

Neo-Hasidism & Neo-Kabbalah in Israeli Contemporary Spirituality: The Rise of the Utilitarian Self

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In this article I would like to explore the rise of what can be called “the utilitarian self” in the contemporary spirituality arena in Israel. This social reality, which has its origins in the religious field of late nineteenth century America, is in Judaic social circles quite a recent development, and has begun to play a significant part of Israeli contemporary spirituality only since the 1990’s. I would like to suggest that the proliferation of certain Neo-Kabbalah and Neo-Hasidic movements since the 1990’s is indicative of its rise. By examining these we can better understand the utilitarian self, which lies at their background and presents the cultural conditions for their popularity.

I will therefore present a few typical examples of the utilitarian self’s manifestation in Israel, and will then try to clarify the socio-cultural reasons for its prevalence at this time. Let us start, however, with a description of the subject matter. The utilitarian self, I propose, is a particular hybrid of the Romantic spirit and Enlightenment rationalism, joined together by means of capitalist instrumental reason. It represents the current fascination with finding ways - indeed methods or techniques - which will allow one to actualize and exercise her or his “hidden” or “unrealized” capabilities in order to undergo an inner transformation and maximize the external conditions of her or his life.

Paul Heelas, from whom I borrow this term, provides three key assumptions that lie at the heart of the utilitarian self’s identity:

That something powerful lies within the person; that this can be tapped and improved; and that it can be utilized to enable the person to operate more successfully in obtaining what the material world has to offer. (Heelas 1996: 166)

The utilitarian self is a development of the Romantic’s expressive self, which, since the eighteenth century, sought to discover and contact our innermost being, deemed to be a natural and primal impulse, an “*élan*”, to put it in Charles Taylor’s words (Taylor 1989: 370). This *élan* is a force running through all creation, and since it also lies as the very essence of all human beings, we can know it by looking within, or by being true to our innermost selves. Thus in connecting to the *élan* of nature we are able to express outwardly our authentic and unique self. Indeed, such an expression is not only considered our birthright, but is given normative value, and so becomes the definition of “the good life” (Ibid. 372).

In contrast to the expressive self, the utilitarian self is less concerned with normative questions, and the mission it lays before the individual is less of an ethical order, and more of a pragmatic one. As I will elaborate on in the final section of this article, the utilitarian self - influenced by the spirit of capitalism - sees the basic resonance of one’s *élan* with that of the universe as a way to influence the world around it. A person’s connection to her or his true self is thus seen primarily not as a way to live an authentic life, but as a means to harness the powers of heaven and earth in order to enrich oneself, both spiritually and materially.

Following such an instrumental course of thought, a systematic method is considered vital for the efficient development of this connection and for gaining the proper benefits from it. It is this change in emphasis that I would like to present in the following pages, by using examples from the contemporary spirituality scene in Israel. Focusing on two main groups, I will begin with current Orthodox Neo-Hasidic popularizers of the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, and continue with the non-Orthodox Neo-Kabbalistic movements which fashion an up-to-date version of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag's socialist Kabbalah. These examples of the utilitarian self are not, of course, unique. Indeed, they are simply illustrations of a very wide and diverse social phenomenon. Emerging from the Jewish tradition, however, they demonstrate the force of this religious adjustment. As a characteristically collective religious tradition, the rise of the utilitarian self is highlighted by a background very dissimilar from it, which makes identifying it all the more easy. I will begin by fleshing out this background, proceed to presenting the utilitarian developments, and will finally try to decipher the cultural and social roots which lie at the base of the rise of the utilitarian self.

Bratslav Hasidism and Rabbi Nachman's *Hitbodedut*

The Bratslav Hasidic community in Israel has since the 1990s experienced an unprecedented burgeoning. As one of the primary sites for welcoming Ba'al Teshuva (BT) Jews (i.e. Jews who are "returning" from a secular lifestyle to a religiously observant one) back into the fold (Garb 2009; Weinstock 2011), Bratslav is perhaps the fastest growing Hasidic group in Israel. With fast growth, however, come fast changes.

Since the death of its founder, Rabbi Nachman, Bratslav Hasidim do not answer to one authority. While there has always been, and still is, a distinct and very traditional group of Ultra-Orthodox Hasidim at the center of the court, the absence of unified leadership allows for the formation of many different sub-courts each presenting its own variation on the Bratslav theme. As BT individuals bring with them the dispositions and preferences of (post-)modern western culture, the formation of new forms of community, and indeed of worship, within the Bratslav world, should not surprise us.

