materials to be used by the National Socialists in support of their inhuman deeds. Since Nietzsche could not really become the philosopher of the National Socialists, they eventually abandoned him without further ado.
\]
entire [German] society. Anti-Semitism, embraced and elaborated by Nazism, was generalized throughout the culture, defining the Jew as a threatening, dangerous and poisonous Other” (Glass, 1997, p. xiii).

The horrific culmination of this “projective diabolization” (Richter, 1984, pp. 116-117) is only too well known, perpetrated by what was apparently one of the most educated and “enlightened” nations on Earth, and one of the centres of European philosophy and arts. Glass (1997, p. 115) emphasises that it would be incorrect to attribute the impulses behind the Final Solution to economic or historical (such as “classic” European anti-Semitic) factors. At the inception of that project of genocide, the German state was in a prosperous position; employment rates were the highest they had been in decades, most of Europe was conquered, and the German people were supremely confident that a thousand-year Reich was within reach. The “othering” of the Jew, rather, had more fundamental origins, in a pseudo-scientific relegation of the very substance of the Jew to the domain of toxicity and disease. “What put the Final Solution into practice was a delusion, a widespread belief in the scientific definition of the Jew as poison, and the ordinary person’s willingness to accept, internalize, and act on this delusion” (Glass, 1997, p. 115). The Jewish body, consequently, became abjected; construed as diseased, toxic and defiled. As such, actions against it were not considered violent, but rather were understood to be legitimately enacted against matter that was dangerous in a physical/biological sense. The Jewish body also became conceived of as a medium for the transmission of ideationally/ideologically dangerous constructs, and thus once more requiring of neutralisation (Glass, 1997, p. 121). A scientific-industrial machine was accordingly established to pulverise the object of the German phobia, an object portrayed as representing the antithesis of the Nazi ideal. Regarding this project, Glass (1997, p. 128) writes: “Nothing analogous to a superego exists to restrain power that has dissociated itself from traditional moral viewpoints, resulting in actions that would have been incomprehensible scarcely a generation before”.

The contemporary Charedi world too experiences suffering, anxiety and depression, as a result of its self-perceptions of impotence in the face of the omnipotent Father. In order to convert those emotions and experiences, it too engages in a form of projective diabolisation, but radically different from the one just discussed. The object of the Charedi diabolisation is, of course, the goyim (the non-Jewish nations); this theme has been discussed in some depth in Chapters 3.8 and 4.2. Rather than naked hatred and unrestrained violence, however, the typical attitude towards the non-Jew—certainly as I observed amongst the Breslov community in Safed and as I extrapolate to broader Charedi society—could best be described as a “benign superiority”.

267
The answers of modern secular versus Charedi society to the perennial problem of helplessness in the face of the Infinite may not be as different to one another as they at first glance appear. There are some superficial similarities between them—for example, both religious Judaism and the rational, secular world take the subjugation of the emotion by the intellect as a pre-condition for personal and social advancement. Furthermore, both give primacy to men, as opposed to women, in almost all facets of their lifeworld. On a more fundamental level, and despite the radically different strategies they have chosen in dealing with it, both modern secular and Charedi societies are motivated by a deep sense of impotence. Unable to establish a healthy relationship with G-d—one that acknowledges the self as being neither an empty zero nor a complete oneness, but rather, a challenging, uncertain and often painful in-between—both societies continue to pursue narcissistic strategies in dealing with their helplessness and fears of abandonment. The secular world seeks total control in order to vanquish its fears and prove to itself that they are baseless; its project is no less than to become G-d. The Charedi practitioner seeks to devote his or her life to G-d completely, aiming for such supreme bitul (nullification of ego) that they will become cognisant of what to them is an eternal truth—that G-d is him or her, and always was. In that sense, then, although clothed in very different garb compared to its secular counterpart, the Charedi adherent’s project could similarly be understood as a narcissistic one of immortality.

**Perspective II: The Charedi Phenomenon as a Developmental Stage (Object Relations Theory)**

Spero (1992) seeks to build new bridges between modern psychoanalysis and religion, a project that grew out of and itself offers fertile new ground for clinical psychoanalytic work with religious patients, as well as constituting a far broader philosophical explanatory platform of its own. He initially surveys the largely impoverished existing efforts at building such psychotherapy-theology bridges, pointing out that most fall victim to a “psychologistic bias”, wherein “theoretical or clinical examination adopts the psychological validity of religious beliefs and objects as the sole or ultimate unit of analysis” (Spero, 1992, p. 58). In the same vein the author adds (p. 82): “Even in the object relations approach… one can sense remnants of psychological positivism”. Merkur (1999, p. 3) similarly notes that psychologists have tended to express their observations and investigations of religious phenomena in their own technical language, often with concomitant value judgements that have a foothold (or more) in pathology. Mystic union, consequently, is sometimes described as a “spontaneous symptom of psychopathology”, meditation as a religious form of autosuggestion, and mystics’ psychic states as self-hypnosis or even hysteria. Beit-Hallahmi (1992, pp. 127-128) goes so far as to argue that even recent efforts at reconciliation between object relations theory and the
principles of faith-based religion are superficial only, and that the rift between the two remains as great as ever.

Spero’s work, whilst rigorously scholarly and deeply grounded in academic psychology and psychoanalysis, seeks to include within its scope an objective G-d, with whom the relationship of the self must be psychologically accounted for. St. Clair (1994, pp. 16-17) similarly describes Spero’s work, and points to his emphasis on the objective reality of the entity that lies beyond the psychological representation. Somewhat reminiscent of the key tenets of Richter’s (1984) work based on narcissism and omnipotence (as discussed and extended above), Spero (1992, p. 14) critiques theoretical approaches that do not recognise and grant objective reality to the “Something” beyond the internalised belief in the Divine, writing: “… the ultimate object of the ‘numinous’ kinds of religiosity promulgated by humanistic or existentialistic philosophies tends to be not God, but man [italics added]”. In this section I do not explore beyond the internalised G-d representation, nor make comments regarding my personal views on the ultimate reality of G-d, yet I include these points here concerning Spero’s religiosity in order to demonstrate again that the psychoanalytic approach—if utilised appropriately—may hold some primacy for religious, and even for Charedi, Jews.

