Hasidic Devotional Reading and Comparative Theology

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Comparative theologians and devotionally motivated readers of interreligious studies face profound hermeneutical questions in their projects. As seekers of religious truth, there is a devotional dimension to such study. And yet, commitments outside of the tradition of the text studied may make one feel like a kind of "outsider." This study focuses upon a model of devotional reading found within the Jewish hasidic tradition. Hasidic rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno (1889–1943), building on his bedrock conviction of the essential value of the cultivation of one's own unique personhood, presents a model in which the devotional encounter with the living essence of a sacred text is intertwined with the discovery of one's own unique perspective and approach to the Divine. This living essence is a figure, the author, whose presence when encountered causes us to reconfigure our own self-understanding as well as our understanding of the Divine. I suggest that this model may provoke reflection and prove constructive in terms of the hermeneutics of comparative theological textual study, calling into question some of the assumptions of traditional study as "insider" readings, and the implications of a "devotional" approach.

Keywords: master; disciple; devotional individuation; Hasidism; tzaddik; *hermeneutics; practice of authorship; religious reading; comparative theology; interreligious reading*

Introduction: Comparative Theology and Hasidism

Comparative theology, particularly when pursued through the comparative study of texts from different traditions, must wrestle with fundamental questions about the stance of the author. Does the comparativist situate herself in a relatively detached, "objective" position[1]—or does the author place himself within a "home" tradition, owning the subjective commitments that render the description of the "other" tradition as always, to some extent, etic? Alternatively, does the comparative theologian emphasize the blurring of boundaries and definitions, or claim dual belonging?[2] At times, the implicit assumption is that the religious texts being studied have a dimension of meaning that is only available to a religious "insider," who identifies with the text and approaches it devotionally. The question is to what extent this dimension of meaning can be accessed by one who is not fully (or exclusively) such an insider.

However, even devotional reading practices within a tradition, outside of the context of comparison, may in fact recognize the need for an insider/outsider dialectic of sorts. Spiritual

[1] Termed by Catherine Cornille "meta-confessional," associated with the work of Robert C. Neville among others. See the exploration of the continuum from confessional to meta-confessional in Catherine Cornille, "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology," in *How To Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 19–36. Cf. the remarks about Neville's "elegant detachment" and the author's contrast with his own approach in Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 45–49.

[2] See the essays collected in Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), and her "Double Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions," *Buddhist–Christian Studies* 23 (2003): 43–49. Cf. also Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 155–62.

directors may feel that, together with the value of identification with the text and its author, it is important for the student to maintain and further develop her own individuality through the engagement with sacred texts. The purpose of this essay is to present one such model of devotional reading from the hasidic tradition, that of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno (1889–1943). I believe that Shapira's approach can shed original light on some hermeneutical issues in comparative theology, precisely because it originates in an intrareligious context in which issues of comparison, and scholarly objectivity, are not at issue. Nonetheless, Shapira frames reading hasidic texts as an exercise in gaining a vision of the spiritual essence of the text and its author, while simultaneously differentiating from the text so as to develop one's own uniqueness in the devotional path. Before we come to the specifics of Shapira's teaching, we must briefly situate him in the wider context of Hasidism, and the devotional attitude he takes toward its leaders, the tzaddikim.[3]

Hasidism, a pious revival movement originating among the Jews of Eastern Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth century, rapidly expanded to become a major force in modern Jewry. Although often associated—by critics and adherents alike—with archconservatism and traditionalism, scholars have recognized with increasing clarity that Hasidism must be seen as a modern movement.[4] From its inception, Hasidism was a reorientation of Judaism that placed the infinite value of the unique human personality at its center. As Gershom Scholem writes, Hasidism's "whole development centers round the personality of the Hasidic saint; this is something entirely new. *Personality* takes the place of *doctrine*."[5] It is not that doctrines disappear, of course, any more than ritual practices do. But all the elements of Judaism find their new center in the mystery of the "bottomless depths" of the personality of the hasidic saint, known as the tzaddik. The tzaddik's every teaching, ritual act, or interaction was treasured as a revelation not only of the Divine, but also of the unique, cultivated personhood of the tzaddik.

This new focus or orientation, however, is amenable to quite different forms of development. In one model, the tzaddik is almost a species apart, such a rare and unique type of individual that the vast majority of people should strive only to attach themselves to a tzaddik and then endeavor to embody, on their own level, the insights and approach of their master. In this model, the tzaddik is the head of the mystical body of his followers. This model found early and emphatic expression in Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye, an important disciple of the traditional

[3] Lit. "the righteous." This ancient and biblical word became a technical term for hasidic leaders.