I will henceforth present two leading figures', each at the head of his own Bratslav sub-court, particular interpretations of Rabbi Nachman's teachings on one of the fundamental pillars of the Bratslav Hasidic way, the practice of *Hitbodedut*. The spiritual leaders discussed below, Israel Isaac Besancon and Erez Moshe Doron, are two prominent members of a group of Bratslav Rabbis attracting BT Jews and presenting popular instructions on *Hitbodedut* for the Hebrew reading public in Israel.

Like other leaders of Bratslav sub-courts, Besancon and Doron disseminate their teachings by writing books. These texts are designed to make Bratslav Hasidism accessible to the general public, and are usually not more than the Bratslav version of self help books, a genre which itself is closely connected to the rise of the utilitarian self (Heelas 1996: 167-168). Speaking in the name of Rabbi Nachman, the books focus on giving encouragement and instructions to Jewish followers, suggesting different ways to conduct their lives towards their emotional well-being and financial fortitude.

These authors have also written specific books concerning *Hitbodedut* practice, on which I will focus here, for it is within these books that the shift regarding Rabbi Nachman's teachings,

from a more traditional structure into a utilitarian one, can be most clearly noticed. The Bratslav Tzadik required his followers to spend an hour each day in *Hitbodedut*, and therefore it is no surprise that this practice is one of the best known and central characteristics of Bratslav Hasidism (Mark 2003).

As a technical term “*Hitbodedut*” has a long history in the Jewish mystical tradition, and usually connotes a form of mental concentration (Idel 1988a; Idel 1988b). Rabbi Nachman, however, uses it often in its basic and literal meaning, which simply means going into seclusion (e.g. *Likutey Moharan Tinyana* part 25). Most often, however, it denotes a simple candid talk with God, in which the Hasid is expected to open his heart and cry out his troubles and wishes to the heavens above (e.g. *Ibid.*, parts 25, 54, 96; *Sichot Haran*, part 234; *Chayey Moharan*, parts 436, 440, 441). On several occasions Rabbi Nachman goes further, and teaches that the seclusion and the frank talk with God are supposed to bring about an ecstatic mystical experience, in which the Hasid nullifies his own self and is drawn into the divine being (*Likutey Moharan* part 52, *Likutey Moharan Tinyana* parts 95, 98, 99).¹

I will not go in detail into Rabbi Nachman’s instructions for the practice of *Hitbodedut*, but will simply note that at no place does he describe *Hitbodedut* as a method to be used, or as a system to be applied, in order to achieve a certain goal. He does state once that *Hitbodedut* is the only way to attain nullification of the self (*Likutey Moharan* part 52), although as such it is far from a systematic path, but a passionate abjuration realized through intense crying and shouting. Rabbi Nachman’s teachings make it clear that the *Hitbodedut* is supposed to be a time of intimate connection – whether through candid conversation or mystical experience – with the divine. As we shall presently see, it is some of Rabbi Nachman’s contemporary interpreters that will form it into a system.

Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron’s interpretation of *Hitbodedut*

Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron is one of the most popular leaders of the Bratslav BT upsurge. Born in 1962, Doron began his own spiritual quest at the beginning of the 1980’s. He joined the Israeli Union for Parapsychology,² and within two years became its chairman. In a popular media interview he recalls he was exposed there to “a salad of ideas: a bit of east, a bit of west, a bit of Judaism.” (Cohen 2011: 29-30).³ Doron eventually started a process of *Teshuva*, finding his place in the Bratslav community. Today he heads the Lev Ha’Devarim organization for the propagation of Bratslav teachings, and is a self-proclaimed “authority for questions regarding *Hitbodedut*.” (Doron 2008c: 16).

Doron has written a number of books concerning *Hitbodedut*, from which it is clear that he has come to view the traditional Bratslav practice a specific meditative method. For Doron *Hitbodedut* is one of many meditative techniques, though unique in being Jewish, and so much so that it is, according to him, “the very thing that sets us apart as Jews” (Doron 2008c: 17). Furthermore, Doron makes it clear that the “method of *Hitbodedut*” (*Ibid.*) is “the only key” that will deliver us out of adversity and bring us into “real intimacy with God forever” (*Ibid.* 15). “[E]verything depends on it”, he states (*Ibid.* 14).

