

Yirat Shamayim
The Awe, Reverence,
and Fear of God

EDITED BY
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THE ORTHODOX FORUM

The Orthodox Forum, initially convened by Dr. Norman Lamm, Chancellor of Yeshiva University, meets each year to consider major issues of concern to the Jewish community. Forum participants from throughout the world, including academicians in both Jewish and secular fields, rabbis, rashei yeshivah, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal professionals, gather in conference as a think tank to discuss and critique each other's original papers, examining different aspects of a central theme. The purpose of the Forum is to create and disseminate a new and vibrant Torah literature addressing the critical issues facing Jewry today.

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Moving Beyond Lightness and Confronting Fears: Hasidic Thought on the Fear of Heaven

Alan Brill

In Rabbinic parlance, fear of heaven (*yirat shamayim*) means religion or a sense of one's obligation to religion. In medieval philosophic texts, fear of heaven is produced by the recognition of divine exaltedness. In Hasidic texts, fear becomes awe and a new emphasis is placed on the love of God over the fear of heaven. Yet the relationship to the divine that conditions Hasidic awe shares much with those discussed in early accounts of religious fear. Both the early modern and Hasidic texts emphasize the importance of making a continuous attempt to internally invoke the experience of God. The Besht, in

the late eighteenth century, expressed the practical meaning of this continuous experience:

In all that one sees or experiences, one should be remembering the blessed Divine Presence. In love, one remembers Divine Love, in fear, one remembers the Divine Awe of the Blessed Name. Even when one does bodily evacuations, one should consider it as discarding the bad from the good. (*Zavaat Harivash* 3b)

Clearly, the most important word here is “all.” Every perception and every experience, regardless of its positive or negative quality, should lead back to a thought of God.

Speaking to a twentieth-century audience, the Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, advocates the same focus on continuously relating to a living God by internalizing pietistic emotions.

A life filled with faith and trust, lucid and clear...A life filled with desire and yearning to experience *the light of the Living King*, to the point where his soul pines constantly. Even when he is involved in mundane matters...A life imbued with sanctity and purity through and through... He purifies and sanctifies himself to the point where even his physical activities become holy. (*Netivot Shalom*, Introduction)

We see that, both historically and presently, the Hasidic approach advocates reading pietistic works every day and teaches that the activity of the hasid is to keep the teachings of these works in mind. In all versions of Hasidism, there is an attempt to remember, reflect, internalize, engrave, and visualize the content of the prior classics. The Slonimer writes:

Now Israel, what does Hashem your God require of you. How is it possible to command an emotion? Since one cannot control one's emotions how can a commandment to fear be effective? The commandment concerns the obligation to reflect deeply in one's thoughts every day until

the matter becomes engraved upon his heart. Eventually the “thoughts of his heart” will become emotions. (*Nesivot Shalom, yesodei hatorah, fear*)

The innovation of Hasidism is not its description of piety, i.e., its nuanced articulation as fear or love, but rather its attempt to internalize piety. As part of his presentation, the Slonimer Rebbe quotes *Hovot Halevavot* on the subject of awareness of and dependence on God, *Zohar* on the need for knowledge of God, and early Hasidic texts on the alleviation of fear from sin. Two hundred years after the original Hasidic revival, many seekers find R. Berezovsky’s contemporary Hasidism appealing. They seek a living God, a life of fear integrated in love and faith, and an attempt to follow the classics of Jewish piety.

However, despite the rich and complicated tradition of the notion of *fear of God*, most modern Jewish formulations of fear of heaven borrow heavily from Rudolf Otto’s classic, *The Idea of the Holy*, which presents a romantic feeling of awe, the numinous, fear, and mystery as the Biblical concept of the holy. The experience of the holy is constructed as a private experience outside of prayer, study, punishment, or any conversionary experience. The paradigmatic example of this fear-as-awe, imagines the individual watching a thunderous storm and, inspired to awe by the destructive natural force, he reflects on his fleeting paradoxical relationship with transcendence. Otto’s “holy” is generalized throughout Jewish homiletics as a sense of the wondrousness of nature, the mystery of life, or peak experiences. While Otto’s approach is quite useful for teaching about fear as an entrance into the relationship with God, Hasidism’s articulation of fear should not be conflated with Otto’s.

The Hasidic tradition contains many subtly and not so subtly different forms of fear, of which there are several in pietistic works. Much of the fear is indebted to the fear of hell, visions of celestial realms, inner voices, and the awesome powers of the Divine name that gripped prior ages.¹ We have to understand the complex tradition of fear in the Hasidic record to understand the possible meanings and uses of *fear of God* in modern Hasidism and what they can contribute to our moral engagement with the modern world.

Furthermore, it is also important to distinguish Otto's approach from the approach of the nineteenth century theorist of religion Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917, *Primitive Culture*, 1871), who presented religion as a fear of God based on a desire to keep God out of one's life. In the later half of the twentieth century, following this approach Mary Douglas showed how a tight group identity uses fear of God to maintain the status quo and Nobert Elias showed how fear helps society create its norms and pass down traditions. They are certainly useful in looking at the Orthodox community, but they are not pietistic approaches.

