



GASHMIUS MAGAZINE

Towards a Progressive neo-Hasidism



Mysticism and Moral Action

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VOLUME
III

The [introductory essay](#) to *Volume 2* argued that the classic Hasidic idea of *avodah b'gashmius* (worship through the physical world and through physical activities, such as eating and drinking) should also be seen as a moral imperative. We wrote:

The social and material conditions of our lives and our interactions are not to be ignored in favor of spirituality. We cannot spiritually bypass the reality of the world, including injustice and oppression. Those social and material conditions are instead an essential venue in which our spiritual ideals can, and must, come alive.

In this introductory essay for Volume 3, we wanted to expand this idea by showing how **a mystical theology can — and, we think, must— lead to moral action in the world.** To do this, let us first explore the goal of mysticism.

Devekus

As aspiring mystics, our desire is for G-d. Pure and simple: we want to taste the all-consuming holiness that we have read about. As Psalm 34 says, “Taste and see that God is good.” Or as the Piaseczner Rebbe

(Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, 1889-1943) writes, we seek the “whole-hearted service” of a prince who rejoices “to greet his father after an absence of years.” [1] Whether you call it G-d, the Universe, or *Shekhinah*, we want to know it intimately, and not just interact with it on an intellectual level.

Our mystical tradition teaches us that a central goal of religious experience is to bring us to a state of *devekus*. The specifics of *devekus* are different for different thinkers, but generally it refers to a state of cleaving to, or uniting with, the Divine. While the tradition is overflowing with descriptions of such mystical unions, the actual instructions about how to reach it are fewer. But some thinkers have drawn a connection between ethical action and this experience of merging with G-d.

The **Kabbalist** and communist Rabbi Yehudah Ashlag (1885-1954) argued that, although *devekus* is “the innermost desire of a human being,” equanimity is its prerequisite, which he believes can only be reached through altruistic acts. [2] Therefore, one must act morally in the world *before* one is able to reach union with the Divine.

Alternatively, contemporary hasidic teacher Rav Itche Meir Morgenstern teaches that a feeling of oneness with love for others can only come about *after* you have reached *devekus*, because altruistic love “naturally emerges from the recognition of G-dliness [that is the result of *devekus*].” [3] Once you have cleaved to the abstract Divine, you can’t help but sense a piece of it in those around you, which should then lead to ethical action.

In either framework, *devekus* and the moral actions involved in loving others are interdependent. Rather than saying that one causes the other, we believe that a mystical state of unity with God and an ethical state of moral behavior are co-occurrent, arising alongside each other as

two sides of the same coin. Some might argue that focusing on proper action takes us away from the intention of mystical practice — which is to reach *devekus* — but we at Gashmius believe quite the contrary! **Mystical experience should reinforce one’s resolve to act ethically in the world.** As author and social critic bell hooks writes, “A commitment to a spiritual life requires ... a willingness to unite the way we think with the way we act.” [4]

“Socio-Mystical Justice”

Sociologist Philip Wexler argues that mystical beliefs should result in a lived reality of “socio-mystical justice.” He writes that if you truly believe that everything in Creation is a manifestation of the Divine, then “justice must be endowed with a verticality, with a morality that transcends and overcomes the reductive and dehumanizing equations that emerge from the secularization of ethics.” [5]

In this framework, every person has inherent value, no matter who they are, what they have done, or whom they have hurt. “Without the vertical dimension,” Wexler continues, “a universal ethic reduces individual value— and ethical responsibility— to the transactional terms of one’s relationship with society.” [6]

This radical theology has far-reaching impacts in the real world. For example, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994) used this rationale to argue that the “punishment of incarceration cannot be entertained, because we thereby deny the perpetrator the possibility of fulfilling [their life’s] purpose.” [7] If we *know* that each person is inherently sacred because we have reached a state of *devekus* in which we experience the Divine within them, then dis-allowing them to live a full life is indefensible.

These teachings have become extremely needed in the Jewish world today. In the aftermath of the atrocities committed by Hamas against Israeli civilians on October 7th resulting in over 700 civilian deaths, hundreds more soldiers' deaths, as well as hundreds of hostages taken into Gaza [8], the IDF has embarked on an indiscriminate and deadly attack on the Palestinian civilians of Gaza. At the time of writing this, more than 28,400 Gazans have been killed (almost half of whom were children), over 68,100 are injured, and hundreds of thousands are starving. [9] These numbers are sure to rise in the coming months. If you hold fast to our stated mystical theology, then not only are the actions and policies that have led to this severe humanitarian crisis abhorrent and unconscionable, but they deface the pieces of G-d contained and embodied in each of those people.

