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## Finding Egalitarianism in a Neo-Hasidic Reading of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov

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**ABSTRACT:** The neo-Hasidic movement—which draws on Hasidism while maintaining its position outside its lived communities—attempts to combine the best of Hasidism and contemporary progressivism. Due to this merging of values, the traditional significance of charismatic leaders, called tzaddikim (sing. tzaddik), is decentered by a desire for egalitarianism. And yet, like all earlier Jewish movements, neo-Hasidism must legitimize and locate its radical restructuring through dialogue with the traditional texts. Therefore, this essay will comb through the teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) and find therein mystical justification for egalitarianism and empowering inclusivity. It will show that Rebbe Nachman taught that every person is cosmically significant because they contain within them an “aspect” of the tzaddik and thus brings unique Torah into the world. For that tzaddik-ness to manifest, though, people must be enabled by their community to embody their full, authentic selves. Furthermore, if that ability is inhibited, the community has failed, and Creation is literally incomplete.

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When I tell my young progressive peers that I study Hasidism, many are not sure what to make of it. To them, the word “Hasidism” remains virtually unknown and only conjures images of conservatism and fundamentalism. There are many reasons for this, such as patriarchal gatekeeping, generations of assimilation, or a “throwing the baby out with the bath water” secularism, but when we crack the pages of its texts, what we find is

a treasure trove of Jewish spirituality that teaches of the underlying divinity of all things. From the first moment I was given an entry point into this world, I was hooked! Hasidic texts provided the deep spirituality I so craved and I was fascinated by the place of Hasidic leaders as the intercessors between their followers (sing. *hasid*, pl. *hasidim*) and the Divine. And yet, I never seriously sought out one of these charismatic leaders, called *tzaddikim* or *rebbeim* (sing. *tzaddik* or *rebbe*), nor was I interested in adhering to its sociologically conservative manifestation today. And so, I became one of many non-Hasidic Jews who draws on Hasidism while maintaining their position outside its communities.

Much of the project of this neo-Hasidism is an attempt to integrate the spirituality of Hasidism with contemporary progressive values, such as universalism, inclusivity, and egalitarianism. Moreover, I believe that Hasidism contains within it a mystical justification for many of these values. An interesting result of the mixing of these two value systems is that many neo-Hasidic Jews that exist in liberal, non-Orthodox Judaisms have more-or-less rejected—or at least drastically reformulated—the centrality of living *tzaddikim* in their communities.<sup>1</sup> Having been raised in individualistic and autonomy-centered cultures, they are ultimately not willing to submit to a hierarchical structure in which the *rebbe* is divine intermediary. Instead, they much prefer a model that empowers each individual to embody their full, authentic self.<sup>2</sup>

And still, like all earlier Jewish movements, this neo-Hasidism must legitimize its restructuring of the tradition through re-interpretating traditional texts. The goal of reading through this neo-Hasidic lens is less about what it meant for its orator and more about finding fodder for one's own personal spiritual life. Thus, we permit our reading of these texts to be selective. Neo-Hasidism attempts to “explore [the] material outside its own claims,” explains Shaul Magid, “enabling it to speak to contemporary issues

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<sup>1</sup> The centrality of leaders differs in different neo-Hasidic communities, but the style of neo-Hasidism that I mainly draw from here does not put much stock in the contemporary maintenance of the model. Other communities, such as Modern Orthodox neo-Hasidism and the Jewish Renewal Movement put more emphasis on central charismatic leadership, albeit in drastically different ways.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note here that this binary between submission-centered and empowerment-centered traditions is not as clear cut as I have made it out to be and many traditional *Hasidim* find empowerment through the submitting to the tradition or the *rebbe*.

and concerns.”<sup>3</sup> Considering this, our current project is to use a neo-Hasidic hermeneutic to locate a justification for this egalitarian democratizing in Hasidic texts themselves and to explore the possibility of a textual replacement for a living rebbe. We will specifically be looking at the teachings of Rebbe Nachman ben Simchah of Breslov (1772-1810). A close reading of the 34<sup>th</sup> teaching in his book *Likkutei Moharan* will provide us the textual grounding to develop a model of community that is centered not around a charismatic leader, but egalitarian inclusivity and empowerment.