Doron sees *Hitbodedut* as “Jewish Meditation” (*Ibid.* 30. quotation marks in original). He writes that it is

[A] Jewish method of disconnecting consciousness from the senses and connecting it to the higher worlds. [... *Hitbodedut* is] a spiritual practice which is able to detach man from tangible reality and connect him to much deeper levels. (Ibid. 30-31)

Elsewhere Doron describes *Hitbodedut* as “the original and most amazing martial art”, able to overcome “the slings and arrows of the cruel adversary – the arrows of despair, the arrows of negligence, the arrows of deadly sadness or the arrows of vainglory and other anesthetic drugs” (Doron 2008b: 17-18). In another book Doron expounds his understanding of *Hitbodedut* in further detail:

Meditation, in its usual definition, deals with protecting consciousness from the load of information [coming] from external stimulations. The mode of defense is a temporary disconnection of consciousness from the senses, thus creating a relaxation of consciousness. After a disconnection of consciousness (or contemporaneous to it), begins the next stage, [that] of connecting to a higher spiritual reality, to which regular consciousness is usually not exposed. According to this definition, there is a form of “Jewish Meditation”, meaning a Jewish method of disconnecting consciousness from the senses and connecting it to the higher worlds. (Doron 2008a: 256)

As can be understood from Doron’s writings, *Hitbodedut* for him is a meditative practice utilizing a mantra in order to achieve concentration, and thus disengagement from sense datum (Doron 2008b: 52-54). Elsewhere I have noted how different Doron’s meditative method is from the Rabbi Nachman’s teachings on *Hitbodedut* (who never mentions the use of a mantra), and how much they rather resemble Yoga-like concentration based techniques (Persico 2012: 436; Persico 2013). I therefore will not engage with his sources of influence here.⁴ It is vital, however, to understand the change in character, not only in practice, that Doron displays here.

Doron both elevates and flattens *Hitbodedut*. It is at once the most important single Jewish practice, the very essence of being Jewish, and conjointly is not a unique spiritual practice given by Rabbi Nachman, but merely one meditative method (or a martial art) among many, comparable to those of non-Jewish spiritual teachers. *Hitbodedut* is no longer seen as a special period during the day meant to enable the Bratslav Hasid to find intimacy with the divine. It is a method for self manipulation and adjustment.

Hitbodedut affects not only the self. Doron describes *Hitbodedut* as a “weapon”, to be used by the Bratslav Hasid: politically against Ishmael (i.e., the Arab and/or Muslim world) (Doron 2008b: 14), and metaphysically in order to bring about redemption (Ibid. 15). As such it is of course of great importance, and Doron wishes to “open schools for *Hitbodedut*, where children will systematically and deeply study its ways and gates, and in which generations of warriors of light will be raised, seekers of true freedom” (Ibid. 21).

It is clear from the above quotes that *Hitbodedut* has been taken out of its original context and planted in 20th and 21st century Israel. It is now a system to be taught in schools and utilized not only as a meditative method for the individual, but as a weapon in a political and eschatological struggle. First and foremost, however, Doron’s *Hitbodedut* is the perfect solitary meditative method.

Rabbi Israel Isaac Besancon’s interpretation of *Hitbodedut*

Rabbi Israel Isaac Besancon was born in France in 1944. After immigrating to Israel he became a student of Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Bender, one of the most influential Bratslav leaders of the twentieth century. Today he belongs to the “Na-Nach” sub-court, which follows the late Yisroel Ber Odesser, and leads his own community within it. Located in Tel-Aviv, it is popular amongst young Religious-Zionist⁵ Israelis.