One final important note, Hasidism is not just the late eighteenth century movement known from history books. Hasidism started as a revival moment in the mid-eighteenth century and has 260 years of changing history, with many diverse trends in many diverse contexts, culminating in contemporary Hasidism. Definitions of ecstatic prayer or of the zaddikim of 1760 are not the same as those of contemporary Hasidut. The very recent construct of Hasidism by Religious Zionists and Modern Orthodox as a tradition of emotionalism and singing adds further confusion. For this paper, Hasidism represents a number of trends in spirituality that make use of Safed piety, Maharal, and Eastern European discourses of fire and brimstone. In all these trends, pietistic works are applied to daily life. As I have suggested, the changing positions and trends of Hasidism throughout its 260-year history are the very things this paper will explore. The questions of fear that Hasidism continually revisits and revises still play a role in today's spirituality.²

HASIDISM AND ITS SOURCES

Hasidism contains much early modern thought on seeking one's personal sense of Divine command through applying prior pietistic works. The Hasidic works, however, were more explicitly concerned with prayer, enthusiasm, and love than with fear. Hence, much of this paper will deal with the antecedents of Hasidism in prior devotional approaches – dependence, knowledge, fear of punishment, and direct experience – in order to show how fear of heaven becomes rearticulated within the Hasidic tradition.

I will examine several unique approaches of the early modern period (roughly from 1520 to 1815) – those of the Maharal, R. Eliyahu De Vidas's *Reshit Hokhmah*, and R. Zvi Hirsch Kaidanover's *Kav Hayashar*. Maharal, like the pre-modern Ashkenaz, understood fear of heaven, characterized by a sense of dependence and recognition of one's contingency in the world, as a return to one's inner self. De Vidas's *Reshit Hokhmah*, an example of Safed piety, explains the relationship between the fear of heaven and the knowledge of the kabbalistic cosmology of the world. Kaidanover's *Kav Hayashar* understands religious fear, somewhat literally, as a fear of the demonic elements all around us. Finally, the *Shenai Luhot Habrit* of Isaiah Horowitz combined the last two modes of piety and was a major influence on Hasidism.

After exploring the early modern conceptions of fear of heaven, I will then show how these earlier ideas are manifest in a number of Hasidic contexts. First, I will explore Ukrainian Hasidism in which one learns to trust enthusiasm over fear. Then I will turn to the school of the Maggid of Mezeritch in which earlier texts are reread with mystical overtones. And finally, I will consider the learned urban Hasidism of the Kotzk school which considers the place of divine experience relative to Torah study. I will conclude this paper by opening a discussion on the role of Hasidism and the fear of heaven in our contemporary world conditioned by this particular understanding of the concept's history.

MAHARAL: CONVERSION AND DEPENDENCE

Rabbi Yehudah ben Betzalel Loewe (called by his acronym Maharal c.1525–1609) was an eclectic Renaissance Jewish thinker who served as rabbi in Posen and Prague.³ His writings were published in his lifetime, but were eclipsed by Safed piety for 130 years until they were republished at the beginning of the Hasidic movement to be used by Byelorussian Hasidism. Fear plays an important role in Maharal's thought and he presents fear in at least four different but related ways: as a sense of human contingency, as an offering of oneself before God, as a sense of human value and meaning, and as an understanding of the true sense of one's self as connected to God.

For Maharal, religious knowledge leads to fear and fear leads to higher knowledge. This dialectical relationship between fear and knowledge is derived from Proverbs 3:17, “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God.” This verse teaches us, according to Maharal, that God is the ultimate cause of everything in our lives and that, therefore, true wisdom teaches us to fear our ultimate cause. The fear produced by understanding God as the ultimate cause overcomes the limits of our human intellectual knowledge. It is through fear that we come to understand our position within a giving and receiving relationship (*mashbia/mekabel*) with God. Maharal considers these religious forms of knowledge, our contingency, our fear, our acknowledgment of our indebtedness to the Supreme Being as a higher form of knowledge than ordinary knowledge. (*Netivot Olam*, Yirat Hashem, ch. 1; *Derekh Hahayim* 3:11)

Since, for Maharal, God is the cause of everything, everything but God, including man, should be considered transitory and contingent. Proper fear is considering oneself as nothing before the divine and infinite. It is the daily consciousness of one’s contingency and fleeting existence. Maharal paints an ideal of fear as offering in sacrifice our human souls to God. He specifically distinguishes the effects of *fear of God* from those of *love of God*. For Maharal, love of God is an acquisition that leads us to cleave to God and religious experience, while fear is a true letting go without any acquisition. (*Netivot Olam*, Yirat Hashem, ch. 4)

According to Maharal’s logic, a person with fear of God is separated from ordinary existence since fear creates God’s kingship and dominion. He suggests that this makes the God-fearing person into a king according to two principles. First, because fear is an ordering of our world, the fearful person, through his fear, becomes part of the ordered universe, the royal court, which is opposed to the randomness of ordinary peasant life. Second, the acceptance of God as King makes the intrinsically unworthy and insignificant human being worthy of the world as an effect of God.