### **A Close Reading of *Likkutei Moharan* 34.4**

Rebbe Nachman was contentious in his own time for his radical and innovative theology that differed from many of the other surrounding Hasidic leaders. In fact, Rebbe Nachman viewed the other Hasidic teachers around him so poorly that he declared himself to not only be a tzaddik, but the one true *tzaddik ha-dor* (tzaddik of the generation). While he saw himself as the Moses of his generation, he claimed that most other self-proclaimed tzaddikim around him were various degrees of charlatans. With this context in place, looking to Rebbe Nachman’s teachings might seem a peculiar place to locate our egalitarian impulse, and yet when one stumbles into *Likkutei Moharan* 34.4 one is struck by its implications.<sup>4</sup> He teaches that,

Each and every Jew possessed an aspect of “a tzaddik rules,” [2 Samuel 23:2] ... For in every Jew there is something precious, an aspect of a nekudah [point], which their<sup>5</sup> friend does not have. As in the story of Abaye and Abba Umna, where they answered him, “Your deeds do not match those of Abba Umna” (Taanit 21b). And with this aspect in which they surpass their friend, they influence, enlighten and inspire their friend’s heart. And their friend has to receive inspiration and

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<sup>3</sup> Shaul Magid, *Piety and Rebellion: Essays in Hasidism* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2019), xxxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, *Likkutei Moharan* will be referred to as LM.

<sup>5</sup> When quoting original sources, I have replaced all masculine pronouns that are used to refer to the general person with the non-gendered and inclusive third person pronoun.

this aspect from them, as in (Targum, Isaiah 6:3), “One receives from the other.”<sup>6</sup>

Most simply, Rebbe Nachman is asserting that every single Jew (the universalist neo-Hasid would read this as “every single person,” and I will use this phrasing going forward) contains within them an aspect of a *nekudah* of the tzaddik. The word translated as “aspect” is the oft-repeated and ever-elusive *bechina* which denotes the dimension/aspect/state of being/realm of something, and *nekudah* literally translates to “a point”. His phrasing of “a *bechina* of a *nekudah*” is meant to convey that the “tzaddik-ness” of each person is a miniscule percentage of themselves, but it is still very much present and thus must be cultivated. This tzaddik-ness within every person is that skill/ability/knowledge that is unique to them by virtue of their unique life experience, and in the moment when it becomes relevant, they act in the dimension of the tzaddik for their friend. Since this skill/ability/knowledge is acquired through their unique positionality, everyone is rendered irreplaceable: the “tzaddik-ness” they bring into the world is only possible through them.

Rebbe Nachman substantiates this claim through a radical rereading of a Talmudic story from Taanit 21b in which Abaya and Abba Umna receive different greetings from their school.<sup>7</sup> In the tale, Abba Umna receives more regular greetings, and therefore more honor. The explanation given to Abaye for the distinction in treatment is that his “deeds do not match those of Abba Umna” and thus he does not merit receiving comparable honor. This explanation is unquestionably presenting the differences between Abaye and Abba Umna as representative of his subordinate stature—but Nachman reframes this radically. In his reading, the verse teaches that everyone has different and unique abilities—not better or worse abilities—and that in those abilities where they surpass their community, they become in the “aspect of the tzaddik.” When one friend becomes the tzaddik, the other is rendered a hasid, or devotee. In LM II 7.4, Rebbe Nachman teaches that “Producing disciples is something

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<sup>6</sup> Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan Volume V: Lessons 33–48*, ed. Ozer Bergman, trans. Moshe Mykoff (Jerusalem/New York: Breslov Research Institute, 1997), 34.4, 54–57.