Besancon teaches that *Hitbodedut* is “the key of keys”, “the weapon that will allow us to conquer the world”, a “secret”, disclosed by Rabbi Nachman and meant to help the individual Jew reach “personal redemption” (Besancon 2001: 4). Indeed, for Besancon *Hitbodedut* is the path to “original Judaism”, meant to transform its practitioners into “true Jews” (Ibid. 84). Finally, he states that

When we understand the value of *Hitbodedut* and resolutely decide to set a time, evening or morning, to conduct a personal and candid talk with the Maker, we are walking the path towards our personal redemption. [...] When this universal method spreads to the four winds, a total redemption will quickly be brought about. (Ibid. 63-64)

For Besancon, then, *Hitbodedut* is a “universal method”, meant apparently not only for Jews, even though it does make one a “true” Jew. *Hitbodedut* brings personal redemption, and when set on a global scale, will naturally engender global emancipation. At another place Besancon describes *Hitbodedut* as one of many “techniques” – albeit the safest (Ibid. 5). Besancon thus aligns *Hitbodedut* on par with many other “techniques”, making it, in point of fact, into a therapeutic method, and not simply a way to worship or encounter God.⁶

But what is actually to be practiced? In the former quote Besancon speaks of “a personal and candid talk with the Maker”, but at other times he goes into greater detail, and discloses how much he has been influenced by contemporary spirituality’s cultic milieu. Indeed, for Besancon what Rabbi Nachman taught is quite similar to Buddhist meditation:

In its essence, the goal of *Hitbodedut* is to disconnect our consciousness, even partly, from all the stimulations that pull it in different and scattered directions, in order to connect it back to its spiritual root. This temporary disconnection from the noisy surroundings brings calm, mental stability, that help us found personal relationships with our Maker, to learn to be assisted by Him, blessed be He, and to win a measure of *Devekut* – which promises us supreme spiritual happiness. [...] Insofar as we will be able to persist in these [*Hitbodedut*] meetings, after a few times we will talk to God, blessed be He, in our language, we will be able, sometimes, to feel His presence. In the light of this splendor we shall be able with ease to look inside as well, to our real inner self. Without make-up or fear our ego will be revealed to us under the generous supervision of the divine Being. In this way the secrets of our soul will be revealed to our eyes, slowly, and we will be surprised to discover in it a hidden glamour, which was waiting to be disclosed. At the same time, the spiritual light will shine on the intricate net of our feelings, and expose the sources of wrong patterns of thought and behavior, of which we were previously unaware. (Ibid. 5-6)

Hitbodedut is presented here as a method of meditative introspection, in the process of which the practitioner learns about himself.⁷ This inner reflection is facilitated by the “light of [God’s] splendor”, and indeed it is the divine Being that will supervise one’s inner journey. God is no

longer the goal of this particular spiritual quest, but the vehicle through which one reaches his goal, his “real inner self”, which holds “hidden glamour”. After therapeutically disentangling the “complicated net of our feelings” and the “wrong patterns of thought and behavior”, this technique will lead the practitioner to *Devekut*,⁸ and finally to “supreme spiritual happiness”.

Obviously, the prime objective of Besancon’s *Hitbodedut* has ceased to be the divine, and is now the human self. It is this self that learns how to utilize the practice for its own well being, while using God to help it on its journey. *Hitbodedut* for Besancon is a technique for bringing God’s light down into the self. Whereby Rabbi Nachman it as an encounter in which the self annuls itself and rises up to God. I have written elsewhere on the obvious influence of Vipassana meditation on Besancon’s interpretation of *Hitbodedut* (Persico 2012: 427-430; Persico 2013), and so will not expand on it here. It is imperative to note, however, that for the contemporary Bratslav popularizer *Hitbodedut* has indeed become a form of Jewish Vipassana, and, as such,⁹ an international meditative technique¹⁰ presented to the individual and aimed at his personal therapeutic use and inner spiritual development.

Rabbi Yehuda Leib Ashlag and the meaning of “Kabbalah”

Kabbalah is widely known today as the “esoteric” or “mystical” part of the Jewish tradition, though such wide recognition questions its presumed esotericity. As for the title “mystical”, since the popularity of that phrase points mainly to contemporary interest in ecstatic experiences and self-transforming practices, it should be taken to denote a comparative and perennialist understanding of the subject matter, propagated through both the academic study of religion and the spiritual-cultic milieu since the nineteenth century (Huss 2012). Both attributes, therefore, should be taken *cum grano salis*, and more than anything are testimonies to the changes this traditional body of knowledge has undergone.