Object relations theory as applied to religion holds that the ego forms a relationship with an internal G-d object. This process begins with precursor religious objects, a term highlighting “… the disposing nature of certain early childhood experiences and representations toward what may later take the form of adult theology or religious practices” (Spero, 1992, p. 5). Family relations, accordingly, form the basis (but certainly not necessarily the culmination) of the G-d image, even prior to an individual’s exposure to institutionalised religion (St. Clair, 1994, p. 12). Importantly, these precursor objects and their mature adult forms are not to be reduced—as they have been by many psychological/psychoanalytic perspectives on religion and G-d, including at times by Freud—to a “pathological endopsychic product”. Rather, and I quote Spero (1992, p. 72) at some length here, for his summary conveys the essence of the object relations approach to religion:

The key object relational contribution lies in its perspective that an “object”—in our case, the personal god concept or representation—is not merely a product of psychological development, but also enters into relationship with and promotes the development of the
IV. Analysis

4.6 Towards A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Charedi Phenomenon

The consensus among these authors is that whether or not one adopts a highly structured, formal religion, some intrapsychic paradigm (what I term a “precursor”) for a deity concept must form early in life as a result of natural developmental processes. This precursor religious object—which may debut as a teddy bear, a mythic hero, or the hazy image of a grandfatherly face behind the clouds—will tend to be healthy if one’s concurrent and overall object relational functioning is healthy; destructive if otherwise… though it is not inevitable that it will eventually take the form of God.

Underlying Charedi society and its lifeworld is indeed a religion that is highly structured and formal. The key point I wish to make here regarding that religion is that it—in its specifically Charedi form—represents a particular developmental stage in the process of relationship formation between self and the G-d object. To discuss in more detail which particular developmental stage the Charedi phenomenon constitutes requires, of course, a transformational model of this relationship between self and the G-d object; several such models, as outlined by Spero (1992), will shortly be presented. Situating the Charedi phenomenon within any particular model, however, is a limited exercise, for clearly such models are one (or at best two or three) dimensional, whereas any observable religious phenomenon represents an external manifestation of multidimensional relationships between self and intrapsychic objects, the G-d one presumably foremost among them.

What is more important, therefore, than such putative models is the actual perspective itself; construing the Charedi phenomenon as one possible stage in an unfolding relationship, that continues to undergo development and transformation, and also, in the words of Spero (1992, p. 70) “possible fixation and arrest in such development”. Indeed, the object relations perspective in particular concerns itself with developmental trajectories and with models of how stages or phases thereof are negotiated by the individual (St. Clair, 1994, pp. 12-13). With this approach in mind, the ethnographic material presented earlier in this thesis, of the type that describes certain attitudes and behaviours of different Breslov Chasidim as falling along a spectrum—in domains including, for example, dress,

---

46 As an entity “entering into relationship” and “promoting development”, it may well be more correct to call the G-d object—and others similar to it—subjects rather than objects, for they seem to demonstrate intentionality, desire, and an intrinsic psychic energy (S. Job, personal communication, 2015). In a similar vein, St. Clair (1994, p. 12) quotes Ana-Maria Rizzuto, a key scholar in the object relations/religion field: “The image or representation of God has all the psychic energy and dynamics of a living person”.

270
conceptions of the leader of the community the Rav, attitudes towards non-Jews, and adherence to the Torah worldview to the exclusion of the modern secular one—may now be understood in a new light. This spectrum of attitudes and behaviours correlates with the aspects—themselves subject to ongoing transformation—of the relationship between an individual’s self and their G-d object, and therefore varies (sometimes radically) across different persons, even within the same religious community.

Chapter 3.7, for example, discusses the practice of hitbodedut—secluded meditative prayer—and the various contexts in which it was carried out by different Breslov Chasidim. These contexts ranged from a quiet room in the middle of the day, through to crying out to G-d in the forest in the middle of the night. The particular forms that each individual is attracted to (or possibly repelled by) are, I suggest, in large part a consequence of that individual’s G-d representation; this internally represented object delineates the behaviours that are understood by that individual as being required in order to connect with, appease, please, and otherwise worship G-d. Indeed, each practitioner’s fundamental grasp of what it means “to worship” G-d through prayer will be dictated by their relationship with their G-d object. In this regard, Meissner (1969, p. 182) writes:

In this activity [prayer], the believer immerses himself in the religious experience in a more direct, immediate, and personal way than in any other aspect of his religious involvement… The God he prays to is not ultimately the God of the theologian or of the philosophers, nor is this God likely to be in any sense reconcilable with the God of Scripture. Rather, the individual believer prays to a God who is represented by the highly personalized transitional object representation in his inner, private, personally idiosyncratic belief system…

One might say that in prayer the individual figuratively enters the transitional space where he meets his God-representation [italics added].

Spero (1992, pp. 64-65) summarises in tabular form Meissner’s stages of development of “faith cognitions” alongside—serving as comparative anchors—key psychoanalytic developmental progressions, including Freud’s psychosexual and Erikson’s psychosocial stages. According to St. Clair (1994, p. 31), Meissner’s work is largely based on the idea of matching modes of religious experience to different levels of childhood development. Using this table as a preliminary and fairly simplistic framework, the Charedi phenomenon is best described by Meissner’s third stage, of “dependence upon terrifying god image; submission; animism, magic”. According to
Spero (1992, p. 64) this stage is concurrent—in a sequence of stages of self-other differentiation that he delineates—with “grandiose self, idealized parental imago” (it also corresponds to Freud’s late oral, as well as Erikson’s “trust versus mistrust”, phases). Charedi submission to a terrifying G-d image has been discussed at some length in the first psychoanalytic perspective (based on Richter, 1984) presented above, as has been (in Chapter 4.5) the Charedi mindset that idealises the Father and all of His actions—that is, “idealized parental imago”—declaring them to embody a perfection that is often incomprehensible to the ordinary human mind. Spero’s inclusion of the label “grandiose self” for this developmental stage is consistent with my observations in the field and discussions herein of Charedi conceptions of chosenness (Chapter 4.2) and the grandiosity arising thereof.