<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 21b.

every person can accomplish. When two people discuss the fear of heaven and one says something that enlightens their friend, their friend is considered the aspect of disciple vis-a-vis them.” But it does not end there. “Occasionally,” he continues, “the reverse happens. That is, when the later hears something from their friend, they become the aspect of ‘disciple’ in relation to their friend.”<sup>8</sup>

Rebbe Nachman is very explicitly declaring not only the *ability* of each person to act as a tzaddik, but the reality that everyone *does in fact act as a tzaddik periodically*. Put most simply, whenever “one says something that enlightens their friend,” one acts in the mode of the tzaddik. For example, in the moments where I give advice to a friend or even help my brother with his homework, I am in the aspect of tzaddik to them. These examples might seem mundane and unrealistic since here Rebbe Nachman is referring to this enlightenment happening in the context of religious conversation, but his scribe, Reb Noson of Nemirov, clarifies the matter. In his commentary, he extrapolates that this teaching refers, in fact, to all moments of life. Instead of being reserved only for moments of religious engagement, Reb Noson explicitly says that “there are times [one] receives the nekudah from their friend by means of other things they discuss. For it is occasionally possible to receive light and inspiration to serve God from their friend’s nekudah by means of everyday conversation one has with them.”<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that declaring your friend to be embodying an aspect of the tzaddik is not a small thing. The type of religious community that could live out this intention would have to be a close-knit fellowship of serious spiritual seekers who support and honor each other. In many places in his writings, Reb Noson relays that Rebbe Nachman was very focused on the formation of just such a mystical fraternity and its maintenance after his death. Reb Noson writes that as he neared death, Rebbe Nachman’s hasidim were despondent and asked, “What are we going to do? To whom

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<sup>8</sup> Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan Volume XIII: Part II, Lessons 7-24*, ed. Ozer Bergman, trans. Moshe Mykoff (Jerusalem/New York: Breslov Research Institute, 2010), 7.4, 17-19. It is interesting to note here the reverberations of this hermeneutic in our own neo-Hasidic readings which also radically reinterpret earlier writings. Perhaps selectively pulling texts from Hasidism and attempting to re-read them to make it relevant for contemporary needs is not as untraditional as it might seem at first glance.

<sup>9</sup> Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan Volume V*, 34.9, 81-83.

are you going to abandon us?” To which he replied, “What you have to do is stay together! Then you will be worthy-- and more than just worthy. You will be tzaddikim!”<sup>10</sup> Here Rebbe Nachman explicitly states that his hasidim will become tzaddikim through their clinging to one another. Moreover, he often stressed the importance of all his disciples being together with him on Rosh HaShanah, insisting that “he wanted all his followers to be with him as one [person]. No one was to be absent.”<sup>11</sup> Not only does everyone have an aspect of tzaddik in them, but it is precisely through communal engagement in a tight-knit community that one can tap into their tzaddikness and become “one person” with their friends. Community unity and strength are only possible if each individual in it is enabled to act in their aspect of the tzaddik.

### **Cosmic Significance of Each Individual**

This conception of community imparts cosmic significance on each and every individual. Without each person’s ability to tap into their aspect of tzaddik, the “one person”-ness—which is to say the unity—of the community is fractured. “Each member of Israel has a share in the Torah—a letter, or a section of a letter,” teaches a later rebbe named Tzadok haKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823-1900). “And without that letter or section,” he continues, “the Torah scroll [i.e. the totality of Israel] is not fit for use.”<sup>12</sup> Not only does everyone have unique Torah to offer the world, but if they do not live up to—or are inhibited from living up to—their full potential, then there is Torah that is kept from the world.

In the mystical understanding of Creation that understands Torah to be the literal building blocks of the world,<sup>13</sup> an individual being unable to perform to their highest capacity or be comfortable being their authentic

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<sup>10</sup> *Tzaddik: A Portrait of Rabbi Nachman by Rabbi Nathan of Breslov*, ed. Avraham Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1987), 141.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 60. To this day, the Rosh Hashana pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachman’s grave in Uman is one of the largest Jewish pilgrimages in the world.

<sup>12</sup> Tzadok haKohen Rabinowitz, *Pri Tzadik* on Parshat Bamidbar, Section 3, trans. The Institute of Jewish Spirituality and Society Summer 2021 Learning Fellowship.