Developed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Kabbalah (along with Maimonidean rationalism, Ashkenazi Hasidism and Ibn Ezra’s astrology) was one Jewish answer to the rising questions of an age that was growing more literate, city-oriented and exposed to Hellenistic philosophy (Dan 1992; Idel 2002: 280-282, 396-398).¹¹ In very general terms, it is a large and multilayered corpus of literature, comprising commentary on canonical Jewish texts, varied interpretations of the Halakha and different customs, and instructions for various mystical techniques.

Kabbalah, at least until the last few decades, held two principal “secrets”: the structure and dynamics of the divine worlds, and the specific connections between the different Halakhic commandments and the rectification of those worlds. It is thus an esoteric lore meant to position the Jewish man both metaphysically and normatively. Over the centuries Kabbalah has developed into varied schools and underwent diverse transformations, though up to and including the beginning of the twentieth century these basic pillars of Kabbalah were maintained, and are still maintained in ultra-Orthodox Kabbalistic circles (Giller 2008; Garb 2010). As we shall presently see, contemporary Neo-Kabbalah’s emphasis lies elsewhere.

Both of the two most popular Neo-Kabbalistic movements, The Kabbalah Centre and Bnei Baruch, stem from the same tree, the one that Rabbi Yehuda Leib Ashlag (1885–1955) planted. One of the foremost Kabbalists of the first half of the twentieth century, Ashlag crafted a modern interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah that blends a Hegelian historical comprehension with a

Marxist social vision and a few fundamental psychological insights. Global redemption for Ashlag meant collective transcendence of the Ego, to be brought about by the extensive dissemination of (his version of) Kabbalah.

Born in Warsaw to a Hasidic family, Ashlag was exposed early on both to Kabbalah and to the scientific and ideological innovations of the *fin de siècle*. In 1921 he left for Palestine, where he devoted his life to writing and circulating his interpretation of Kabbalah. Two of his students, Levi Isaac Krakovsky (1891-1966) and Yehuda Zvi Brendwein (1903-1969) attempted to continue his work in the United States, with little success. There they met Shraga Feivel Gruberger, who would become Philip Berg, and handed the torch to him. Berg adapted and continue their work in the Kabbalah Centre. He, in turn, along with Baruch Ashlag (in Israel), also taught Michael Laitman, the founder of Bnei Baruch (Meir 2007; Myers 2007; Meir 2013).

In the following sections I will consider a small but characteristic sample of the ways in which the Kabbalah Centre and Bnei Baruch interpreted and adjusted Ashlag's teachings. In order to make my examples as emblematic as possible, I will examine how the very concept of "Kabbalah" is reinterpreted in these movements. I believe that studying the transformations of this term will enable us to observe quite clearly the significant change in the emphasis and meaning ascribed to it.

What, then, is Kabbalah? As noted at the beginning of this section, what the word stands for today is an illustration of the transformation it has traversed since it has become in many ways disconnected from its traditional configuration at the beginning of the twentieth century (Garb 2012). Though Ashlag himself, as mentioned above, adapted Kabbalah to modernity, I will take his definition of Kabbalah as a point of reference. In two introductory articles, both written in the 1930's and meant for a popular audience,¹² Ashlag defines Kabbalah. In the first, "The Essence of the Lore of Kabbalah", he states that Kabbalah

is, no more or less, an order of root-causes, descending by way of antecedents and consequents, according to regular and absolute laws, which conjoin and target one very high goal, that is named "revealing His godliness to his created beings in this world." (Ashlag 2009: 15)

In the second article, "The Teachings of Kabbalah and Their Essence", Ashlag asserts that

The wisdom of Kabbalah in general is the matter of divine disclosure, set in order by His ways in all His aspects, from what is revealed in the worlds, and from what will be revealed in the future, and in every way that it is possible to ever be revealed in the worlds, until the end of time. (Ashlag 2009: 21)

As can be understood by both quotes, for Ashlag the Kabbalah is first and foremost divine wisdom, a map of the heavenly worlds as well as an explanation of the way in which they affect the earthly ones. It is a systematic body of knowledge, meant to help Man in understanding God, the creation and the connection between the two (stretched along the historical process), the full comprehension of which *is* divine revelation.

While Ashlag did write about a personal inner transformation of the individual (and thus was a modern Kabbalist), he did not describe Kabbalah as method to be used toward this transformation, nor did he think this transformation was an individual process. For Ashlag the

change, i.e. giving up our egoistic drive and changing into altruistic and “giving” individuals, was to come about through observing the Jewish Halakhic law, studying Kabbalah, and leading generous relationships with others (Huss 2006: 115; Myers 2007: 63). Such conditions would be possible only in a society which would allow the individual to cease caring for his or her own needs, and begin caring for others’ (Huss 2006: 116).