[4] See David Biale et al., "Introduction: Hasidism as a Modern Movement," in *Hasidism: A New History*, ed. David Biale et al., (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1–11. The authors succinctly place the question of the interpretation of Hasidism within a broader questioning of the popular notion of modernity and secularization, which tends to conflate the former with a direct movement toward the latter. The authors conclude that "Hasidism throughout its two-and-a-half-century history represents a case of 'modernization without secularization'" (Biale et al., 11). It is worth noting that the term "secularization" here assumes a debatable definition. In Charles Taylor's phenomenological history *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), he distinguishes three senses of "secularity." The third sense he terms changes in the conditions of belief, or the tacit "background," of explicit beliefs and practices. Ibid., 2–3, 12–14, and passim; see also the references under *Secularity (3)* in the Index. In Taylor's terms, much of Hasidism could be seen as "Jewish piety under the conditions of secularity (3)." On the wider issue of Jews in modernity, see Ari Joscowitz and Ethan B. Katz, eds., *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

[5] Emphasis in original. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 344.

"founder" of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer (also known as the Ba'al Shem Tov).[6] Ya'akov Yosef's elitist division of the Jewish people into the few "men of form" (*tzurah*) and the many "men of matter" (*khomer*) made it clear that the latter were not to engage in original self-creation but rather were to allow themselves to be shaped by their inspired leaders.[7] However, a second model would see the tzaddik's development of his own unique self as *itself* a model for those who would be inspired by him to develop their own uniqueness. The tension between these two models is captured neatly in a hasidic tale, as presented by Martin Buber in "In His Father's Footsteps":

> When Rabbi Noah, Rabbi Mordecai's son, assumed the succession after his father's death, his disciples noticed that there were a number of ways in which he conducted himself differently from his father, and asked him about this. "I do just as my father did," he replied. "He did not imitate, and I do not imitate."[8]

Yet this story, presenting succinctly the model of non-imitation, or phrased positively, a "model of individuation," is still about one tzaddik learning from another (in this case, his father). Indeed, the disciples' question indicates that they cannot grasp such a model, and one senses that they are perhaps disconcerted by it. Rabbi Noah's response, in addition to its ironic model of "imitating non-imitation," contains its own ambiguity. It can be read either as opening the door for the disciples to become non-imitators, or alternatively as an explanation that cements his own special status as a tzaddik, that is to say, one marked by and entitled to his own uniqueness.

This study is focused on a hasidic tzaddik, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira,[9] who combined a pious and traditionalist way of life with an extremely heartfelt passion for the bedrock value of each person cultivating his or her unique selfhood. Shapira's own "revivalist" project strove to imbue new life into Hasidism in his day. His writings show an extensive knowledge and profound sensitivity to the textures of early hasidic thought. A gifted writer and penetrating thinker, he consistently draws on aspects of early hasidic thought that highlight the value of the unique individual. Simultaneously, he creatively reinterprets some of Hasidism's central teachings in the light of this nonnegotiable value of individuation, creating a model that I refer to as "devotional individuation." After sharing Shapira's articulation of this value, I will discuss his presentation of

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[6] See Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History*, 67–70, on the shaping of the notion of Hasidism as a movement, and the Ba'al Shem Tov as its founder, in the decades after his death. Essential biographies on the Ba'al Shem Tov include Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

[7] Cf. Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy* (New York: Schocken, 1960), 113–41 and passim. On "form and matter," see 136–37. Dresner correctly notes that the hasidic tzaddik had "not yet become an institution" in Ya'akov Yosef's lifetime (p. 132), and therefore his "men of form" are an elite sector without being communal leaders necessarily.

[8] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 2:157. N.b., this is the second half of the book, and the pagination begins again in *The Later Masters*, which was originally published as its own volume, separately from the first half of the book, *The Early Masters*. References to this compiled text will be located in the proper volume. Cf. Nahman of Kossów's anti-imitation slogan, "Pay no heed to the fathers!" (*al tifnu el ha-avot*), a pun on the prohibition against turning to occult forces (*el ha-ovot*) in Lev. 19:31, which is twice cited by Ya'akov Yosef in his *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef,* often considered the first hasidic book published. See the discussion of this in terms of the demographics of early Hasidism in Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 179–81, and n. 76 there.

[9] For an excellent study of Shapira's life and thought, which focuses on his teachings from the Holocaust years, see Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (London: Jason Aronson, 1994.)

the central reality of the tzaddik in his particular hasidic philosophy, with an eye toward its comparative implications.

In the space of this brief study, I will contrast the hermeneutics advocated by Shapira's devotional individuation model with those that emerge from a contrasting model found in a teaching by the influential early hasidic master, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810). This latter model I conceive of as "devotional impressionism," in which the disciple attempts to make himself like a blank page or, to use another metaphor employed by Nahman, like wax in order to receive the impression from the tzaddik in as undistorted a manner as possible.[10] This article thus explicitly engages in comparative analysis within one tradition. However, two issues of fundamental concern to comparative theological projects are at the heart of this article. Firstly, it engages a core hermeneutical question: To what extent should one attempt to enter the inner world of a text and/or its author? This itself has two aspects, for one may question both the possibility and the desirability of such an attempt. Secondly, the notion of the deepest core of a sacred text being a sacred personhood that one is attempting to contact through the text has deep and rich roots in many traditional devotional hermeneutics. For all of the focus on Jewish hermeneutics and midrash,[11] such forms of devotional hermeneutics in Jewish sources are not widely known, particularly their development in hasidic literature. Thus, the intratraditional analysis offered here may point to directions for future comparative theological work in the area of devotional hermeneutics.