<sup>13</sup> This is an ancient idea in Jewish mysticism, which can be traced back to the 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century in *Sefer Yetzira*. To learn more about this formative mystical text and how it can be used to guide meditative practice, see Jill Hammer, *Return to the Place: The Magic, Meditation, and Mystery of Sefer Yetzira* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2020).

self (whether because of discomfort, fear, circumstance, or societal oppression) means that Creation is literally incomplete. Like an incomplete Torah scroll, Rabinowitz teaches us, it is no longer functional. Berkeley-based Maggid Jhos Singer points out that sometimes being our full selves can hurt, but “it’s worth it... Because there’s one and only one of you for all of fucking eternity. And we just don’t know what our little piece of the puzzle is doing in the vast scheme of things. But if you don’t show up—if you don’t be you—then it goes undone. And the fabric of reality has a hole in it where it’s supposed to have you.”<sup>14</sup> He urges people to be themselves no matter how “weird” or “different” that might seem. A classic Hasidic story communicates the same teaching. Reb Zusya of Annipol is quoted as saying “in the coming world they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”<sup>15</sup>

The significance of this cosmology is not lost in a time when our society is attempting to be more inclusive and still continues to fall short. While I understand that Rebbe Nachman’s intentions were quite different and his tightknit community was an all-male fellowship of Jews, my own neo-Hasidic understanding of these teachings results in a radical inclusivity wherein every single individual (who agrees to be respectful of the community and its members) must be welcomed with open arms and allowed to express their full selves. Without their ability to feel comfortable in the community, their unique Torah and ability to act in the aspect of the tzaddik is inhibited, and thus Creation is incomplete. Our communities need to not only be “tolerant” of people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender expressions, and abilities, but they need to be crafted by, for, and in conjugation with them. “Tolerance is for lactose and nuts, not for people,” declares transgender Jewish activist Abby Stein. “People we celebrate!”<sup>16</sup>

And yet, not all spaces are comfortable for everyone. “There’s a tension between individualism and communitarianism,” shares Dev Noily,

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<sup>14</sup> Personal Interview with Maggid Jhos Singer, August 13, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Book One: The Early Masters and Book Two: The Later Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 251.

<sup>16</sup> Abby Stein, “Tolerance is for lactose, and nuts. Not people,” *Facebook*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/AbbysteinAS/photos/tolerance-is-for-lactose-and-nuts-not-people-people-we-celebrate-i-will-never-get-u/2711720189111396/>.



the rabbi at Kehilla Community Synagogue in Oakland, CA. “And I think that in any kind of communitarian environment, we give up a certain amount of our individual[ity]... But I don’t think we can give up our identity.” Thus, we see many examples of spaces crafted by and for specific identities, such as Svava for queer Jews,<sup>17</sup> Ammud for Jews of Color,<sup>18</sup> and Kohenet for earth-based feminist Jews.<sup>19</sup> Although part of the broader Jewish landscape, these communities serve specific populations who are often made to feel less welcome in mainstream spaces. These identity-specific spaces thereby enable more people to embody their unique tzaddik-ness. Rabbi Noily, who is queer and nonbinary themselves, sees the teachings that comes out of these spaces to be a gift to the community at large. “Generativity of the margins is real,” they share. “There’s just a different way of looking at things if their experience is a little less normative. And that is a needed perspective for the whole.”<sup>20</sup> To put this into Rebbe Nachman’s language, a society can only be “one person” if everyone is able to manifest their aspect of the tzaddik, and that is only possible if everyone has a place where they can feel comfortable—whether that be in a mainstream institution or an identity-specific community.

## Community in Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism

Besides Rebbe Nachman’s writings, we can find another example of early Hasidic emphasis on community in the close-knit Tiberian Hasidism of Rabbis Menahem of Vitebsk and Avraham of Kalisk. After relocating part of their community to Palestine, Menahem of Vitesbk attempted to maintain a connection and semblance of control over their community back in Bellorussia through the writing of letters. The absence of the tzaddik in the community back in Eastern Europe—and hence their inability to cleave to him directly—forced them to flesh out a version of *devekut*, or cleaving to God, that relied not on the community. Even the community in Tiberias itself—which had the tzaddik present—centered community more than many other Hasidic courts at the time. Interestingly, Rebbe Nachman

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<sup>17</sup> Learn more at <https://svava.org/>.

<sup>18</sup> Learn more at <https://www.ammud.org/about>.