In a more comprehensive and sophisticated model than that based on Meissner, Spero (1992, pp. 66-69) sketches his own outline of separation-individuation subphases, each one correlated—as aspects of “religious transformation”—with descriptions of Quality of Relationship with Religious Community and with Quality of God Concept. The first subphase of this model is defined as “Symbiosis: State of psychic undifferentiation; pervaded by sense of ‘omnipotent fusion’”, indicating that, according to this schema, the human being at the commencement of his or her journey in this world is undifferentiated from the mother, and has yet to establish an internal relationship with any object. Merkur (1999, p. ix), in his discussion of mystical states, rejects this idea that unitive and apparently undifferentiated (in terms of the self and its objects) sublime religious states may be explained as a regression to infantile modes of ego functioning, of the type described by this first of Spero’s subphases, Symbiosis. Merkur (1999, pp. 53-54) argues—and also brings experimental psychological evidence in support—that this is because there is no neonatal state of non-differentiation to which to regress; according to him, the theory of infantile solipsism is a myth. Interestingly, the Chasidic emphasis on bitul (nullification of the ego; see Chapter 3.4)—regardless of whether that tradition understands the newly born child (or indeed, the foetus) to be undifferentiated and experiencing a sense of “omnipotent fusion” or not—appears to be a project seeking to manifest just such a unified state, in which there is no more Father, nor human, but only Being, which is G-d.

Regarding any effort to understand the Charedi lifeworld in terms of Spero’s subphases, it must be emphasised again that such a framework—no matter how insightful and detailed—is at best an impoverished abstraction of a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. Furthermore, Spero (1992, p. 63) aptly cites Piaget’s notion of “horizontal décalage… that pockets of earlier levels of functioning may persist for a time simultaneous with ongoing development within a stage”. Spero’s
IV. Analysis

4.6 Towards A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Charedi Phenomenon

model of religious transformation appears to be particularly appropriate for illuminating the phenomenon of ba’aley tshuvah in the Charedi world; secular Jews who have become religious. In a relatively short space of time—in some cases, several years—such an individual may traverse almost the entire gamut of subphases as delineated by the model; in other cases, however, the individual’s development (that is, their relationship with their G-d object) becomes fixated or arrested, and he or she may abandon the explicitly religious endeavour altogether. Much of the ethnographic material presented previously in this thesis relating to ba’aley tshuvah is highly congruent with Spero’s model. Below are five such ethnographic excerpts; the first one from Chapter 4.1, and the remaining four from Chapter 4.5 on the “Phenomenology of the Religious Experience”:

(1) I suggest, then, that much of the self-regard of the typical Breslov Chasid (and more generally, Charedi Jew), and especially the ba’al tshuvah, is tied up in this obsession; a self-regard contingent upon self-perceptions of how one is fulfilling (or shirking) the work of the mitzvot. The particular brand of guilt that may arise from such a psychological position is discussed…

(2) I was, to use a term frequently employed by Breslov Chasidim in this context, “in orot (lights)”. This experience is said to be especially typical of ba’aley tshuvah (secular Jews who have become religious) in the early stages of their “return” to religion, and particularly in the context of formative events and experiences, such as the Uman pilgrimage indeed constitutes.

(3) Chapter 3.1 estimates that approximately fifty percent of the Breslov community in Safed are ba’aley tshuvah. One common and defining characteristic of the “journey of return” to G-d typical of such individuals, when he or she chooses to undertake it in a Charedi context, is a significant severing of secular social ties that the individual previously held. Several secular Jewish friends commented to me on this phenomenon, from their own personal experiences with people who were previously their friends. One religious (non-Breslov) and particularly insightful friend in Safed explained the topic well, remarking that when fresh ba’aley tshuvah join a Charedi yeshivah (similar to a kolel, but for unmarried men), they are typically greeted with a certain prevailing attitude—with variations, of course, across different yeshivot—that they themselves come to adopt. This attitude holds that everything that occurred in their lives up until that point indeed constituted the Will of the Almighty, in order to bring them to that seminal moment of taking upon themselves repentance, and a new or renewed resolution to live according to the Laws of G-d. From that moment on, however, the past is not so important; neither in its social connections, nor personal interests, nor even experiences it consisted of.

(4) Previously, even during a fairly intense process of tshuvah, I had shied away from and rejected the image of the shtetl Jew, dressed in black garb, speaking Yiddish and living compliantly and submissively amongst his often aggressive neighbours. Rather, for me, the Jews were strong men and women, Hebrew-speaking people of the desert, who dressed in bright colours and were intimately connected to the land—to the valleys and mountains, rivers and fields—as opposed to the urban sprawl. In that moment, however, something clicked in my mind; I somehow perceived with a level of clarity
IV. Analysis

4.6 Towards A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Charedi Phenomenon

the significance and the very holiness of the whole Eastern European “thing” in the cosmic unfolding of the history of Israel. And in that moment, almost unbelievably for me, I wanted to embrace and to be a part of that “thing”—to be walking down the street dressed in black, with peyos, a shtreimel, the lot.

(5) This understanding was prompted, on that Shabbat-eve service, by the realisation that my process of tshuvah, back to a path of Torah, was probably the one greatest challenge for me in this lifetime, and indeed, what the circumstances of my life had been arranged to test me with. Our Sages suggested that in every lifetime—every cycle or gilgul that the soul passes through—each person has a unique challenge, or puzzle in a sense, that they must rise to, transcend, solve.