In this way, Maharal treats Rabbinic Judaism as a separate world order (*nivdal*) and one’s goal is to be part of the system. In order to have true fear one needs to fill oneself with the wisdom of the

Torah, which functions as a connection to God's world order. Fear, for Maharal, teaches us about the need for a Divine order, while sin, the opposite of fear and based on a forgetfulness of our contingency, leads to dispersion and nothingness. We have two choices: either to offer ourselves up to God, or to dissipate into purposelessness and nonbeing. For Maharal, there is no intrinsic value to life outside of one's relationship with God. (*Netivot Olam*, passim, especially *Teshuvah*, and *Bushah*)

Maharal's anthropology postulates that the *Image of God* and thereby the human connection to God (and Torah), exists in the womb. Birth and the human condition are falls from this natural primordial connection. The mission for Maharal is to attempt to return to this point rather than to attain any new perfection. This point separates Maharal from most other Jewish thinkers who are concerned about perfection. To return to this primordial state one needs to conduct one's actions on the straight path of the Torah.⁴ According to Maharal, scholars have greater problems with fear of God than do ordinary people who naturally know their maker. For the ordinary person, the physical is the primary separation between man and God. The Torah elides this separation. Yet the scholar replaces concern with the physical with concern for the self and for personal wisdom, which further separates him from God.

Maharal's philosophy can be characterized as anti-cultural, in the sense that according to Maharal one should relinquish the ordinary realm in a quest for meaning. Yet, Maharal's approach rings psychologically true for many within modern culture. Many of the commitments to God attained in outreach, in community, and in seeking meaning in life can best be conceptualized through using Maharal. Echoes of Maharal's thought can be found in the philosophies of twelve-step programs, which require members to give themselves up to a higher power. Many sing the song "In my heart I will built a tabernacle (*mishkan*)...to offer up my soul (*belevavi mishkan evneh*)," a close précis of a paragraph of Maharal (*Netiv Hateshuvah*, ch. 3), indicating an impulse toward the conversionary self-sacrifice of the soul. Therefore, Maharal's thought should be a recurring reference point for understanding a variety of forms of

fear of God for those seeking meaning in life, a moral order, or a conversionary experience.

RESHIT HOKHMAH: KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

R. Eliyahu De Vidas, a student of R. Moses Cordovero, imbibed heavily from various streams of Safed piety and Mediterranean lay devotions, both of which influenced his classic work *Reshit Hokhmah*. This work became one of the basic sources for Safed piety, both among the merchants of Western Europe and the isolated saints of Eastern Europe. It was frequently reprinted and available in several best-selling summaries.

Representing one of the fullest treatments of fear in Judaism, *Reshit Hokhmah*, places the need for fear of God at the very start of the book and defines fear as knowledge of God. For De Vidas, all of one's piety flows from the intellectual knowledge of God derived from the study of Kabbalah, one's contemplation of the implications of this knowledge, and the modeling of one's life accordingly. De Vidas offers a variety of approaches to this knowledge, each briefly stated since a pietistic book was to be read slowly and contemplatively. A single short paragraph becomes a spiritual practice.

Following the kabbalistic approach of Cordovero his teacher, De Vidas presents a synthesis of Maimonides, *Zohar*, and midrash in which each approach elucidates the meaning of the other. Maimonides's imperative to know God is defined using the interdivine structures of the *Zohar*, which in turn can be successfully used to explain mystical midrash. In this interpretive tradition, Maimonides, the Neo-Platonist with a need to contemplate celestial hierarchy, becomes identified with the great Chain of Being of the Kabbalah, and both can be used to explain the Midrashim that treat knowledge as participation in the Divine. R. De Vidas's themes and variations on knowing God include knowledge of the infinite aspects of the *eyn sof*, knowledge of the Tetragrammaton, and knowledge of the divine filling the world. Thus we can see that in contrast to Maharal's emphasis on conversion and dependence, R. Eliyahu De Vidas requires intellectual knowledge.

The most important kind of fear, according De Vidas, is the

inner awe of the infinite aspects of the Divine. One realizes the smallness of one's place in the chain of being. The infinite *eyn sof* causes, animates, and radiates into the entire chain of being. It is a divine chain of being, a Jacob's ladder in which we are to appreciate all the elements of creation and to partake of the *Zohar's* "river that flows from Eden." True inner fear is one's relationship to the *eyn sof*. (Ch. 1)

The realization that everything is connected to the infinite leads one to fear of God through six precepts. (1) To see that the Divine illuminates the world and without it all is dark. Light is one of the basic metaphors of sensing the divine in midrash and Kabbalah, and in fact in almost all mystical systems. Instructions for sensing the light range from pure Torah study to specific light meditations. (2) To gain a fleeting attempt to grasp infinity conceptually. This grasping gives one a sense of finitude and contingency before a great being. (3) To sense God's manifestation in the world. God is actively pulsating into the world and has presence in our realm. (4) To sense the Divine mercy (*hesed* or *caritas*) as it extends to us at every moment. (5) Practically, to live as if one sees that all of one's life is dependent on God. (6) To see all objects in this world corresponding to God as a vestige. (ch. 2) These six elements articulate a relationship to divinity that anticipates Otto's sense of the Holy, yet for De Vidas this relationship comes from a requisite study of Kabbalah rather than from a natural experience. In addition to the six elements that govern man's relationship to the infinite, De Vidas also emphasizes knowledge of the aspects of the Divine's relationship to the world such as the divine names, the throne, and the angelic realm.