In fact, mystical-anarchist Rabbi Shmuel Alexandrov (1865-1941) argued that experiencing the Unitive reality we long for as mystics naturally leads one to a sense of solidarity with others. He writes that it is only after one senses oneself “as a creation” that “the other is a brother or sister likewise ‘created in the image of God.’” [10] Scholar Hayyim Rothman explains that when this sense of mystical unity and fellowship is lost, “a man [becomes] estranged from heaven and earth [and] is [no longer] ‘his brother’s keeper’ — solidarity is lost.” [11] Drawing on the story of Cain and Abel, we learn that it was the loss of the mystical connection that allowed Cain to kill his own brother. In response, he is marked by G-d and exiled (Gen 4:15), which mirrors his exile from the rest of creation: he became cut off when he could no longer see the divinity in his brother. To recognize G-d in the world is to *become* your brother’s keeper.

Imagining the Future

In the words of prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba, we must begin this journey towards a redeemed world by asking “what can we imagine for ourselves and the world?...’ then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us.” [12] We must start with the belief that the state of things as they are now — whether that be our pre-*devekus* consciousnesses or societal injustices — need not stay that way. We must work towards changing both, and those processes are interdependent.

We believe that a Jewish mystical theology offers a vision of a world in which the holiness of every human being is recognized and each and every one is afforded infinite dignity. A world in which everything that exists is bound together through a hidden, but absolutely real, network of compassion.

But even more than providing spiritual resources for activism, we hope to articulate a vision of a world in which spirituality *is* activist, and activism *is* spiritual. We want to usher in a world where the distinctions between these categories can fall away. We hope to see the radical Jewish idea that mystical experience demands ethical action, and ethical action simultaneously enables mystical experience, actualized in our lifetimes.

Endnotes:

[1] Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *B’nei Machshavah Tovah*, introduction. Trans. Yaakov David Shulman, *Experiencing the Divine: A Guide to Jewish Spiritual Practice & Community* (Self published, 2017), 3.

[2] Hayyim Rothman, *No Masters But God: Portraits of Anarcho-Judaism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 139. Rothman is paraphrasing from Yehudah Ashlag, *The Writings of the Last Generation and the Nation* (Toronto: Laitman Kabbalah Publishers, 2015), 106.

[3] Itche Meir Morgenstern, *Sefer B’Yam Darkecha: Darkhei Avodah L’Ma’aseh* (Bnei Brak, 2022), perek 1:3, p 19. Translation by Jonah Gelfand.

[4] bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) , 77.

[5] Philip Wexler, Eli Rubin, and Michael Wexler, *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe’s Transformative Paradigm for the World* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2019), 196.

[6] Wexler, *Social Vision*, 192.

[7] Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat menachem hitvaduyot Vol. 1*, 195. Trans. Wexler, *Social Vision*, 190.

[8] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/14-kids-under-10-25-people-over-80-up-to-date-breakdown-of-oct-7-victims-we-know-about/>

[9] <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/live-updates-china-calls-israel-halt-military-operations-107182873#:~:text=The%20overall%20Palestinian%20death%20toll,civilians%2C%20and%20abducted%20around%20250> ; <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/live-blog/israel-hamas-war-live-updates-rafah-gaza-offensive-rcna138759>

[10] Shmuel Alexandrov, “Letter to Paltiel Katnelson, dated January,” Notebook of transcribed correspondence, Alexandrov Collection, Genazim Archives, Folder 143, 1910. Accessed via Rothman, *No Masters*, 107.

[11] Rothman, *No Masters*, 107 quoting Alexandrov, “Takhlit Ma’aseh Shamayim wa-Arez: Perek Alef,” *Ha-eshkol*, ed A. Ginsburg. (Krakow: Yosef Fisher, 1899).

[12] Mariame Kaba, “So You’re Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist, LEVEL Oct 2020,” in *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 5.

Glossary

Term	Def
Mysticism	“A belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.” (oxford dictionary online)
<i>Devekus</i>	a state of cleaving to, or uniting with, the Divine
Kabbalist	A practitioner who engages in <i>Kabbalah</i> , or the practice of Jewish mysticism
Kabbalah	The central tradition within Jewish mysticism