<sup>19</sup> Learn more at <https://kohenet.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with Rabbi Dev Noily, July 1, 2021.

actually visited this community on his trip to Israel in 1798-1799 and stated that Avraham of Kalisk was the only other tzaddik to whom he “attribute[d] the quality of wholeness.”<sup>21</sup> Scholars have even suggested that “the small and elite community of the Tiberias Hasidim seems to have served as an important model for Nahman, both in the creation of the Bratslav community and in his fantasy of an ideal Hasidic brotherhood.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we can understand this stream of Hasidic thought to be another traditional predecessor for our above imagined community.

In Tiberian Hasidism’s *dybbuk haverim*, one connects to God through horizontally connecting to one’s friends (*haverim* in Hebrew) rather than vertically towards the tzaddik. Of the three ways of cleaving to God that Menahem of Vitebsk describes, the first two are quite traditional—the study of ethical texts and prayer—but the last one is uniquely horizontal. “Each one should also cleave to companions whom they trust, who seek only truth,” he writes. Through this interpersonal connection, they are able to connect to the Divine.<sup>23</sup> Rather than seeing this *dybbuk haverim* as a last-ditch attempt at cleaving to God, Tiberian Hasidism presented this speaking with a friend as a more effective tool for reaching the expanded consciousness known as *gadlut*. They taught that in moments of *gadlut*, *devekut* is within grasp, but in moments of *katnut*, or small consciousness (which is where we live most of our lives), it is more difficult. And yet even in *katnut* one can still love one’s neighbor.

Through the adherence to the commandment of loving the neighbor, *devekut* “can be gained ... through the *devekuth* of [one’s] companion and through the latter’s cleaving to God.”<sup>24</sup> This is to say that someone’s connection to God can permeate beyond them, thereby making the relationship to God—which is often conceived as individualistic—a communal affair. Rather than *katnut* being an isolationist period of

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Tsippi Kauffman, “Doctrine of the Distant Tzaddik: Mysticism, Ethics, and Politics,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 38, no. 3 (2020), 196. Here Kauffman is translating from Yaakov Barnai, *Iggerot Hasidim me Eretz Yisra’el* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben Tzvi, 1979), 91.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Weiss, “R. Abraham Kalisker’s Concept of Communion with God and Men,” in *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, ed. David Goldstein (Liverpool University Press, 1997), 160.

smallness, here we see it as an opportunity for communal devekut.<sup>25</sup> This is to say that if one has difficulty feeling God in their life, they could go to a friend and experience it through close connection to them. This cleaving to God through the transitive property can only function if each individual is seen as fully capable of reaching devekut and supports their friend in getting there. Recognizing everyone's ability to reach devekut and pass it on aligns with LM 34's assertion that everyone has within them "tzaddikness," since the tzaddik is often the distributor of expanded consciousness in Hasidism. And yet, this "tzaddikness" can only be tapped into when they are able to embody their full, authentic selves. Tiberian Hasidism teaches us that one was to do this is through close companionship.

In the history of neo-Hasidism we see many attempts to create tight-knit communities such as this, although our emphasis on "embodying your authentic self" was not yet in vogue. In interwar Warsaw, we see Hillel Zeitlin's call for Yavneh, which would be an "elite Jewish spiritual fraternity"<sup>26</sup> that returned to the "old Beshtian Hasidism" that he believed his contemporaries had abandoned.<sup>27</sup> Although he boasted, almost ironically, of the "tens of individuals in Poland" who were prepared to join the community,<sup>28</sup> it never came to fruition and his intention ultimately died with him at the hands of the Nazis. In mid-century North America, we see Zalman's Schachter-Shalomi's unrealized call to create a non-celibate Jewish monastic group called B'nai Or and Arthur Green's Havurat Shalom community in Sommerville, MA.<sup>29</sup> Havurat Shalom was formed as a countercultural rabbinical school but quickly became an adult education community which Green described as a "religious fellowship" composed of "a group of men and women involved in an ongoing religious quest."<sup>30</sup> They