Besides study, in order to purify one's mind, De Vidas teaches that one should contemplate these matters with visualizations. He advocates visualizing the divine name on each limb (66). He continues to follow the classical contemplations of Jewish piety known from Bahye's *Duties of the Heart* and onward. Among these are the precepts that one is nothing before the infinite creator, that he gives us goodness even though he does not need us, and that we can cease to be in an instant (50). Of the thirty meditations in Bahye's *Heshbon Hanefesh*, De Vidas selects one

in particular for special citation – the contemplation that everything is doing God’s will and to realize that since God fills the world then one needs shame before His ever-presence (Ch. 3, 75). For De Vidas, one would be opting out of the glory of God by ignoring the study of Kabbalah. The failure to imagine God in the natural order leaves one without any real sense of God. If he is correct, then we moderns fundamentally deny ourselves a sense of the fear of God when we accept a secular natural order. Even modern kabbalistic approaches that do talk about creating a sense of the Divine in our lives tend to avoid specific cosmological details in order to evade difficult inconsistencies with our modern, secular cosmology. Despite the difficulties of coupling kabbalistic knowledge with a secular natural order, the Kabbalah must be integrated into the broad discussion of theology.

KAV HAYASHAR AND EARLY HASIDUT

R. Zvi Hirsch Kaidanover’s *Kav Hayashar* epitomizes the fearful world of the seventeenth century. It contains vivid descriptions of the hell fires awaiting the wicked (even hotter than those of *Reshit Hokhmah*), the dangers of succubæ created through nocturnal emissions, a multifarious demonology, and descriptions of the various dangers of incorrect ritual performance. For us, in the twenty-first century, this mode of fearing God is perhaps outdated, or perhaps not.⁵ It is, however, historically important to understanding Hasidism.

The Ukrainian disciples and colleagues of R. Israel the Baal Shem were anxious about the fearfulness of sin all around them in the physical world. As noted by many scholars, part of the attraction of early Hasidim was its easing of the burden of religious fears. As a popular revivalist movement, Hasidism taught that God is found in all activities and that one can relate to God in many direct ways. Love, prayer, and enthusiasm can ransom one from the grip of fire and brimstone.

R. Nahman of Bratzlav is famous today for his statement that “when a person has to cross a very narrow bridge, the principal thing

is not to fear anything (*Likkute Moharan* 11:48),” yet he retained a strong visceral fear of sin, physicality, heresy, and punishment.

It is man’s nature to be drawn to worldly temptations, and this can be overcome only through the fear of punishment ...Philosophy raises doubts and questions, strengthening one’s natural inclinations away from God.... Although the *Zohar* belittles the mere fear of punishment, our moral classics write that this is still the main gateway to true devotion. (*Sihot Haran*, 5)

While believing that fear was both rational and morally purposeful, he offered the individual ways to combat fear by suggesting various wondrous corrections: the recitation of psalms, mikvah immersion, clapping, dancing, enthusiastic prayer, and story telling. The shame of sin, he taught, could be mitigated through these actions.

Rav Nahman acknowledged a complicated relationship between practical fear of punishment and fear of God. He taught, “The quality of fear itself fears God.” Yet he also suggested that depression causes apathy, which in turn, lessens the fear of God. (*Likutey Moharan*, No. 148) Fear lessens apathy, but his active attitude toward alleviating the shame of sin guarded against the tendency toward depression inherent in an exclusively punitive world. Rav Nahman’s discussions of fear, depression, and apathy deeply resonate with modern psychological and ethical concerns. Rav Nahman connects that lack of fear to apathy and depression to a personified fear that itself is fearful, meaning that the world is a fearful place. The question resonates with modern senses of the self, yet his solution offers a personification of the problem.

We find a similar understanding of fear in the writings of R. Ephraim of Sladikov, (the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*), in which the world is depicted as a fearful pit and by grasping the presence of God as a lifeline one attains awe. We can see some distinction here between fear and the fear of God as awe that complicates earlier accounts and begins a logical progression from *fear of heaven* to

the *love of God* emphasis of Hasidism. Similarly, R. Yakov Yosef of Polyanye wrote in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, “I heard in the name of my teacher, where there is fear there is no pleasure and the place where there is pleasure there is no fear.” It is only in moving beyond the inherent fears of corporeality by cleaving to God that one comes to a proper fear of God. Statements like, “thereby human fear is transformed into the love of God,” of which we find many in early Hasidism, reflect a logic similar to those considered above which articulate *fear of God* as a sublimation of human fear. The difference here is that the human fear becomes not sublime fear, but sublime love.

Most texts suggest that one can sublimate fear into love of God on their own, but some need the Zaddik to do it for them. Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl comments that “zaddikim transform the source of fear and awe into love and desire.” (Green translation, p. 100)⁶ We have here the charismatic figure of the Zaddik to ease the burden of fear by offering his ability to bear responsibility and allowing the hasid to return home solely to focus on love. More importantly, we see in this statement a recognition that religious experiences or conversionary experiences that may start in fear actually need to be tempered with love to survive the long haul of life.