It is clear that for Ashlag Kabbalah was divine knowledge meant to enlighten Jews (and not non-Jews) as to the way to become altruistic beings, and that a necessary part of this way was to build a communist, or at least socialist, society. Ashlagian Kabbalah can therefore be very schematically defined as an ethnocentric and society-centered corpus of divine wisdom.

Rabbi Philip Berg and the Kabbalah Centre’s Kabbalah

The leaders of the Kabbalah Centre the meaning of their teaching in quite different terms. Founded by Berg (then Gruberger) in 1965 and originally called the National Institute for Research in Kabbalah, the movement underwent two main phases. The first, which lasted until the beginning of the 1990’s, was characterized by a slightly more conservative approach, closer and more continuous with Ashlagian (and Brendweinian) Kabbalah, in the name of which Berg reached out almost solely to American and Israeli Jews – mentioning the essential connection between Kabbalah and Halakha and the Jewish people’s special and unique place in history and within the divine plan. In the second phase Berg undertook, as it were, a mission to the gentiles, dropping the centrality of Halakha and the exclusive status of the Jews (Myers 2007: 52-73). Not surprisingly perhaps, in is since the beginning of the 1990’s that The Kabbalah Centre has flourished.

In corresponding with the change in its outreach agenda, the Kabbalah Centre also changed its conception of Kabbalah. While in the 1981 edition of his main textbook, *Kabbalah for the Layman* Berg insisted that “Kabbalah lies at the very heart of the system of holy actions and deeds known as *mitzvot*; without these actions, the life of a Jew is considered incomplete and lacking” (quoted in Myers 2007: 67), in the revised 1991 edition this has been changed, and “comments about Judaism [are] just a passing reference” (Ibid. 68). In the 2012 edition of the book the word “mitzvot” cannot be found at all and Kabbalah is described as “A system, that can deal intelligently with all the problems thrown up by existence in the twentieth [*sic*] century.” (Berg 2012: 4)

Of Berg’s two sons, Yehuda is more prolific a writer, who has also authored a few bestsellers. The most known of these is *The Power of Kabbalah: Thirteen Principles to Overcome Challenges and Achieve Fulfillment*, which has been translated into twenty languages. Its subtitle indicates the book’s utilitarian treatment of the subject. In its introduction, the first mention of Kabbalah in any explanatory context teaches us that “Kabbalah encourages us to expand who we are in order to achieve a lasting flow of fulfillment—not the fleeting variety that lets us down again and again” (Berg 2010a: 4).

In the former volume’s “companion book”, *Living Kabbalah: A Practical System for Making the Power Work for You*, the subtitle of which is also significant, the first appearance of the word “Kabbalah” stresses that

Kabbalah is about action; it's not some cryptic philosophy. With this in mind, we ask that you be practical. [...] Kabbalah tools—which we call k-Tools—will help reveal new insights that will lead to profound changes in your perspective, awareness, and actions” (Berg 2010b: xi)

From these references it is quite obvious that the Kabbalah Centre's leaders see Kabbalah first and foremost as a “system”, centered on the self, and meant to satisfy his or her needs and assist his or her progress along the spiritual path. Contrary to Ashlag's understanding of Kabbalah, the Centre does not view it as an ethnocentric and society-oriented body of wisdom, but a source of handy and effective tools (or rather, “k-tools”) at the disposal of the individual.

Berg taught Kabbalah while visiting Israel all through the 1970's, as well as during his residence in Israel in 1983-4. At the end of the 1970's a permanent centre was established in Tel-Aviv, in which Berg gave special classes at the beginning of each Jewish month and in Jewish holidays, though the usual activity consisted of evening lessons for adults. The main teacher at that time was Jeremy Langford.¹³ The centre itself was too small for any communal gathering, and holiday celebrations were conducted in rented hostels. A small, short-lived Yeshiva for intense study was also founded (Meir 2013: 264). It is only since the beginning of the 1990's that the model of today's centers, which draw great crowds and in which all the activity is held, was initiated, and a significant growth in the scope of The Kabbalah Centre's activities was witnessed.¹⁴ In 1998 there were already three Kabbalah Centre houses in Israel, in 2006 four centers, and today the movement maintains six centers in Israel (interestingly, none of them in Jerusalem), facilitating activities for thousands of followers.