I. The Religious Imperative of Individuation

Shapira presents a passionately argued case for the religious imperative of individuation in his spiritual journal *Tzav v'Zeruz*.[12] Here, Shapira wishes not only to describe this value, but to instill a will in the reader to strive toward individuation. To this end, he often uses the first- and second-person voices to evoke the reader's inner feelings, and to call out to the reader personally. Thus, Shapira begins by presenting a first-person voice, a person who laments "about himself," crying out "where is my free choice?" The person senses that he is trapped, unable to master himself, unable to determine his choices or his will. For Shapira, this state is not due to some evil force overcoming the person. Rather, this state is the natural result of an absence:

> Please be aware that, for every act of choice whose origin is in the one willing and not in outside forces, the necessary prior condition is that the one who is choosing exists independently. That is, he must be a particular individual differentiated [*nivdal*] unto himself, for only then may he will for himself. If the individual is not

[10] See Nahman of Bratslav's *Likkutei Moharan* (Jerusalem: Meshekh ha-Nakhal, 1996), no. 140. Note that this text reflects the complex nature of Nahman's thinking: He is also playing with the impossibility of receiving such an impression, as the tzaddik's mind is simply too elevated to be perceivable. Thus, like a wax impression from a seal, the ideal student is both a perfect "impression" of the consciousness of the tzaddik and yet a kind of opposite or mirror image of the tzaddik, just as the image is reversed from looking at the seal directly.

[11] These writings include the extensive work of Michael Fishbane, esp. *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

[12] Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, *Hakhsharat ha-Avreikhim, Mevo ha-Sha'arim, Tzav v'Zeruz* (Jerusalem, 2001), 321–87; henceforth, HMTZ. *Tzav v'Zeruz* has been translated into English by Yehoshua Starrett under the title *To Heal the Soul: The Spiritual Journal of a Chasidic Rebbe* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1995).

> particular, differentiated unto himself, rather a mere "type" [*min*], it is not possible to speak of choice or individual will in relation to him. For who is it that might choose? Other than the decrees of the collective [*ha-klal*], there is nothing here. Please, look inside yourself! Have you brought forth the authenticity of your self [*amitut atzmekha*]? Are you a particularized individual unto yourself, or just a part of a species…?[13]

Shapira goes on to emphasize that a true individual must be distinguishable not merely in a statistical sense, as one may have greater intelligence or other abilities compared to another. After all, animals can be distinguished in these ways as well, but the fastest wolf in the pack is still not an *individual* in the human sense. An individual is she who has developed a particular self not in a quantitative sense, but rather a unique quality of her selfhood that is inimitable and expresses itself in her every word and action. Thus, "a person must differentiate with a characteristic quality all his own," exhorts Shapira, adding, "He should bring forth from within a personal essence and image (*diyukon*), unique unto himself." For one who has attained this, all of her Torah and Divine service becomes an act of self-expression. All will recognize the specific mind and particular devotee behind his words of Torah and manner of worship, for they are stamped with a unique quality. Shapira concludes with a plea to the reader: "Elevate yourself from the world, and reveal your personhood separate from [being merely an example of] the species of humanity, and become a person who can choose, and [who can] worship the Divine."[14]

For Shapira, the project of cultivating one's own unique selfhood is at the very core of the purpose of human life. Whereas many "traditionalists" argued that the modern emphasis on self was a kind of idolatry and that we should focus on the worship of God *instead*, Shapira insisted that the development of one's unique selfhood is itself the most fundamental prerequisite for the worship of the Divine.

Turning now to Shapira's discussion of the tzaddik, we will see that much of it centers around the role of texts—both the role of the spiritual master in composing texts, and the manner of devotional reading that the hasid should bring to the text. We will also contrast Shapira's model of devotional reading here with that of the influential early hasidic master Nahman of Breslov, whose writings contain an understanding of devotional reading that has remarkable similarities with Shapira's, while differing from it in a most revealing manner.[15]

II. The Engraved Self

In the opening paragraphs of *Tzav ve'Zeruz*, Shapira describes the tragedy that, after a lifetime of slowly and with great effort gaining wisdom, one must pass away. If only one could begin again, and live a second life beginning with all of the insights gained during the first one. But since this is not possible, writes Shapira,

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[13] HMTZ, no. 10, 331. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.
[14] Ibid., 321–2.
[15] On Nahman's shifting thoughts about writing, reading, and the self, see David B. Siff, "Shifting Ideologies of Orality and Literacy in Their Historical Context: Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav's Embrace of the Book as a Means for Redemption," *Prooftexts* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 238–62.