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, "Hillel Zeitlin Introduction," in *A New Hasidism: Roots* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Hillel Zeitlin, "What Does Yavneh Want (1924)," repr. in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Zeitlin, "What is Yavneh? Untitled Manuscripts, ca. Mid-1920s," repr. in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, "Toward an 'Order of B'nai Or': A Program for a Jewish Liturgical Brotherhood (1964)," repr. in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, 240-257.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Green, "Havurat Shalom: A Proposal," in *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship in Theory and in Practice*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1972), 149.

learned together in a group that was most specifically like the kind of intentional community we discussed above. Reflecting on its formation in a recent interview, Green said that despite founding it, he tried to be “just another voice in the community” and empower all the members to co-create the space.<sup>31</sup>

And yet, despite these attempts, none of these communities lasted in the way their founders intended and today we see their students still making similar calls.<sup>32</sup> It is also important to note that the egalitarian impulse in these communities was never originally centered around questions of gender, sexuality, or race, which are so relevant in our time. It was not that people were not pushing for these changes, but just that the mostly male founders of these communities were not listening to these calls. The egalitarianism they were striving for was one of dissolving the traditional rebbe-centered hierarchy and empowering individuals—even if most of these individuals were originally still men. Although Zeitlin was already understanding mentions of “Israel” to refer not particularly to Jews, but to all people, an emphasis on gender egalitarianism was still decades away.<sup>33</sup> Schachter-Shalomi’s B’nai Or literally translated to Sons of Light, and that gendered orientation remained until 1980, when it was changed to the gender-inclusive P’Nai Or and eventually to the radically inclusive ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Lastly, although Havurot Shalom is sometimes remembered as the progenitor of modern traditional egalitarian Judaism, it was only after one of the male student’s wives, Mona Fishbane, advocated for inclusion in a prayer quorum that gender egalitarianism was made an official community guideline.<sup>34</sup>

Also in the history of neo-Hasidism, we see one formalized restructuring of the rebbe model that is strikingly like Rebbe Nachman’s: Schachter-Shalomi’s “functional rebbe.” Although he understood having a

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<sup>31</sup> Penn Libraries, “Art Green Interview,” *YouTube*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsD-2rdFR7s> (2:54:14).

<sup>32</sup> See Ebn Leader, “Does a New Hasidism Need Rebbes?,” in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. edited by Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 317-339.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Green and Joel Rosenberg, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 42.

<sup>34</sup> Penn Libraries, “One Change, Three Stories: Women in the Minyan at Havurot Shalom,” *YouTube*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcwjlbuauQQ>.

rebbe figure to be essential, he saw rebbe-ing itself as a *role* into which anyone can step. This “functional hierarchy” resulted in the identity of rebbe constantly shifting among individuals.<sup>35</sup> To justify this restructuring, Schachter Shalomi writes, “When we are playing—yes playing—Hasid and Rebbe, something good happens. I like the idea of play, and I don’t want you to think of it as ‘mere play.’ By ‘playing,’ we make sure we don’t get stuck in thinking that we always are that Rebbe. We understand that these are temporary roles that we assume for the benefit of that mutuality that we try to create.”<sup>36</sup> One is reminded of Rebbe Nachman’s teaching in LM II 7.4, where the rebbe-hasid titles shift among friends at different times. The difference for Schachter-Shalomi’s Jewish Renewal communities is the explicit possibility that this title could be bestowed on anyone, regardless of gender, race, or religion.<sup>37</sup> As time went on, this emphasis on inclusivity drawn from a syncretic neo-Hasidism became a primary component of what Renewal Judaism offers their constituency today. That Schachter-Shalomi continued to insist on the importance of the “rebbe” (albeit in a nontraditional capacity) begs the question: what place does a rebbe have in our proposed egalitarianism?

### “Rebbe From a Text”

Shortly after our central excerpt in LM, Rebbe Nachman maintains that a relationship with the rebbe is a prerequisite for the type of diffused rebbehood that we explored above. “Everyone first has to receive from the tzaddik,” he teaches, “and afterwards they will receive from each other.”<sup>38</sup> For our purposes, this “receiving from the tzaddik” need not be going to a living teacher who we uplift as cosmically significant and to whom we

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<sup>35</sup> Shaul Magid, “From Sainthood to Selfhood in American Judaism: Artscoll’s New Jewish Hero and Jewish Renewal’s Functional Rebbe,” *Modern Judaism* 32, no. 3 (November 2012): 281.