Since in Israel the Kabbalah Centre reaches out only to Jews, the reason for its growth cannot be openness to non-Jews. Instead, I propose, it is the change in emphasis, and characterization and portrayal of Kabbalah not as ancient wisdom but as a pragmatic system offering tools for self-development, thus enabling the individual to “achieve fulfillment” and “mak[e] the power work” (to quote the subtitles of the above mentioned books) for him or her which contributes to the movement's growth in Israel. Myers observes that

Since the major revision of the curriculum in the 1990's kabbalistic ideas and their implications have been described as “12 Rules for the Game of Life”. They provide people with a simple method of recognizing their impulses and channeling their desires in a direction that will elevate, improve and refine their soul. (Myers 2007: 76)

The Kabbalah Centre thus literally rebranded Kabbalah, presenting it as a practical set of rules or tools dedicated to the self-fulfillment of their members.

This move was not confined to the exterior packaging of the “product” only. As noted by Huss, since the 1990's the Kabbalah Centre has introduced “kabbalistic practices which did not play a central role in Ashlag's Kabbalah (such as scanning the Zohar and the meditative use of the seventy-two names of God)” (Huss 2005: 617). These are meant to confer spiritual and physical benefits on the individual (Myers 2007: 127, 132, 137), and supplement the change in the characterization of Kabbalah from a esoteric body of knowledge to a universal box of tools.

I will elaborate below on how the rise of the utilitarian self that has created the demand for such teachings. It is the willingness and flexibility of the Kabbalah Centre that allowed for the satisfaction of such a demand.

Rabbi Michael Laitman and Bnei Baruch's Kabbalah

Michael Laitman began his journey into the secrets of Kabbalah under the tutelage of Philip Berg, but eventually became the student of Yehuda Leib Ashlag's son, Baruch Ashlag, becoming his personal assistant in 1979 (Myers 2007: 60). After the latter's death in 1991, Laitman founded Bnei Baruch (literally "sons of Baruch") and started teaching his interpretation of Ashlagian Kabbalah. During the first few years of his activity Laitman drew mainly Israelis who – like Laitman himself – immigrated from the former Soviet Union (Meir 2007: 191). After 1996 more and more native-born Israelis joined the group. During this time Laitman expanded his proselytizing and teaching overseas as well (Ben-Tal 2010: 158), with books and internet sites translated to a number of languages –English and Russian at first, and then up to 33 more languages (Ibid. 159-160; Meir 2007: 192).

Today Bnei Baruch is by far the most successful new religious movement in Israel, numbering a few thousands in the inner, most committed circle, and a few tens of thousands of students and long-distance believers (Ben-Tal 2010: 161).¹⁵ It is attracting numerous Israeli celebrities, has its own cable television channel and its own municipal political party (*Yachad*, in the city of Petah Tikvah). Its success has created a backlash of investigative newspaper articles focusing on its authoritarian and messianic characteristics,¹⁶ but so far none that even closely endangered the well-being of the group.

Laitman teaches a doctrine similar to Berg's, though a bit more conservative. Though his group is open to non-Jews, women are excluded from the core of the Kabbalistic activity. Like Berg, he views the Halakha as non-compulsory advice for spiritual development. However, as in The Kabbalah Centre, Bnei Baruch's inner circle observe the Jewish law. Laitman's theology places the transformation of the individual from egocentric "wanter" to altruistic "giver" as a personal soteriological ideal. There is also a strong messianic current running through his teachings, the end vision of which includes the rebuilding of the Jewish temple and the dictatorial rule of the Kabbalists, with or without a preceding apocalypse. This is perhaps due to the fact Laitman is situated in Israel. (Meir 2007: 196-199, 214-216).

Grand visions of universal rule notwithstanding, Bnei Baruch have a very simple message for the individual. This can be learned from the way in which they define Kabbalah itself. In numerous introductory books, most of which can be found and downloaded freely from the internet, Kabbalah is presented as a method (or system, or technique – in Hebrew *Shita*), by which to develop one's self and/or gain exciting experiences.