> It is good for a person to record all of his thoughts. Not in order to make a name for himself as an author of a book, but rather to engrave himself [*lakh'rot et atzmo*] on paper, to preserve all of the movements of the soul, *its fallings and its risings*. All of its being, its form, its knowings and all that it acquired for itself in the expanse of its life should remain alive…[16]

This language makes it crystal clear that Shapira is interested in preserving the unique self through his writings, the individual self in its full form created through the narrative of its particular experiences. Consider: This opening paragraph could have ended with a declaration that he should record his "pearls of wisdom" for future generations, those thoughts and insights that occurred to him during inspired moments. Yet Shapira does not merely want to preserve wisdom in an abstract sense, he wants to preserve the self that he has cultivated throughout his lifetime. Thus, it is imperative that the voice of that self's fallings should be recorded as well, for it is not the impersonalized "highlights" that he wants to be preserved, but the full force of his selfhood that he wants to truly live on.

Is this narcissistic? Is such a focus on the self inherently egotistical or selfish, with the negative connotations of those terms? Is Shapira's self-proclaimed desire to live on eternally in the lives of those who learn his teachings a reflection of the hasidic focus on the tzaddik, and at odds with his call for the student to be a unique individual?

I suggest that further investigation of Shapira's thought shows that this is not the case. While the experience of the teacher's full selfhood may perhaps be temporarily overwhelming— and it must be, in the sense that the student should open to the presence of the teacher—still the result is that the student's own selfhood and sense of her own uniqueness emerge more clearly. Just as a model of wisdom or piety can evoke the same for those who witness it, the unique selfhood of the teacher (or really of any person) is a model to evoke *unique selfhood* in the student. It is only if the image of the teacher becomes frozen, static, idealized, and impersonalized that it runs the risk of being an idol with all of the negative connotations—in Jewish discourse, as in many others—of that word.

III. Encountering the Presence of the Tzaddik in the Text

In his 1929 sermon on the first section of Exodus, Shapira emphasizes the necessity of the presence of a spiritual master, termed the tzaddik in hasidic discourse.[17] This is, of course, a common theme in hasidic writings, and the development of the doctrine of the holy leader (tzaddik) has rightly received much scholarly attention.[18] Both in hasidic stories, and in homilies, the need for the presence of the tzaddik is often justified in answer to the question: "[W]hy is it necessary to travel to see the tzaddik? Are there not many holy books which one can learn in one's

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[16] HMTZ, no. 1, 321. Emphasis added.

[17] Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, *Derekh ha-Melekh* (Jerusalem, 1995), *parshat Shemot* (sermon on Ex. 1:1–6:1), 87–92; henceforth, DHM.

[18] See, e.g., Ada Rapoport-Albert, "God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present,* ed. Gershon David Hundert, 299–329 (New York: New York University Press, 1991); Arthur Green, "The *Zaddiq* as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 3 (1977): 327–47, and "Typologies of Leadership and the Hasidic Zaddik," in *Jewish Spirituality,* ed. Arthur Green (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 2:127–56.

hometown?"[19] While a variety of answers are offered to this question in hasidic literature, what fundamentally unites them is their insistence on the necessity of experiencing the presence of the master.[20] It is not sufficient to merely examine ideas in a book.[21]

Fascinatingly here Shapira, while agreeing wholeheartedly that one must encounter the presence of the tzaddik, teaches that it is quite possible to do so from a book if one knows how to approach the text. However, one must recognize the true nature of a book written by a holy author. Punning on a Hebrew word for author *(mehaber)*, Shapira states that a true author is one who is able to "join" (also *mehaber*) together heaven and earth. When such a holy author writes a book about the service of God, it is not merely a collection of scattered ideas but a vehicle through which his or her spiritual persona can be transmitted to a sensitive reader. As Shapira writes:

> A person could mistakenly think that a book has no essence of its own [*etzem l'atzmo*], but rather is merely a sort of collection of notes in one place, like a mountain which is merely the gathering together of many grains of dirt. However, this is not the case. The book has an essence of its own.[22]

This "essence" is the spiritual persona of the author,[23] which Shapira refers to as the author's *shiur komah,* his "full stature (or 'full structure')."[24] This phrase has deep roots in Jewish mysticism, which uses it to refer to the full structure of the Divine in some of the most boldly anthropomorphic texts.[25] In our context, it serves to emphasize both the form and the wholeness of this persona. It is not the "soul" of the author, in the sense of some holy essence that he was given by God. Rather, it is a "body composed of holiness" that the spiritual master cultivated over time through his service

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[19] See, e.g., the opening paragraph of Nahman of Bratslav's Lesson 19 in the first volume of his *Likkutei Moharan*. This is the main collection of Nahman of Bratslav's teachings.