<sup>36</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Netanel Miles-Yepey, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of The Hasidic Masters* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 14.

<sup>37</sup> See Reena Sigman Friedman, “Women in Jewish Renewal,” in *The Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); and Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan Volume V*, 34.8, 75.

submit our will; instead, it can be uplifting a text as the source of wisdom—a “rebbe from a text.”<sup>39</sup>

This phrasing of “rebbe from a text” was used by Rav James Jacobson-Maisels to describe his nontraditional relationship with a later Hasidic leader named Kalonymus Kalman Schapira of Piaseczno (1889-1943).<sup>40</sup> Since the Piaseczno Rebbe was killed many years before Jacobson-Maisels was born, a lived relationship between rebbe-hasid was not possible. Therefore, turning to his texts with a neo-Hasidic hermeneutic allowed Jacobson-Maisels to develop a substantive relationship with a source of wisdom whose teachings empower him to find his own tzaddikness. Instead of this “rebbe from a text” being the authoritative top-down relationship of traditional Hasidism, Jacobson-Maisels describes it as him having “organized the way I think about and approach the world in my spiritual practice. [His teachings] become mine in many ways... I’ve developed them. I’ve changed them. Maybe [he’d] be like, ‘that’s not what I said at all!’—I have no idea. But from my perspective, I’ve sort of *internalized* them; integrated them into the way I view the world and the way I approach it, and the way I think about it... From my perspective, my teaching is very much channeling [him].”<sup>41</sup>

This “rebbe from the text” relationship is thus not only one of submitting yourself to its wisdom, but of learning the teaching deeply and internalizing it such that *it changes you and you change it*. Sometimes this internalization diverges from the original intent of the author—both in neo- and traditional Hasidic contexts—as was clear in LM 34:4’s use of the Abba Umna and Abaye story. What makes our use particularly neo-Hasidic is its position outside of traditional Hasidism and its conception of textual authority: our goal is to uncover fodder for our spiritual lives, not submit fully to its authority. An example in our current project is the caveat that the scope of Rebbe Nachman’s egalitarianism was not as all pervasive as our 21<sup>st</sup> century need, but my reading of him led me there.

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<sup>39</sup> This move to hold up the text as a replacement (or at least placeholder) is also drawing on its articulation by Shneur Zalman of Liadi in the intro to his *Likkutei Amarim*. See Schneur Zalman, *Lessons in Tanya of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*, trans. Nissan Mindel, 10th ed. vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 2017), 27.

<sup>40</sup> Personal interview with Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels, Aug. 30th, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

Additionally, this “rebbe from the text” relationship is a way to make a non-living rebbe present in the life of the hasid—something that traditional Breslov Hasidism has had to master since they never replaced Rebbe Nachman after his death in 1810. For example, Reb Noson’s entire *Likkutei Halakhot* is an ingenious way of making the “absent rebbe present.”<sup>42</sup> Within its pages, he integrates Breslov teachings into the daily rituals of a religious Jew, thereby inundating their performance with Rebbe Nachman’s presence. Although this book is 200 years old, it shows the way in which the follower can adapt the rebbe’s teaching to fit the needs of the time. Tomer Persico has also shown that the leaders of contemporary Breslov Hasidism still reinterpret and reformulate practices to fit today’s cultural dispositions.<sup>43</sup> What distinguishes this from our neo-Hasidic hermeneutic is that there is no attempt to hide our restructuring in the garb of tradition—neo-Hasidism freely admits its neo-identity.

Rabbi Ebn Leader describes this relationship to the text using the “I and Thou” language of 20<sup>th</sup> century neo-Hasidic writer, Martin Buber.<sup>44</sup> He wonders how we develop a relationship with a text without objectifying it. “What does it mean to learn the book as a Thou, rather than as an It?” Leader asks about another early Hasidic text by Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, entitled *Noam Elimelekh*. “When you do that—when you learn that way—you have a relationship...*not* with Elimelekh of Lizhensk—he died a hundred years ago!... But you are also not reading the text—the It—which is *the Noam Elimelekh*. You are learning into a relationship—a Thou relationship—with, all capitals, ‘The Noam Elimelekh.’”<sup>45</sup> This all capitals “The Noam Elimelekh” that Leader refers to is drawing on the practice in Judaism of calling an author by the name of their most important book, thereby transforming them into a person/text with whom you can interact and to whom you can look to as a source of wisdom.