HASIDUT FROM THE SCHOOL OF THE MAGID OF MEZRITCH

The Hasidic texts from the school of the Maggid of Mezritch display a revivalist encouragement of the mystical nullification and divine immanence present in the early modern record. These texts contain varied revisions of early modern accounts providing new emphases and motivations for the fear of heaven. For example, the imperative, “When some fearful event happens that you hear about, know that from heaven they are hinting to you to cleave to the root of fear,” echoes the earlier suggestions to see God as personally involved in every moment. (*Besht al Hatorah Behukotai*, No. 7) The Hasidic claim that “fear of God automatically causes all adversaries to fall away,” (*Derekh Hasidim*, p. 282) adds to fear a magic potency. Statements like, “Continuously see in your mind’s eye that God

looks at you as another person looking at you,” (*Derekh Hasidim*, p. 142) suggest a watchful but humanized God intensifying both the motivation of fear, because God sees us, and motivation of a personal connection with God, because he sees us as another person does. Early Hasidic texts also remind us that in moments of corporeal affliction we should not forget God. “You should have continuous fear from God even at the time of affliction, conversely at the time of affliction, heaven forefend, that you do not have only fear from God.” (*Derekh Hasidim*, p. 131) The important points here are that the hasid has an individual relationship with a personified God and that, while the Neo-Hasid reads many of these texts as expressionistic, the early Hasid found magical thinking efficacious. Both of these attitudes reoriented the individual’s relationship to the divine and consequently reconfigured the notion of fear of God.

Mystical and ecstatic forms of fear represent a particularly significant revision that early Hasidic thought made upon earlier notions. For example, Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, the author of *Pri Ha-aretz*, expanded Maharal’s notion of fear into a mystical awe, an annihilation into the divine:

When he gazes intently at the root and source of his awareness of Him, blessed be He, he is unnerved in His blessed presence for the Blessed One is the giver and he the recipient. Every recipient is unnerved – that is they all become annihilated and absorbed into the giver. Awe is thus the ultimate in holding close.... The consciousness of the recipient is that it has no life or existence besides the giver.

In this revised account, fear becomes the ability to gaze into the divine and go into a state of annihilation that eventually reaches a state of rapture. The experience is the overwhelming sense of merging into the Divine; human concerns melt in the awe of His presence.

A more striking addition of the mystical account of fear is that in the ecstatic experience, one is possessed by a Pentecostal presence of God that speaks through the

pious. In the act of prayer, awe is both the initial rapture from God and the subsequent Divine gift.

True Awe, however, is experienced as being seized by a shuddered-trembling; and out of the awe of sudden realization, one loses orientation momentarily, and does not know where one is. Its result is experienced as one's awareness becoming purified. At times tears well up of themselves...One who does not know the likeness of this, is not even a servant of God...and does not render the service worthy of a Jew at all. (*Besht al Hatorah Noah*, No. 59)

When one begins to pray; immediately upon saying "O Lord, open my lips;" the *shekhinah* is en clothed in the person, and is speaking the words of prayer. And when the person shall have integrated the faith that the *Shekhinah* is speaking these words, certainly there will descend upon one the consciousness of the Awe and fear. (*Besht al Hatorah Noah*, No.96)

In these texts, awe is an experience of nullification and mystical union, a peak moment that entirely transcends ordinary life, rather than the continuous path as described by thinkers like Maharal. However, Hasidism, like modern American Pentecostalism, assumes that these pneumatic gifts are available to everyone who seeks them. Everyone can cultivate a presence of God speaking through him or her. *Zaddikim*, however, are those who are completely divested of corporeality and can maintain this continuous mystical life. Hasidism offers everyone a direct presence of God in every moment and, for some, a mystical ecstasy.

A major strength of Hasidism is its self-conscious reflection on the experience of fear. Hasidic texts acknowledge that sometimes what appears to be fear of God is, in fact, melancholia or depression. "There are those who pray in despondency, due to an excess of black bile overcoming them, and think that they are praying with great awe." Hasidism also considers not only the proper experience of fear, but the proper consequences of fear. "Upon concluding one's prayer,

one must be carefully observant of one's comportment, because if one prays with a fear of God one is able to easily fall into a state of anger." Thus Hasidism encourages both revision of and reflection on the nature of *fear of God*. (*Besht al Hatorah Noah*, No. 167; *Degel Mahanh Ephraim, Ki Tissa*)

RABBI ELIMELEKH OF LYZENSK

To achieve continuity in the practice of cultivating fear of God, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lyzensk wrote an ethical will to be read by his followers everyday that was included in many Eastern European prayer books. He advocates visualizing one's death as a martyr whenever one has free time.

At any time when one is free from learning Torah, especially when idly sitting alone in his room or lying on his bed unable to sleep, he should have in mind the mitzvah of "I shall be made holy among the children of Israel." He should feel and imagine as if a great fire was burning before him reaching until heaven. (*Tzetal katan*, No. 1)

The fear of death is a very human and very widespread phenomenon. This death meditation alleviates the anxieties by facing the fear directly. The recent resurgence of mediation practice in the modern West may have refamiliarized us enough with the practice to make this once again a useful resource for rehabilitating and channeling our contemporary fears.

A less frightful passage from Rabbi Elimelekh seeks to motivate the hasid by encouraging him to have in mind the image of a motivation coach

One should always imagine, and especially when he is reading this Ethical Will, that a person is standing before him. He is near him shouting at him to follow all of the words that are written in it...Once accustomed to this, it will cause him to have great inspiration, sparks of fire, and a holy divine flame. (*Tzetal katan*, No.5)

Motivation will encourage a continuous sense of the fear of God. Similar to motivational speakers in business, the results of this approach are positive. Piety is not about thinking about Hasidic homilies or kabbalistic symbolism but the change to one's daily schedule and one's ability to entrepreneur fear in one's life. This is especially applicable to moderns who are not connected to living exemplars which can create fear, the motivational imagination can serve in its place.