Returning again to the first subphase, Symbiosis, of Spero’s (1992, pp. 66-69) model of religious transformation, descriptions of Quality of God Concept for this stage include “Profound sense of union with God… perception of having sinned gives rise to intense feelings of self-annihilation”. Such destructive feelings directed at oneself, as a result of not fulfilling the mitzvot, may be compared with the “guilt” referred to in excerpt (1) above. Spero furthermore describes: “Protective, all-good God concept, largely made up of intrapsychically derived object representations or grandiose self-object representations, fuelled by narcissism”; I suggest that the religious zeal emically designated “orot (lights)”, as referred to in excerpt (2)—and recognised by Charedi practitioners themselves as being detrimental at times—arises precisely from the narcissistic and grandiose object representations that Spero refers to here, of a G-d who is all-protecting and all-providing, and with whom the individual feels a privileged (and possibly exclusive) relationship at that moment.

Following Symbiosis, the next subphase of Spero’s model is Differentiation. Here the Quality of Relationship with Religious Community aspect—in contrast with the previous Symbiosis phase which speaks of a simple sense of group membership providing the classic nurturing and protecting functions of the mother—refers to the problem of “absence of past”; being an outsider, as is indeed the case initially with ba’aley tshuvah, the individual “Becomes increasingly aware of religious traditions and knowledge but also begins to sense differences between himself and the group (absence of past); also wants, as compensation, increasingly greater self-expression and to be identified as ‘religious’” (Richter, 1984, p. 67). Excerpts (3) and (4) are primarily concerned with this issue of a shared past, or lack thereof. In the former excerpt, whilst the secular personal history of a new adherent clearly cannot be replaced with a religious Charedi one, the individual is nonetheless encouraged to make efforts to erase their irreligious past, in a figurative sense, by actively reducing their connection with and importance they attribute to it. The latter excerpt, (4), is an example of a
desire so strong to create a shared past that it led to immersion in a historical fantasy, of the type that had previously been vehemently rejected.

Finally in terms of Spero’s model, the third subphase is labelled Practicing. Here the individual’s G-d concept “Tends to fantasize God’s acceptance and approval, expressed in notions of divine providence guiding his religious odyssey” (Richter, 1984, p. 67). My account in excerpt (5) refers precisely to such a religious odyssey, construed in epic and mythic dimensions, and understood to be guided at every stage by the Will of the Almighty Himself.

Having fitted disparate ethnographic observations described in this thesis to various stages of Spero’s model of religious transformation, I am not suggesting that those observations “prove” (or disprove) that model and its particular sequence—although the relevance of this model to the ba’aley tshuvah phenomenon in the Charedi world is distinctly highlighted. Rather, this correlational exercise emphasises the developmental aspect of tshuvah; it is not—as secular outsiders often perceive—a discrete event in which the individual decides to become religious, makes radical cognitive and behavioural changes by adopting the Torah lifeworld as their own, and continues happily ever after. Rather, and as Judaism itself recognises through the concept of ratzo vashov (“running and returning”; see Chapter 4.5), the tshuvah process is a long and arduous one, entailing an ever-evolving (or stagnating, as the case may be) relationship with G-d and one’s religious community.

Charedi society as a whole, containing the sum of all such individual relationships (including both ba’aley tshuvah and those born into the religious milieu), may thus similarly be construed as an entity engaged in an active, ongoing and changing relationship with its G-d object. Accordingly, for both the religious individual and their society as a whole, object relations theory suggests that the nature of this ongoing relationship is highly congruent with the most essential intrapsychic developmental processes; those pertaining to self and other.

Conclusion: Judaism as a Fractal Structure

Spero’s halakhic metapsychology hypothesises that, since Halakhah and psychoanalysis both conceptualise the same single reality, substantial identity must exist between the “basic mechanisms, processes or objects” of each, and also between their terminologies denoting those elements (Spero, 1992, p. 95). This assertion is further supported by a core Jewish principle, that Spero (1992, pp. 105-106) cites as his third major premise in formulating this metapsychology; that all religious obligations—the mitzvot—come to rectify the personality. As such, “… there must be psychological
mechanisms of some kind deep within the structures of the law that facilitate or express such change at every level”. As one detailed example, Spero (1992, p. 110) posits an identity between the psychoanalytic concept of transference and the Halakhic concept of arevut, which denotes a legal transfer of executive power or financial obligation. The author discusses this identity at length, dwelling upon the Talmudic exegesis of one and psychoanalytic theory regarding the other, and argues that both concepts involve the activation of common intrapsychic processes.

As I immersed in the Jewish religion during the years of this research project, I began to realise the fractal nature of the Jewish tradition. That is, that almost every concept in Judaism has some identity at each of the various levels and domains of the entire system. Indeed, the Jewish religion is saturated through and through with this principle, which is also expressed by the phrase (often affirmed by various mystical traditions the world over), “as above so below, and as within so without”. In some regards, this fractal nature is reminiscent of the psychological/religious identities posited by Spero’s halakhic metapsychology, although with marked differences; his metapsychology is a novel theory of identity between two very different conceptual systems (psychoanalysis and Halakhah), whilst describing Judaism as fractal in nature implies similarity between elements within the contours of a single system (the Jewish religion). Furthermore, Spero (1992, pp. 106-110) discusses at length the definition of “identity” in the context of those two very different conceptual systems, calling for an exacting and rigorous application of the term, in order to avoid the artificial glossing-over of concepts that characterised many early efforts to build bridges between psychology and religion. I do not suggest that the identities I discuss below all meet such exacting standards; nonetheless—as will be shown through a number of examples—most Jewish elements, that may have simultaneous historical, mythological, temporal, physical, and metaphysical identities, also denote personal psychological concepts and processes. As such, a deeper understanding of those psychological concepts and processes should provide some illumination of the corresponding Jewish elements, and vice versa.