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<sup>42</sup> This phrasing was used in Yoram Bilu and Zvi Mark, “Between Tsaddiq and Messiah: A Comparative Analysis of Chabad and Breslav Hasidic Groups,” in *After Spirituality: Studies in Mystical Traditions*, ed. Philip Wexler and Jonathan Garb (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 48, 60, 65.

<sup>43</sup> Tomer Persico, “Hitbodedut for a New Age: Adaptation of Practices among the Followers of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,” *Israel Studies Review* 29, no. 2 (2014): 99–117.

<sup>44</sup> See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> Personal interview with Rabbi Ebn Leader, June 14, 2021.

In his book *The Text as Thou*, Steven Kepnes explains that reading the text as a Thou means not only encountering it and affecting it, but having it confront and affect you—as we saw in Jacobson-Maisels’ “internalizing.” “Interpreting a form of spirit requires us to face the work as we face another being,” Kepnes explains. “We open our senses to it, to its particularities and to its total [whole]. We allow it to move us, to confront us, to speak to us. We try to perceive its special message and disclosure of reality. *And we also respond to it.*”<sup>46</sup> Our response to internalizing Rebbe Nachman’s teachings and attempting to make them relevant to our modern context is the impulse to create a neo-Hasidic community characterized by empowering inclusivity and egalitarianism.

## Conclusion

Neo-Hasidic pioneer Arthur Green often says that “the insights of Hasidism are too important... to be left to the Hasidim alone”<sup>47</sup> and this essay was an attempt to heed this call to accessibility by shedding light on the opportunities afforded us through “intentionally misappropriating Hasidic ideas.”<sup>48</sup> Although it might not have been Rebbe Nachman’s specific intention, our neo-Hasidic reading of Likkutei Moharan 34.4 showed the way that Hasidism can provide fodder not only for our spiritual lives, but for our ethical and moral lives as well. Through the teachings of Rebbe Nachman, we were able to design an inclusive, empowering, and egalitarian community.

As we saw, Rebbe Nachman bestowed cosmic significance on each and every person. We learned that all individuals contain within them an aspect of the tzaddik, thereby democratizing the traditional hierarchical structure of Hasidic communities. For their tzaddik-ness to manifest, though, people must be enabled to embody their full, authentic selves and if that ability is inhibited, the unique Torah that they offer the world is withheld, and Creation is literally incomplete. Additionally, Tiberian Hasidism taught us that a unique cleaving to Divinity is available through

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<sup>46</sup> Steven D. Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 25. Emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> Green and Mayse, “Introduction” in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, xvii.

<sup>48</sup> Magid, *Piety and Rebellion*, xxxviii.



communal engagement but that communities can only enable this when its members are made to feel comfortable. Lastly, since this model is attempting to be mostly horizontal, the living rebbe is replaced by a textual source of wisdom with which we attempt to have a dialogical relationship.

Although a community like the one described in the above pages can easily be designed without pulling from Hasidism, it is the tradition that is closest to my heart, and thus I am drawn towards using it as that source of wisdom. Therefore, like all Jewish innovations, we must have grounding in traditional texts, and I believe that neo-Hasidism can provide that grounding. “Hasidism is an inheritance for the entire Jewish people,” writes Rabbi Nancy Flam, and by putting our moral and ethical beliefs in dialogue with it we can uncover their mystical confirmation.<sup>49</sup> And yet, internalizing this tradition means that we are not just confirming our previously held values through selective reading but also allowing it to transform us. Once inclusivity is framed by this reading of Rebbe Nachman, it becomes clear that it holds cosmic import. Its necessity is no longer solely to make people comfortable (although, to be clear, that reason should be good enough in and of itself) but also out of a divine need that we complete Creation. And who are we to neglect that duty?

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<sup>49</sup> Nancy Flam, “Training the Heart and Mind toward Expansive Awareness: A Neo-Hasidic Journey,” in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 246.

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