POLISH HASIDISM

The followers of R. Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859), created an elite group of rabbinic scholars who encouraged his students to awaken and experience God directly. Many in the twentieth century were attracted to this approach because of its modern sense of the psyche. The school of Kotzk rejected Torah study without Hasidic experience. The Kotzker rebbe asked: "What is the difference between a Hasid and a Mitnaged? The Hasid has fear and trepidation before God and the Mitnaged has trepidation before the Shulkhan Arukh." Awe of God is greater than Torah, and furthermore, one needs to internalize this awe. Stories reflecting this attitude abound: The Kotzker was reported to have once asked a student, who wanted to know about fear of heaven, if a wolf ever frightened him. The student said yes. The Kotzker then said that one's fear of God should have the same immediacy without reflection. Reb Simhah Bunim once told of a student of R. Nathan of Chelm who was unable to pray on Rosh Hashanah due to his immense awe and trepidation about the presence of God on that day. The fear-inspiring presence of God is sought on holidays, on every Sabbath, and ultimately the goal is to live in the moment of continuous presence.

The possibility of living in the continuous presence of God could, by certain accounts, lead to a personal relationship with God that superseded even Torah study in moral efficacy. R. Menahem Mendel of Kotzk said, "Even one's Torah and mizvot may not be God's will." He taught his students to seek a personal calling and to continuously worry and fear what God wants. R. Menahem's student,

R. Mordekhai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (d. 1854), develops this theme of uncertainty in one's religious life.

Even if a person is careful to keep the entire *Shulkhan Arukh*, he is still in doubt if he intended to the depth of God's will because it is exceedingly deep. "Who can find it?" Furthermore, "if" is the language of prayer. God (as if it were possible) prays, "If when they follow my statutes, they would reach the depth of my will." (*Mei Ha-Shiloah* II: 27a–b).

Fear of God, for R. Leiner, requires the individual search for what God wants. R. Zadok of Lublin decreases some of the fear of God by returning to the *Shulkhan Arukh* as a source of God's light.

One might have thought that it would be better for a person to turn at every moment to God to enlighten his eyes, telling him what to perform and how to behave, instead of having a fixed statute like the *Shulkhan Arukh* as a path to follow without turning to God in all his paths. But in truth it is to his benefit that he has this brilliant illuminating light on which to lean for support. Without Torah he would be in continuous fear lest he err and not perform the true will of God. (*Zidkat Hazaddik*, No. 211)

R. Zadok mitigated the immense fear that stems from the uncertainty of God's will, but it is important to note that fear is not phrased as submission but as illumination. In these approaches, turning to the halakhah is itself a form of attaining an inner awe of God. Otto's numinousness is not supplemented by the halakhah, rather the experience itself generates the halakhah.

Proper fear of God according to R. Leiner is to accept our utter dependence upon God. Once again we have an idea of dependence similar to Otto's numinousness, yet R. Leiner preached the more radical view that "everything is in the hands of Heaven, even the

fear of Heaven.” This gives us a sense of a continuous connection to God so complete that everything is considered determined. This kind of connection is not a numinous moment but a continuous presence. The hasid becomes solely a passive tool in the hands of the Divine Will.⁷

Finally, Polish Hasidism offers us the writings of R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Gur, the *Sefat Emet*, who combined the immediacy of the school of Kotzk with Maharal’s explanation of the commandments. Whereas Maharal taught that divine order gives structure in a top-down manner, the *Sefat Emet* takes a bottom-up approach in which the hasid has a personal task of internalizing the exaltedness, awe, and power of renewal that God offers. To internalize the divine order and remove the other elements of human consciousness, one requires study, contemplation, silence, and purity.

A PERSONAL SENSE

Do I actually think that we can still use the traditional ideas of dependence on God, a kabbalistic worldview, magical techniques, mystical union, zaddikim, and personal illumination as an approach to halakhah? I think yes, but with significant qualifications. The question should be: how can these prior approaches be used to lead people to a personal sense of the divine? They cannot be accepted in their original cultural settings of Eastern Europe; they have to be cultivated to lead contemporary believers in America forward.

In the early twentieth century, with the discovery of the modern world by Eastern European Jews, Rav Kook grappled with the inherited fearful piety of his Eastern European education. He advocated seeking a more natural morality to overcome oppressive fear of sin. “The fear of Heaven must not suppress man’s natural morality for then the fear of heaven is no longer pure.” Rav Kook also offers an important observation about fear. Fear results when the soul does not match with general reality. We do not fear that which is normal and expected. One who is unburdened with sins and maintains a healthy connection to the social order will not suffer from excessive worries and fears. (*Ein Ayah*, Vol. 1, pp. 324–25)

Rav Kook considered a new era, one without fear, immanent since Judaism was going to match the new reality through the revival of Judaism in the land of Israel. He wanted to move beyond the reality of Eastern Europe and fully confront a modern era that would not need fear anymore. I am sorry to say that the new reality did not occur; fear and sin are still very much with us. Fear of God, in particular, is always and will always be with us, but our contemporary post-secular age brings religion into our lives in new ways. The central question of applying *fear of God* in America asks us how to make it an ennobling fear rather than a regressive one.