One example of such a Jewish concept is that of vessels (kelim) and light (or); according to Judaism and especially its Kabbalistic tradition, these were key components in the Creation of the world, involving G-d’s fashioning of the vessels, the pouring of His light into them, the breaking of those vessels—as they were unable to contain that light—thereby producing the qlipot, or impure shells, and so forth. Chapter 3.3 discusses these two terms, vessels and light, as also denoting different domains of Torah study, and also, importantly, as psychological manifestations. It is often emphasised in the Breslov kolel, for example, that a man needs adequate vessels to contain his light; an individual who is “in orot”, as mentioned in the section above, is one who has built up too great a light to the
IV. Analysis

4.6 Towards A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Charedi Phenomenon

neglect of his vessels, an initially uplifting yet ultimately dangerous situation. Furthermore, as with the cosmic *qlipot* of Creation, each individual also has their personal shells, which are essentially the garb of the Evil Inclination (*Yetzer Hara*), influencing that person’s thoughts, speech and actions.

The exodus from Egypt is a seminal event in the Jewish religious consciousness, representing a journey from bondage into freedom on the national level, and celebrated annually at Passover. Importantly, however, as discussed in Chapter 4.5, Passover and the exodus are also *personal* events, denoting a psychological liberation from the Evil Inclination and its influences. In another classic example of fractal structure, Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari) taught that the ten plagues that preceded the exodus are also representative of the stages of childbirth. The Ari charts the parallels between the plagues and childbirth; for example, “The first plague was that of blood, for the womb cannot open without bleeding first”, and:

The analogue of the plague of darkness [the ninth plague] is as follows. It is known that during the first trimester, the fetus is in the lower chamber of the womb, during the middle trimester, it is in the middle chamber, and during the last trimester, it is in the upper chamber. At birth, it rolls down and dwells in darkness and great pain.

Parturition is analogous to the exodus itself (Wisnefsky, 2006, pp. 259-260).

Chapter 3.6 discusses the concept of *chametz* and *matzah*; the former is the “leaven”—for example yeast—that allows foodstuffs such as bread to ferment and rise, whilst the latter denotes the thin wafer bread that the Israelites baked to sustain them as they fled Egypt, in such haste that the dough did not have time to rise. In terms of their *psychological* identity, these concepts were explained in this thesis as follows: “The *chametz/matzah* dichotomy, however, extends far more deeply in its symbolism than mere commemoration; bread and its leaven represent sin, pride and the Evil Inclination, whilst the light, unleavened *matzah* signifies freedom and liberation from such external influences, and from the ‘ego’…”

In the introduction to the present chapter, the multi-faceted manifestations of Amalek were discussed, as a historical and physical man, a mythological figure, a metaphysical concept, and as the psychological manifestation of the Evil Inclination. In another example of fractality, Haman, the evil Persian vizier of the Purim story (see Chapter 3.10), being the heir of Amalek, is similarly regarded. A Jew is *Halakhically* instructed to become so inebriated on Purim that he is unable to use his intellect to discern between dual opposites, to the extent that “he does not know the difference between cursed
be Haman and blessed be Mordechai [the Jewish hero of the story]” (Talmudic tractate Megillah [7b]; Tauber, undated).

The arrangement of prayer services also reflects the fractal structure of the Jewish religion; as discussed in Chapter 3.3, the Shacharit morning service consists of four major stages, each corresponding to the four major physical structures of the Biblical Temple in Jerusalem, and each in turn denoting the four Worlds as set out in the Kabbalistic tradition. The first stage is “Offerings” or “Sacrifices”, corresponding to the Temple Mount and to the lowest World, of Actualisation (asiyah). The second consists of the “Psalms of Praise”, corresponding to the Courtyard of the Temple and to the World of Formation (vetzirah). The third stage contains the Shema prayer together with its blessings, symbolising the Holy Chamber of the Temple and the third World, of Creation (briyah), whilst the fourth stage is the amidah, denoting the Holy of Holies—the Inner Chamber of the Temple—and corresponding to the highest World, of Emanation (atzilut) (The Roadmap to Prayer: Lesson 2, 2005, pp. 14-16). Once more, each of these four stages also have psychological equivalents; they constitute an inner journey of ascent, this being the proper manner in which to approach the Almighty—as one might approach a king—beginning with offerings, praise and thanksgiving, continuing to expressions of love and obedience, and finally, when the practitioner has raised themselves to an ideally lofty frame of mind, experiencing communion and making supplications as required.

The temporal dimension is also conceived of by Judaism in fractal terms. The various parts of the day, reckoned from one sunset to the next, are understood to possess different metaphysical properties. As was explained to me by religious teachers, in the first half of the night, for example, the Evil Inclination is understood to be in ascent, whilst from midnight onwards, conversely, the Shekhinah—the Glory or Divine Presence of G-d—“rules”. This understanding affects night-time religious activities, including prayer practices and meditations (such as hitbodedut), in order that each practice may be undertaken at the most auspicious time. Similarly, the seven days of the week each possess certain attributes, and are correlated with particular Sefirot (Emanations), as are the twelve months of the year, in a corresponding fashion. Put differently, each month has certain aspects in ascent and others in descent; those cycles are repeated more locally across the days of the week within each month; and repeated yet again at a lower level of resolution, throughout the hours of a single day.
Another key temporal concept in Judaism is the Shabbat, surveyed at length in Chapter 3.5; Shabbat occurs every week, but is also a fundamental (perhaps even the fundamental) concept in terms of “cosmic time”. Judaism understands the world to run along a seven thousand year cycle; each millennium corresponds to a day of the week, and each such corresponding millennium/day pair share common attributes. The current Jewish year is 5775, a few centuries shy of 6000, which represents (since the first millennium of counting, from years 0 to 999, was equivalent to Sunday) the beginning of the millennial Shabbat. The present era is often spoken of, therefore, as being akin to Friday afternoon, with its hope and excitement—just as religious Jews tend to feel on every Friday of the more mundane, weekly variety—regarding the forthcoming holy millennium. Other Kabbalistic teachings speak of six cosmic eons, each 7000 years long, after which the cosmic Shabbat (and presumably ultimate redemption) will arrive. These examples illustrate that Jewish time is divided and subdivided into structures that repeat themselves at all levels of the whole.