[20] A story highlighted by Buber tells that Rabbi Leib son of Sarah went to the Maggid not "in order to hear Torah from him, but to see how he unlaces his felt shoes and laces them up again." See Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 1:107. A variation on this anecdote is also deployed by Scholem in illustrating the new elevation of the "character" of the tzaddik as more important than his "opinions." Scholem, *Major Trends*, 344. Assumedly, the latter may more easily be transmitted in written form than the former. The teachings of Shapira explored in this study may be seen as an argument that it is possible to access the "character" through a particular hermeneutic of reading the "opinions" and teachings, and thus to encounter the presence of the master in the text.

[21] In *Likkutei Moharan* no. 19, Nahman emphasizes that there is a great distinction between hearing the words of the tzaddik directly and hearing them from another who heard it directly from the tzaddik, how much more so if there are more intermediaries. He concludes: "But [the distinction] between one who hears from the mouth of the *tzaddik* and one who looks into a book, is a very great distinction."

[22] DHM, *parshat Shemot*, 88.

[23] It is worth noting that Shapira's emphasis on the oneness of this essence—it is "not merely the gathering together" of disparate components—is an example of his emphasis on the oneness of the human self. Further, Shapira's emphasis (as we will see shortly) that this oneness or identity is only revealed through the multiple examples of the author's insights illustrates his sense that this oneness of self can only be revealed through a narrative of particulars. Both of these points are discussed more fully in my "The Call of the Self: Devotional Individuation in the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno." Master's thesis, Hebrew College, 2017, Ch. 4, Sections V and VI.

[24] DHM, *parshat Shemot*, 88.

[25] This phrase is in fact the title given to one such early text. On *Shiur Komah* (also transliterated *Qomah*), see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 63–7, and Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 74–124, esp. 85–7. In future work I hope to trace the development of this term in hasidic works that Shapira cites, as this would surely be the more immediate source for his own usage of the phrase and its universe of associations. These include the notion of the *shiur komah* as the full structure of the inner work in constructing a particular character trait, and as referring to the Torah in all of its fullness.

of the Divine.[26] Continuing the corporeal metaphor, this *shiur komah* has parts and limbs. The different thoughts in the book should be seen not as isolated parts; rather, each one helps to reveal a portion of this "holiness body." When a sensitive reader approaches the text in search of this *shiur komah*, looking into the text slowly, carefully, and at length, eventually the *shiur komah* of the master is revealed to the reader.[27]

If one approaches the text superficially, however, looking only at "one or two" teachings, this will not occur. This Shapira compares to understanding the body through its parts, writing: "Specifically, for one who wants only to see and hear a good saying or homily, he will hear only one limb of all of the limbs. He will not have seen the full persona, and he will not have encountered the one who reveals prophecy."[28] By prophecy, Shapira clarifies, he does not mean predicting the future. Although the Hebrew prophets sometimes engaged in this, this is the trivial aspect of their profession; fundamentally, the prophets acted as a conduit to help to connect the people to God. So too, all tzaddikim and holy masters "unite Heaven and Earth." Echoing the strongest formulations of Hasidism about the necessity of the tzaddik, Shapira writes:

> The main work of the prophet was to guide Israel on the path of God, sanctifying them and drawing them close to God. For this, too, a prophet is needed. For every virtuous act of will which arises in a person of Israel, and every thought of holiness, and every type of apprehension in matters of Torah and divine service is a kind of revelation from above within the person. It is not possible for this revelation to occur except through a prophet, who is the aspect of 'the kissing of heaven and earth.'[29]

This emphatic claim of the absolute necessity of a tzaddik as the source—or better, the indispensable channel—for revelation, including every virtuous thought, act of volition, or grasp

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[26] DHM, *parshat Shemot*, 89.

[27] Ibid., 91.

[28] Ibid., 90. By "prophecy," Shapira does not intend the revelation of future events, but rather the creation (or revelation) of a bond uniting the human self and the Divine—as will be explicated shortly. The category of prophecy in Shapira's teachings is undeniably central, although easily misconstrued. For an excellent overview of Shapira's views, see Daniel Reiser, "To Rend the Entire Veil: Prophecy in the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piazecna and its Renewal in the Twentieth Century," *Modern Judaism* 34, no. 4 (2014): 334–52. Reiser challenges the sufficiency of scholarly models that divide prophecy into two types, the "ecstatic" and the "emissary." Reiser argues that this imposes a false dichotomy for many rabbinic and later Jewish models of prophecy that see some of these elements as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. This is true in a simple way; for example, when Rabbeinu Bahya discusses the prophet's transcendence of both ecstasy and the physical, he does not mean that the prophet is therefore not concerned with society and ethics, or not involved in the world. Indeed, the ecstatic experiences may inspire the prophet to emerge determined to manifest proper ethical behavior, and guide society toward an ethical living out of God's will. Shapira's views certainly challenge the aforementioned dichotomy, but in an even more fundamental way. It is not only that the prophet's ecstatic experiences inspire him to ethical behavior and instruction of others. In fact, part of the purpose of the prophet is to help others come to experience this ecstatic "light," fundamentally the holy spirit or closeness to the Divine. To miss this point is to miss the essence of the prophet and see only his actions. If the prophet's only purpose was to instruct others in ethics, surely a teacher who is not a prophet can do this as well. Thus, it is not only the external content of the instruction but the inner experience that the prophet seeks to convey, to channel, to make open. As Reiser puts it, "For the Piazecner, the role of the prophets is to bring the spirit of God to the people. The content of their prophecies, such as visions of the future and ethical rebuke, is simply a garment surrounding the light of God that passes through them into the community" (Reiser, 339). See also Zvi Leshem, *Between Messianism and Prophecy: Hasidism According to the Piaseczner Rebbe.* [Hebrew] Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2007.