Robert Wuthnow, the leading sociologist of American religion, aptly described the changes in the American quest for spirituality in the last three decades. A large percentage of American religious believers now accept twelve-step religion as well as outreach and conversionary religion, and also seek direct voices from God. For many, small miracles, daily providence, and direct engagements are paramount in daily religious practice. Other scholars point out that currently twenty three percent of American Christians are pentecostal and accept speaking in tongues, exorcism, and gifts of the spirit. Following these trends Jews are looking for a spirituality that will reaffirm the real presence of the Divine in the world.⁸

Hasidism can be used to conceptualize various activities, including *musar* classes where one is taught to see God's hand in daily life, *tehillim* group discussions, and much of the devotion of our outreach and youth movements. Hasidic piety is even shown when a rosh yeshiva gives out *chulent*, in a preverbal act, to feed his students at a *tish*. Hasidic approaches have already been widely adapted in our era for America, especially those of Rabbi Abraham Twerski, as well as the popularizations of Chabad and Breslov. Rabbi Twerski's adaptation of the twelve-step program of giving oneself to God captures the ordinary person's sense that their inherent frailties make the ideal ever unattainable. Chabad teaches that we need to use all tools available to lead a more meaningful life and that moments of personal connection to the Divine can motivate that pursuit.

R. Menachem Mendel Schneersohn makes extensive use of

Maharal in advocating the extraordinary moments of connection and meaning in life. Breslov teaches how “we are all turkeys under the table,” insane, forgetful of God, and he urges us to put away the illusory thoughts and sinful desires of our suburban lives. All of them are directly confronting the problems of life in modern America.

Particularly revealing is the popularity of a Neo-Hasidic *musar* work rapidly devoured by those seeking a path to God in our communities – Rabbi Itamar Shwartz, *Belivavi Mishkan Evneh* (Jerusalem, 2003). Its basic message is that we must overcome our physical natures through submission, separation, and removal from the false physical world. Then, after separation through following hasidut, one learns to have fear of God through nullification of the self. For this author, every event in a person’s life is from God and every moment of every day is the location of our choosing to serve God. Since all events are from God, there is a complete relinquishing of the sense of autonomy, choice, and reflection. Why does this appeal to people with suburban lives? I submit that it provides a way to get outside of the physicality and vanity that characterize such lives. The constant white noise of contemporary life is the backdrop for this desire to call a halt to the sounds of consumerism, media overload, and even intellectual innovation. When the secular means we use to insulate ourselves and maintain security, despite our fears, fail, extreme fear of heaven serves as a replacement for the fears of contemporary life.

In the United States, fear has become a major aspect of our culture. The social construction of American fear in the last thirty years has shifted its terminology from internal anxiety to an ever-present free-floating vulnerability and sense of risk. Fear is constructed based on one’s sense of sin, failings, or addiction. There is the fear of failure and the overwhelming fear of the post-9/11 world and general vulnerability before larger forces.⁹ Fear of God sets in because people do indeed feel that their lives are out of order. Yet once it has, Hasidism, with its ability to first acknowledge and then work within the human condition gives the modern fearful the resources to be religious. Many today, as always, tend to seek religion when they do not feel that all is well. Contemporary Orthodox Jews seek to find

God in any way possible, but especially as a kitchen deity, near to one's own struggles with making kugel, catching the LIRR, or fixing the car – fighting for them in the daily choices of the supermarket, playground, and office. Others find comfort in the magical thinking that the performance of halakhah will set everything aright. Yet without instruction on the proper fear of God such religious expressions simply don't do the modern banality that religious feeling arises to confront. The complex Hasidic articulation of fear of heaven can teach us to go further and seek conviction, our own sense of dependence, our own sense of the presence of God, and our own sense of immediacy. Maharal taught that in finding the self we are finding God. Safed Kabbalists taught that the study of the nature of God and the soul could provide religious and moral certainty. Hasidism teaches one to find God in all moments, an approach which provides us with a way to confront the world with moral seriousness and religious confidence.

If the above discussion of fear of God was utterly foreign, it may be because certain centrist Orthodox institutions specifically attract those who are not interested in Hasidic views on the fear of God. Or it may be that they are addressing their fears elsewhere, especially in external battles. "Fear needs no definition. It is a primal, and so to speak, subpolitical emotion," wrote the political scientist Raymond Aron. Yet fear is a poor adviser for the external social world, and we must fear those who live in fear since their judgment about the external world can be corrupted. We cannot judge the external world based on fear, or as Rashi taught "hatred destroys judgment (*sinah mikalkalet et hashurah*)." (Rashi Bereshit 22:3 based on Midrash).

What these early modern and early Hasidic accounts really provide are ways of converting destructive fear into useful fear. Fear can be a response to a personal anxiety, uncertainty, or vulnerability that arises from within. Such fear, as certain thinkers have acknowledged, can become destructive by resulting in depression and apathy. Fear can also come from without, from perceived uncontrollable forces beyond the self. This can lead to a demonizing of the other, the destructive consequences of which are obvious. Rav Nahman offers examples of both. He demonizes the modern world

and new challenges. He also deals with the fear of libidinal drives and weaknesses of mental health. But Rav Nahman could not stop the confrontation with modernity by recoiling in fear. Clearly the way we construct and use fear must be a central concern for a modern Orthodox audience that seeks neither depressive withdrawal nor sectarian isolationism. This paper suggests that *fear of God* can usefully govern our relationship and has sought to examine just what that term can and should mean for us.