One of the best examples in Judaism of fractality, and also of the psychological significance of apparently mystical and highly abstracted concepts, is the counting of the Omer; the forty-nine days between Passover and Shavuot (the Festival of Weeks). The Jewish tradition understands each of these days to be a manifestation of two combinations of the seven lower Sefirot—those seven being Chesed (Compassion), Gevurah (Strength/Discipline), Tiferet (Lovingkindness), Netzach (Eternity), Hod (Glory), Yesod (Foundation), and Malkhut (Kingdom). Day one of the Omer is accordingly “Compassion in Compassion”, day two “Strength/Discipline in Compassion”, day three “Lovingkindness in Compassion”, day eight “Compassion in Strength/Discipline”… and day forty-nine is “Kingdom in Kingdom”. Each of these days is dutifully counted and blessed; day fifty, finally, is Shavuot, when the Torah was given upon Mount Sinai.

Crucially, each of the forty-nine days of the Omer, along with its Sefriotic identity, corresponds to a particular character trait, that the devotee is to work to rectify during that day. Whilst the exact psychological equivalent of each particular Sefriotic combination may vary between the many books and guides that have been written on the subject, the principle is always the same: the forty-nine days constituted for the Israelites in the desert a journey of rectification of the character traits (the midot), and were essentially a spiritual ascent to prepare them for the giving of the Torah on the fiftieth day. The modern-day Omer period—repeating itself yearly—is understood by Breslovers and other Charedi Jews as being equally important as its Biblical equivalent; as a time for self-improvement and rectification. The psychological intentions and practices that these adherents aspire to during the Omer reflect this understanding.
Numerous examples have been given above illustrating the fundamental idea that most of Judaism’s conceptual elements appear to be abstracted forms that may be manifested at different levels of reality; this idea is highly reminiscent of Plato’s theory of Forms. Acknowledging the repeating structures that such a framework gives rise to, I have referred to it as the fractal nature of Judaism. The Jewish religion, however, would argue that this fractal nature belongs not only to Judaism, but to the entirety of reality as a whole; that the Creator, beginning with the tzimtzum (the “withdrawal” or “contraction” of the Infinite in order to create “space” for the finitude of Creation), and proceeding through the “filters” of the ten Sefirot followed by the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, gives rise to all the forms of existence as permutations of ever-repeating structures.

Where, then, lies the template for these ever-repeating structures that underlie Creation? In other words, where is the fundamental structure of all structures? The Jewish answer to this questions is the Torah. That is, that the structures of the Torah—its letters, vowels and cantillation marks—constitute the underlying blueprint of reality. Following the PaRDeS principle (see Chapter 4.3), a seeker may attempt to read and understand that blueprint at “simple” (narrative story), “hint”, “conceptual” and “secret” (esoteric Kabbalistic) levels. The idea of the Torah as the blueprint of Creation gives rise to the principle, already quoted in the previous Chapter 4.5, that (Spero, 1992, p. 24):

…the Halakhah, inasmuch as it is the expression of God’s desire, transcends time and is immutable. Its basic structures, therefore, are not coterminous with reality as we know it and must be considered in some sense contiguous with the initial will of God to initiate those creative processes we identify with creation.

Returning to the central themes of this chapter, the discussion has sought—based on insights gleaned during fieldwork and research, as well as drawing on inspiration from Spero’s halakhic metapsychology—to show that the mechanisms, processes and objects of the Jewish religion repeat themselves at various levels, including, importantly, at the psychological one. This idea of Judaism as a fractal structure is a valuable concept for understanding the religion as a whole, and should present fertile possibilities for further illuminating the psychological and social realities that it underlies.

***
V. Conclusion

> There is something eternal in religion, then, that is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively cloaked itself.

Durkheim (2001 [1912], p. 322)

Conclusion

The title of this thesis—*Digging the Well Deep*—was inspired by a parable related to me by a religious (non-Breslov) friend in Safed, a parable that according to him has its origins in the Sufi tradition. The story speaks of a Sufi master who comes upon a man in the desert, surrounded by many shallow holes that he has just dug, yet desperately digging another. The master asks of him, “What are you doing?”; the man responds, “I’m digging for water”. “Why, then, have you dug so many holes?” The desperate man answers, “I didn’t find water in any of them, so I kept trying to dig in new places”. The Sufi master pronounces: “Forget about digging so many holes; choose one spot—any spot—and keep digging until it yields the water you’re searching”.

This story is reminiscent of some of the key aspects of the Charedi phenomenon, in particular the pursuit of absolute obedience to the Will of the Almighty through a striving for zero degrees of freedom. Such a pursuit demands absolute faith; always to keep going—no matter how many doubts arise—until the sweet water is found. The Sufi story also captures the flavour of how religious Judaism tends to perceive itself; as the saga of a people embarked upon a cosmic journey, involving immense hardships, until they finally reach the transcendence (“redemption”) that has been sought for so long.

The Charedi phenomenon constitutes an example of one particular and remarkable type of relationship that human beings pursue with the Deity. It is characterised by the aforementioned striving for perfection in the adherent’s life—essentially obedience to Him through strict observance of what are perceived to be His ordinances; by a demonisation of the non-Jewish or non-religious *other*; and by a radically different understanding of history and causality compared to typical secular conceptions. In exploring psychoanalytic perspectives on this phenomenon, I have suggested, firstly, that the Charedi lifeworld may be understood as a particular type of response to the feeling of impotence in the face of the Infinite, a feeling that all individuals and all societies are bound at some point to grapple with. Secondly, the Charedi phenomenon—whilst acknowledging that neither the Breslov community in Safed, nor by any means Charedi society as a whole, are homogenous groups—
may be construed as a specific developmental stage in the process of relationship formation between self and the G-d object.