[29] DHM, *parshat Shemot,* 88.

of matters Divine, would certainly seem to suggest a kind of obliteration of self. The person can have nothing of his own, rather all his virtues are from the tzaddik. Yet Shapira does not intend this and therefore he immediately clarifies his meaning:

> It is not that it is impossible for a person of Israel to will, think, and so on anything other than that which the prophet or tzaddik says to him! Rather, each person of Israel requires a *mehaber* to join together heaven and earth, the supernal world and this world. Then the lights and the holiness will descend to each individual—for each one according to his situation, reflecting the manner and extent to which he has prepared himself.
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> This is like the story they tell of the Rebbe Reb Zusya[30] (may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing): When the great Maggid (of Mezeryzec)[31] opened his holy mouth to say Torah, and had recited the verse that he wanted to teach Torah about, the Rebbe Reb Zusya would already have begun to shout and make a scene. He explained that when the Rebbe Reb Dov[32] (may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing) says the verse, he opens the gates of light and of Torah.[33]

The tzaddik is necessary to make the connection. Shapira thus evokes the language common in hasidic literature that the tzaddik is a channel (*tzinor*) who helps to connect Heaven and Earth—or the hasid and God.[34] And yet, although preserving this traditional language and not openly critiquing it, Shapira demurs from its obvious implication. If the tzaddik is the necessary channel, the Hasid's experience of the Divine is assumedly mediated through the tzaddik. Yet Shapira clarifies his view: Once the tzaddik makes the connection, the student receives the lights directly from above, unmediated through the tzaddik. In Shapira's own words, those who "grasp" the *shiur komah* of the tzaddik "receive holy lights from above, beyond that which they hear from him. Rather, directly [*yashar*] from the supernal world, [lights flow] to their hearts and souls."[35]

We see here that, rather than the self of the hasid being obliterated, it is the specificity of the tzaddik that recedes to make room for the uniqueness of the Hasid's own connection. This is most dramatically illustrated in the story of Reb Zusya, who clearly needed the presence of the Maggid to open the gates—and yet he could do without the latter's interpretation of the verse. In contrast to those who extract interpretations but leave aside the presence of the master, Reb Zusya is able to experience the presence of the master without even hearing the interpretations.[36] Ultimately, this leads him not only to a place beyond the specifics of the interpretations, but also beyond the specifics of the persona of the master. For Shapira, Reb Zusya shows the possibility of

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[30] Meshulam Zusya of Hanipoli (1718–1800), student of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeryzec (1704–1772). On Zusya, see Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History*, 145. On Dov Baer, and his role in the crystallization of Hasidism as a "movement," see ibid., 77–85, 98–99.

[31] See previous note.

[32] See n. 28.

[33] DHM, *parshat Shemot*, 88–9.

[34] See Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 189–207.

[35] DHM, 89.

[36] A standard version of the story of Zusya's excitement, sparked by hearing the Maggid quote the opening words, "And God spoke," ends with him being forcibly removed by the other disciples to the hallway, where he pounded upon the walls and cried allowed, "And God spoke!" By the time he had calmed down enough to rejoin the Maggid's table, Dov Baer had already completed his teaching. See Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 1:236–7.

a student finding his or her own direct connection to the Divine by means of the encounter with the "body of holiness" of the tzaddik.

Of course, Reb Zusya could experience what he did without hearing the Maggid's specific thoughts and interpretations because the very presence of the tzaddik was directly before him. What of the later hasid who has only the books of the Maggid and other holy masters? The only way to access the presence of the tzaddik by means of the book is to learn his interpretations. However, it is essential to recall the wider goal, to gain a vision of the "holiness body" of the tzaddik. The form of the book requires that this whole presence be revealed one limb and part at a time. Yet the ideal reader remembers always this bigger picture, and strives to contact the presence of the master, which is an organic whole, not simply a "collection of parts."[37]

IV. The Validation of the Book

We remarked above on Shapira's positive assessment of the possibility of contacting holiness through the books of tzaddikim. In fact, he doesn't even hint in this piece at this being in any way secondary to being able to be in their direct physical presence—a hierarchy emphasized often in earlier hasidic teachings. What could account for this change?