CONCLUSION

The classics of early modern piety remain timeless for those seeking a personal sense of the Divine in their lives. As I mentioned at the outset, Hasidism is not about Zaddikim and the events of 250 years ago. Some seek an authentic Hasidic approach of continuously working on their faith, love, and fear of God using the writings of the Slonimer rebbe. They want the traditional. Others need an adaptation. Just as the Hasidic movement was a popularist adaptation of older pietistic works, so too we have a 150-year heritage of Neo-Hasidic works applying these texts to life in the Western world.

One example of a contemporary thinker using the Hasidic ideas of this paper is Rav Yehudah Amital, retired Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Har Etzion, who offers a paraphrase of the Kotzker rebbe he inherited from his grandmother. R. Amital distinguishes between “fear of God” and *frumkeit*; the former applies to one’s sense of doing the will of God at any given moment, while the latter describes one’s scrupulous performance of the *mitsvot*. As his grandmother taught him, *frum* is an anagram for “*fier rishus unvenig mizvos* – much wickedness and little action.” *Frumkeit* is not always a good thing and Rav Amital accepts this maternal critique of over-scrupulousness. Rather than taking an approach of *frumkeit* – habituation, external obedience, and scrupulousness – one should seek fear of God to reach one’s personal sense of divine command.¹⁰

How do we reach such fear today? R. Schneur Zalman of Liady (Tanya, ch. 41) discusses a lower fear of punishment and a higher fear of God’s grandeur as ever-present in God’s oneness. He prefers the latter and sees the former as only a step on the way. Rav Amital

argues that since today we no longer relate to the fear of punishment, we should return to the medieval ideas of God's exaltedness and grandeur. Since pietistic fear of God flows from the conception of God, to formulate a theology of God is essential, but alas I do not envision a return to either medieval or eighteenth century metaphysics. To be effective we need to creatively connect fear to a theology of God, mindful of both the need for theological continuity and the practical wane of medieval metaphysics. We need a standard by which to encourage ennobling theologies and to avoid the primitive, the kitchen deity, and the superstitious. Modern fears and these therapeutic practices, which it conditions, should not replace actual theologies of God based on the high theologies and philosophies of classic Jewish texts. If we cannot follow medieval Kavod theories, Aristotelian hierarchies, Maharal, and Cordovero, then we desperately need theologies of God for today. Also we cannot discuss fear without love. We have not had a conference on love of God, or on holiness, truth, integrity, dignity, or humility. Any discussion of the application of these Hasidic ideas of fear would need to discuss these broader religious issues.

In this paper, I offered several other models of fear that come from the pietistic works that influenced Hasidism and from Hasidism itself. Peter Berger argues that there are "signals of transcendence" as part of the human condition. Forty years ago to understand those signals, perhaps Otto was sufficient. But Otto's model of the fear of God encompasses neither the variety of models found in Hasidic texts, nor the variety of experiences in contemporary America. What I have tried to show is that recognizing the complexity of *fear of God* in early Hasidic texts offers us a richer set of tools for thinking about how to construct and position fear of God in our contemporary world than does Otto's overly-simple theory of the numinous. This paper seeks merely to open what must be a continual discussion keeping in mind that, as the Baal Shem Tov taught, "it is harder to become a God-fearing person than a scholar."

NOTES

1. A good place to enter these worldviews is Piero Camporesi, *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early Modern Europe* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).
2. This paper will not deal, however, with the many medieval elements in Hasidut. Nor will it deal with the traditional non-textual and physical forms of Eastern European fear of heaven such as regular immersion in a mikvah, asceticism, and wearing a *yarmulke* (or *kapel*) or the social elements of fearing heaven through rejecting doctors, modern life, and secular studies. Also beyond the scope of this paper are the major twentieth century trajectories of Hasidism that incorporate twentieth century perspectives, such as R. Kalonomous Kalman Shapira, and the writings of the last three Lubavitcher Rebbes. These texts have more to do with modernity and justly deserve their own full discussion. Finally, I have left the resources offered by Ramhal, Vilna Gaon, and Musar to another presenter.
3. See Alan Brill, "Maharal as an Early Modern Thinker." *Kabbalah*, 17 (2007).
4. Yorem Jacobson, "The Image of God as the Source of Man's Evil According to the Maharal of Prague," ed. Joseph Dan, *Binah*, Vol. 3, pp. 135–58.
5. On the importance of demons in the seventeenth century, see Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). One of the most thoughtful discussions of the role of demons in modern religion is found in Reginald A. Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000).
6. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Upright Practices and Enlightenment of the Eyes*, ed. Arthur Green (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982).
7. On the topic of Polish Hasidism, see Alan Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok HaKohen of Lublin* (New York: Yeshiva University Press/Ktav, 2002).
8. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
9. Frank Furedi, *The Culture of Fear: Risk Taking And The Morality Of Low Expectations*, (London: Cassell, 1997); Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability In an Uncertain Age* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
10. Alan Brill, "Worlds Destroyed, Worlds Rebuilt: The Religious Thought of R. Yehudah Amital," *Edah Journal*, 5:2 (Sivan, 2006).