In this thesis, essentially, a bridge has been built between fieldwork and ethnographic description, and subsequently between ethnographic description and theory; importantly, that theory (for example, when discussing the “Charedi phenomenon” in the previous chapter) has been asserted for the Charedi lifeworld as a whole. The matter of my own grappling with Judaism as a personal spiritual path—the difficulties posed to the present research project as a result, and conversely and especially, the resultant ethnographic and experiential depth that that grappling has enabled—have been discussed in Chapters 1.2 and 1.3, and are revisited in the concluding section of this present chapter as a “Personal Afterword”. This matter of my personal journey and its impact on the anthropological research aside, there are three major issues—which might be called “methodological”—that should be taken into account in regards to the material that constitutes this work, and that likely weaken some of those aforementioned theoretical bridges.

All three issues relate to the population group to which most of the friends whose data informed this thesis belonged; they were mostly Breslovers, almost all males, and in large (but not total) part ba’aley tshuvah—secular Jews who had become religious. The issue of men and almost no women informing this study has already been discussed in Chapter 1.3; I do not suggest for a moment that the anthropological picture is complete with men only, simply that—due to the highly segregated realities of Charedi society—I was able to paint only one half of it. It is indeed possible (although not necessarily so) that the experiences and beliefs of Breslov women, in domains that were emphasised in this thesis—including attitudes towards the State of Israel and its military, conceptions of the head Rabbi of the community, approaches to prayer and the resultant phenomenological experiences thereof, and many more—are in some ways significantly different to the experiences and beliefs of the Breslov men. Accordingly, then, Parts III and IV of this thesis paint an incomplete picture; I suggest, however, that only a woman would be able to immerse in the female half of Charedi society to the extent required to complete that picture.

Most, although by no means all, of the Breslov friends who informed this thesis were ba’aley tshuvah. I believe that this was a direct result of the rapport that would often and quickly form between myself and such people, as a result of mutual recognition of shared mindsets, common experiences, and similar religious challenges. Whilst the tshuvah phenomenon constitutes an entire subject of enquiry in and of itself—and has been explored from various angles herein—it is not entirely reflective of the Charedi phenomenon as a whole. Certain particularly polarised ideations and practices—for example,
the wearing of tefilin outside of the morning prayer service (Chapter 3.2), or the conception of the Rav of the community in Safed as being in direct succession, in a line including the Ba’al Shem Tov and Rabbi Nachman, to the soul of Moses himself (Chapter 3.4)—are associated especially with ba’aley tshuvah. Conversely, other “extreme” positions, such as attitudes towards the State of Israel and its military (Chapter 3.3), or adherence to the cosmology of the Torah lifeworld (Chapter 4.5), are certainly not more prominent amongst ba’aley tshuvah compared to those who have been born into the Charedi lifeworld; if anything, I suggest that regarding these topics, previously non-religious Jews who have become religious are perhaps more accommodating of secular positions. Therefore, I simply note here that much—although by no means all—of the ethnographic material originated from ba’aley tshuvah, and that the discussions and conclusions within this work may be accordingly inclined.

Finally and importantly, in this thesis I begin for the most part with a small Breslov community in Safed, and proceed to extrapolate to the Charedi lifeworld as a whole. At each point in this progression there are uncertainties as to its validity; for example, would comparable findings be reported for other Breslov communities, such as the ones situated in the Mea She’arim religious stronghold in Jerusalem, or those located outside of Israel, especially in the United States? And what about concerning a different Chasidic group, such as Chabad? And, importantly, would similar conclusions be drawn regarding the non-Chasidic Mitnagdim, who make up a substantial proportion of Charedi society, or regarding Mizrachi (Middle Eastern and North African) Charedi Jews? The answer is, of course, that in some cases yes, but in other cases no. I argue that the key characteristics that I have described and discussed regarding the “Charedi phenomenon” do hold true for Charedi society as a whole, but that some of the specifics may not. For example, I understand that the emphasis on bitul—nullification of ego—is a particularly Chasidic one, and may not be similarly emphasised by Mitnagdim practitioners. Accordingly, the discussions and conclusions of this thesis are especially relevant to the Breslov Chasidic group, followed by the Chasidic lifeworld more generally. They are applicable only more cautiously, in terms of their particulars, to the Charedi world as a whole.
V. Conclusion

Personal Afterword

Regarding his own work with a Breslov community in Israel, Shatil (1993, p. 12) writes: “…from afar, as an observer, one cannot hear the details of the song, yet from close by, as a participant, you fall prisoner to its magic”. In some sense, at times I willingly fell prisoner to the magic of the Charedi song, and this is what allowed me to write this thesis in the manner that it is written.

Through most of the five years of work on this doctoral project, the fundamental question that impelled me onwards through a gamut of personal, multi-faceted grappling with my “God trip” (as I came to call it) ran basically as follows: is the Jewish tradition, for myself, the path to ultimate liberation or ultimate slavery? In leaning towards the former mode of thinking, I perceived a spiritual path embedded by the Creator within His Creation, a tradition containing within it cosmic truths about Being and Reality, and about the purpose of humanity in the world—ranging from understanding that purpose at a metaphysical level, and through to the simplest ethics of action in daily life as dictated by the Halakhah.

In the latter mode—of perceiving Judaism (and similar religions more generally) as an ultimate slavery—I comprehended the tradition as a structure that is able to replicate itself effectively from generation to generation, using the fundamental and ever-present human thirst for meaning-making in order to bind its adherents to a series of sometimes bizarre beliefs and practices, customs (for example, kosher dietary requirements and Torah reading) that are themselves the mechanism of its replication in the sociocultural medium. I understood those customs, for whomever adhered to them, to be limiting the possibilities of their human self-realisation and range of experiences on the one hand, and through the kinds of cognitions those beliefs and practices fostered (particularly racial exclusivity and a polarised worldview of good versus evil), as constituting one direct obstacle to an authentically inclusive human community—as might be imagined in an idealist vision—on the other. In this mode of thinking, the Jewish tradition became anathema to me.