It may be that Shapira felt that the great tzaddikim of early generations were simply not prevalent in contemporary times, and therefore it is urgent to discuss how to come into contact with the personas of these earlier figures. We could thus see Shapira alongside his contemporary, Martin Buber, as involved in the attempt to revive and make relevant what they perceived as the best of early hasidic insight through book-learning. However, Shapira never directly denigrates hasidic leadership or speaks openly of a "decline." Buber, in contrast, was generally blunt in his assessment that the hasidic movement went into sharp decline by the mid-nineteenth century. In his introduction to the "later Masters" in *Tales of the Hasidim*, he closes his portrait of this decline by depicting R. Mendel of Vorki's silence as a kind of soundless weeping or scream, a reaction to the realization that "the present too is corrupted." Concludes Buber, "The time for words is past. It has become late."[38] Ironically, it is precisely by means of words, particularly his condensed and extremely influential *Tales* that Buber presented to the world, that Buber attempted to carry forth what he perceived as the best of the hasidic message into his present and beyond.[39]

More speculatively, it is also possible that Shapira recognized that the effort to contact the presence of masters through books has advantages as well as disadvantages. One learning a book may fail to seek the presence of the master, and thus lose the chance for certain types of self-transformation and spiritual illumination. However, in the presence of a charismatic master, one may be in greater danger of self-obliteration, as one surrenders one's own uniqueness before the impressive presence of the master, and attempts merely to reflect the master's holiness and his holy

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[37] DHM, 91.

[38] Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 2:7–46, see esp. 46.

[39] Buber's own ambivalence about the adequacy of words and the (possible) legitimacy of the role of the living tzaddik comes through in many places in his writings, and indeed is hardly surprising given his philosophy of "meeting" and "dialogue," which requires a living other for the fullness of the encounter. Yet Buber was hardly naïve about the dangers and corruption of this role in Hasidism. For his fascinatingly ambivalent description of his childhood encounter with a hasidic tzaddik in Sadagora, see *Hasidism and Modern Man*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 18–20.

thoughts. Thus it may be that encountering holy people through their texts is in fact the healthiest way to both transform and retain one's individuality.

V. Shapira and Nahman: On Blank Pages and Replication

It is instructive to contrast Shapira's model of contacting the tzaddik through his writings with a particular teaching of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav from his *Likkutei Moharan*.[40] For Nahman, it is indeed possible to contact the presence of the master through his writings; he teaches that the face, image (*diyukon*), and intellect of the tzaddik are contained in his writings. This is so, because if the tzaddik's mind had been different, the words in his book would be different in a manner that would reflect this. To offer a modern metaphor: We might say that the book is the DNA of the living being of the tzaddik.[41] Quoting the Palestinian Talmud,[42] Nahman recommends that one should "visualize the author of the teaching standing before him" while learning his words. The goal is to nullify the self and receive the imprint of this holy presence, ideally onto the "blank page" that remains once the self of the hasid is wiped clean.[43] Nahman here borrows the metaphor from the Rabbis of the Mishnah—"[W]riting with ink on new [blank] parchment cannot be compared to writing with ink on old [used] parchment [even if] that [ink] has been erased."[44] Nahman explains that receiving the undistorted image of the tzaddik is only possible to the extent that the self or mind of the hasid has become this blank page. There is no need for critical thought, for the words of the true tzaddik are "pure truth," with no "admixture" of any kind.[45]

Despite their similar concepts of the availability of the presence of the tzaddik in the text, including their use of identical terms (e.g., *diyukon*) to describe this presence, the *goals* of this contact stand in stark contrast. In Nahman's teaching, the ideal hasid is a blank page; whereas, for Shapira it is the ideal tzaddik who is a blank page. One senses that, for Shapira, Reb Zusya was in some sense an ideal student, who was able to use the presence of the Maggid, absent his specific words, as a blank page on which to write his own unique Torah insights. Other students who focused more on the interpretations of the Maggid for the sake of his words might be better able to repeat accurately the undoubtedly profound teachings of the tzaddik, yet for all that the tzaddik's ink on the page could distort their own ability to perceive—and cultivate—their own unique form of Divine service.

This emphasis on the unique quality that each individual should bring to his or her devotional life is precisely what we saw before, in the selection from Shapira's spiritual diary. In

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[40] See Lesson 192 in *Likkutei Moharan*. Note that although Rebbe Nahman is never named in Shapira's writings, he did have access to this work. Shapira's personal copy of *Likkutei Moharan* is housed in the rare books collection at Bar Ilan University, as noted by Zvi Leshem, *Between Messianism and Prophecy: Hasidism According to the Piaseczner Rebbe.* 46 n. 122. As for Bratslav Hasidism, increasingly influential in Israel particularly in recent decades, it has inspired a vast body of scholarly literature. The classic studies of Nahman's life and teachings include Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1992), and more recently, Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

[41] See Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 31–50, esp. 39, where Magid remarks that in his book "the flesh of Nahman became the word."

[42] T. J. Shekalim ch. 2.

[43] Cf. also *Likkutei Moharan,* Lesson 230.

[44] Mishnah Avot 4:20.