In swinging like a pendulum between those two worldviews (a swinging very typical of religious and mystical seeking generally, and a subject that many Jewish texts dwell upon at length; as discussed, ratzo vashov), it was appropriate that the Charedi lifeworld should become the crux of my investigations and the central topic of this thesis. This is because that lifeworld appears to be a paradox of coexisting opposites. On the one hand, the Charedi ethos is probably the most dismal example of closed-mindedness, insularity, primitive thinking and regression in Jewish society today. Yet on the other, beneath what appears to be a shroud of fear and arrogance, exists a core of glittering diamond,
personified in the Jewish mythology—and possibly in historical reality—by figures such as the Ba’al Shem Tov. Ultimately, the promise of that glittering diamond is the primordial desire of every sentient individual: *liberation* and *realisation*, in the fullest sense that we can grasp those terms as limited human selves.

As with all dichotomies, one begins to intuit that there is a transcendent level that encompasses them both; the synthesis to the thesis and the antithesis. That transcendent level is supplied in this case by Carl Jung (1954), through the profound illumination he conveys in *Answer to Job*. A fundamental and perspective-opening idea that Jung, almost casually as a taken-for-granted precept, applies in his book is that every religion and tradition is born from—and, indeed, represents an ongoing articulation of—the interaction of a particular sociocultural entity’s consciousness and the Divine consciousness. As such, the mythologies, texts and other cultural works that that interaction produces—corresponding, by definition, to that group’s own particular level of conscious reality—may be taken as clues and indications to the Divine Reality.

Based on this precept, Jung dives into the Biblical *Book of Job* and seems thereby able to penetrate the very mind of the Deity Itself, declaring a radical thesis: that only a broken—unintegrated—God can create a broken Creation. The search of Being for its own completion constitutes the Divine Saga, and it is truly historical; individuals evolve and attain, but each is animated by the life and breath of the particular sociocultural reality into which he or she manifests. The ongoing *transmission* of a particular vista of consciousness (along with its corresponding forms of language, philosophy and science), and indeed, of an entire lifeworld, does not occur within an individual—for they come and go—but within the sociocultural unit. Therefore, real “progress” is made, it seems, through the awakening of the individual, but it is cemented at the level of the social, for only therein lies continuity.

Each society, then, is pursuing a connection with the Infinite in its own particular mode and flavour; the emerging relationship is between God and the social entity, as much as it is between God and the individuals comprising that entity. As the religious metaphor would phrase it, He attends—in both love and destruction, Jung might add—to *all* of His creatures. Jung’s revelation was that the Deity too is doing the work of Its own integration through this very same dialogue—they are, in fact, one and the same processes. And according to Jung, one of Yahweh’s (one particular group’s conception of the Deity) finest creations, Job, was needed to prompt His own consciousness into a world-moving shift and a new horizon of Being.
V. Conclusion

For myself, religion was and is the counterforce that can hold the seams of my madness and contradictions together; Jung (1954, p. 135) gives a similar perspective, in this case for the Biblical Christian John, that could also apply to each person and his or her particular religion/cosmology: “The eye of John penetrates… into the dark abyss of those forces which his Christianity kept in equilibrium [italics added]”. At other times, religion masquerades as the very perpetrator of that madness and contradiction. It is precisely this seeming paradox that this thesis has attempted to explore (although it did not set out to do so from the beginning; that level of meaning emerged, of course, from the work itself). The exploration took place through the example of a contemporary—living and breathing—religious society in Israel, following the contours of the group’s relationship with its God and the corresponding structures of its lifeworld. The research has sought at every turn to shed light on the dichotomies and contradictions of that lifeworld, for only through such an investigation of opposites may the whole, perhaps, be rediscovered.

The word *Yisrael* may be translated as “defeating” or “triumphant” over God, and was the name given to Jacob upon his defeat of the angel with which he wrestled. One way in which Israel can be understood to have defeated God is that he (as the individual figure, or she as the nation) was able to create a world of symbolic meaning that held together the seams of Reality and allowed large lifeworlds to blossom, in terms of their grasp and articulation of the Mystery. Those worlds of meaning, in the form of several different religions (Christianity, and less directly, Islam) that have the Biblical reality as their foundation, still inform the metaphysical, cosmological and indeed practical realities of a large proportion of the world’s population today. In that sense, every individual and society defeats God… until, of course, God defeats them.

The innovation that Israel produced several thousand years ago was not monotheism, which is sometimes glibly attributed as a novel development of the Abrahamic religions. Other traditions, contemporaneous or older, had as their fundamental precept the Oneness of all things and the intuition of a single Highest Principal, encompassing Being and non-Being and all things besides. Rather, the Abrahamic contribution was its articulation of a vision of (as well as a practical pathway to) a *personal*, direct human connection with that Highest Principle; the idea that that Will is embedded in all dimensions of a person's life, that It operates with providence, and that It *consciously* directs all of Reality. It is—under this conception—a living, breathing God, who hears the cries of its individuated and constricted godlets.
Many people, from all parts of the world and belonging to all traditions, desire that sublime yet elusive faith—that once received, bestowed, self-generated, or whichever metaphorical verb is used to denote that state and the means by which it arose, becomes like a drug, intoxicating—yet few are able to sustain and stand in it. Most stumble and crawl, sometimes touching, often missing, and indeed, as the Torah itself regales, this is the entire story of Israel. In Safed I met and befriended—ultimately as sources of great good fortune, learning, and blessing to myself—a group of people who stood more than they fell.

***
V. Conclusion
VI. References


VI. References


VI. References


291
VI. References


VI. References


*Pereq Shirah [Hebrew]*. (undated). Bnei Brak, Israel: Malchut.


Rabbi Natan of Breslov. (nineteenth century). *Likutey Moharan (The Anthology of Rabbi Nachman) [Hebrew]*. Israel: Keren Israel Dov Odesser.


VI. References


Finally, I acknowledge *Wikipedia* as a vital source for obtaining and/or confirming small pieces of information—dates, names, places, spellings, and similar—during the course of my writing of this thesis. That impressive communal repository of human knowledge has become invaluable to both academic and popular writers alike, and deserves due recognition.

***