[45] Nahman emphasizes this in the opening words of Lesson 192.

looking at Shapira's teaching on the necessity of the tzaddik, we have seen how he maintains many tropes in the traditional hasidic doctrine of the tzaddik while simultaneously subverting the implication that the tzaddik serves as an intermediary.[46] For Shapira, the tzaddik is a role model in the sense that he cultivated his own uniqueness and personalized connection to the Divine, and thus can help inspire those who encounter him to forge *their* own unique connections.

It is worth noting that Shapira's framing of the very concept of tzaddik contains an implicit critique of a simple understanding of the mystical goal—frequently exalted in early hasidic teachings—of self-nullification (*bittul*). Shapira's emphasis on the non-nullification of the self of the student in the presence of the tzaddik is intertwined with his very notion of the tzaddik's accomplishment. Where many hasidic texts speak of the tzaddik as being "nullified" and nothing (*ayin*) in relation to the Divine, Shapira emphasizes the tzaddik's unique persona and "body of holiness." Rather than becoming nothing before the Divine, the tzaddik precisely models how to develop a unique self and "body of holiness" with which to serve the Divine.

One sometimes hears of the risk of making an idol of one's own self, which prevents devotion to the Divine. Yet for Shapira, the self of the spiritual master—as indeed one's own individuated self—is not an idol but an icon (*diyukon*), an *aid* to devotion. It is not the self that is at risk of becoming an idol, but an imitation of it. Idolatry is characterized not by a focus on self, but rather precisely by the depersonalization of the object of focus.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have presented two contrasting hasidic models of devotional reading. The model of devotional impressionism that I have presented from Rabbi Nahman helps to highlight, by contrast, the structure of Shapira's model of devotional individuation. The contrast is most sharp in terms of the goal. In devotional impressionism, the student or reader aims to nullify the self in order to receive the impression of the spirit and mind of the master, who has a special connection to the Divine. By contrast, Shapira's devotional individuation calls on the student's or reader's encounter with the master to lead to the revelation of the reader's own unique spirit, mind, and ultimately, direct connection with the Divine. However, it is also important to note the ways in which these two models are anything but simple opposites. Rather than preserve the self by analyzing the ideas of a text in a detached and independent manner, Shapira fully agrees with Nahman that it is necessary to open the self to a true encounter with the living essence of the master in the text. The sophistication of Shapira's model lies in the way that he explains how this encounter can not only coexist with, but is indeed necessary to, the process of individuation. This is a theoretical working out of the model of "imitating non-imitation" contained in inchoate form in Buber's tale from Rabbi Noah. In Shapira's hands, in addition, this model is decidedly read as applicable, indeed imperative, for every individual and in no way restricted to the hasidic leader or tzaddik.

[46] To be clear, that the tzaddik serves as intermediary in many forms of Hasidism and hasidic thought is abundantly clear, and often explicit. In contrast, though Shapira draws on earlier language that seems to carry this implication, he explicitly rejects this understanding of the tzaddik, emphasizing the ability of the student to receive through his or her own direct connection with the Divine. See quotation on p. 38, above.

As explored in the opening of this essay, one of the central tensions in comparative theological work, particularly when focused primarily upon textual study, is the question of the theologian's "insider" or "outsider" status in relation to the texts and traditions that he or she is studying. Legitimate concerns about hegemony and colonialist discourse, with much history behind them, tend to intensify the stakes in these discussions. By admitting one's own "outsider" status, one may preemptively admit to the limitations of one's own understanding, and own the active nature of one's own project that seeks to construct meaning for oneself and one's "own" particular community or tradition.

Shapira's hermeneutic model of devotional individuation can be translated into the realm of comparative theological hermeneutics, suggesting ways to reframe questions within this discourse and offering a constructive model. For Shapira, no reader is, or should strive to be, an "insider" in the sense of simply internalizing and being able to recapitulate and mimic the inner content of a sacred text. Yet the great advantage of the "outsider"—the ability to construct meaning from her or his own center—is, for Shapira, not to be gained by the detachment that this term may seem to imply. This is because, for Shapira, one's own center is not simply a given that one brings to the text. Rather, the encounter with the text, even as the reader seeks to encounter its inner life, can make possible a revelation of the self of the reader as well. Shapira's model suggests that there is a subtle interdependence between the attempt to sincerely encounter the otherness of a text or tradition and the search for self-understanding and self-construction.

For a comparative theologian, it seems, part of the understanding derived from the text may be related to another tradition, or to theological sensibilities that are conceived as not native to the text. For obvious reasons, this aspect of comparative study may seem not to "belong" to the text and tradition being studied. Although Shapira does not have comparative study in mind, of course, his model suggestively calls into question some common dichotomies. For Shapira, the attempt to encounter the emic perspective of the text is not a surrender of self; so too, the attempt to develop one's own unique perspective is itself a devotional act. This maps well onto forms of comparative theology that are both devotional and scholarly, opening to the inner dimensions of texts being studied while allowing new meanings to emerge from the juxtaposition with texts from other traditions, and the unique perspective of the theologian.

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