Thus, the very first sentence in Laitman's 2003 *The Kabbalah Experience* (Heb) states that "The wisdom of Kabbalah is a method that teaches man how to live in the reality laid out before him" (Laitman 2006a: 7). True to the book's title, Kabbalah is defined through it as a means to experience "the spiritual world", "the Creator", "only the good and eternal" and/or "mind intensity" (Ibid. 22, 31, 42, 74, 165). In Laitman's 2005 book, *Kabbalah, Science and the Meaning of Life* (Heb), the first mention of Kabbalah defines it as a new and scientific world view, one that "develops tools within us that welcome us into a comprehensive reality and

provide means to research it” (Laitman 2006b: 10). The 2006 English edition states the same (Laitman 2006c: 13).

This angle is emphasized again in Laitman’s *A Look at Kabbalah* (2006, Heb). Kabbalah here is a “means to get to the good”; “a method that teaches how to get the feeling of the spiritual world”; “a method [giving knowledge] how to change one’s fate”; “a method by which man and humanity reach perfect and eternal life”; and the only way “to draw the heavenly light [... and] be happy” (Laitman 2006d: 28, 47, 60, 149, 175).

From the English *Basic Concepts in Kabbalah: Expanding Your Inner Vision*, which was published during the same year, we learn that “The path of Kabbalah is a path of independent and voluntary realization of the need to gradually terminate egoism” and that “The essence of Kabbalah lies in enabling a person to attain the ultimate level of development without suffering”. Kabbalah is here formally defined as “a method for revealing the Creator to the created beings existing in this world” (Laitman 2006e: 17, 43, 93).

Kabbalah in Laitman's eyes is first and foremost a functional tool for self improvement. While he does also present Kabbalah as a “science”, and thus as a body of knowledge (e.g. Laitman 2006a: 25, 221; Laitman 2006b: 22), these references are fewer in number, and at their end lies again the wish to use this “science” in order to develop oneself.

Indeed, this understanding has clearly been keenly adopted by Laitman’s followers. A review of introductory books edited by some of his leading pupils shows that the treatment of Kabbalah as a technique for care of the self is even more accentuated. In the 2007 book *Kabbalah for the People* (Heb) the word “Method” (*shita*) is used to describe Kabbalah more than forty times, and with varied and disparate objectives, from “spiritual development” through “reaching the top”, “achieving perfection”, “achieving the greatest pleasure”, and up to “getting all the good in existence” (Aharoni 2007: 28, 50, 110, 118). In the 2012 book *Preface to the Wisdom of Kabbalah* (Heb) the same word is used more than eighty times to describe Kabbalah, with similar goals to be sought (Levi 2012).¹⁷

Laitman, who started teaching in the 1990’s, did not, have to adapt and change his work as Berg did. Indeed, he presented Kabbalah as a pragmatic and efficient method for self development right from the start of his teaching career. Contrary to Ashlag’s view that individual development is dependent and corresponding to the change in society as a whole (Huss 2006: 115-116), Laitman suggests that “Attainment occurs through inner work on ourselves” (Laitman 2006e: 97), and that in fact “there is no need to repair the world, because the only thing that needs fixing is man. Once we repair ourselves, we will find out that the world is perfect” (Aharoni 2007: 131).

Conclusion: The Rise of the Utilitarian Self

The examples of Jewish and Israeli contemporary spirituality which were discussed above point to a specific and narrow path in which these popular New-Age phenomena tread. Both Orthodox popularizers of Rabbi Nachman’s *Hitbodedut* and non-Orthodox popularizers of Rabbi Ashlag’s Kabbalah have molded traditional knowledge or practice into a modern practical and utilitarian system aimed at self improvement. Thus shaped and rebranded, these methods serve as ready-to-use religious applications for the universal spiritual seeker, waiting to be picked up by

him or her from the shelf of the spiritual supermarket (Roof 2001). Indeed, the examples of Neo-Hasidism and Neo-Kabbalah brought here are basically Jewish equivalents of Yoga or Transcendental Meditation, i.e. universalized and homogenized “techniques”, cut out of their traditional settings and “stripped for export”, as it were.¹⁸

The resemblance to Yoga and modern appropriations of Hindu and Buddhist meditations has to be qualified, though. Originating from a traditional Jewish background, both Neo-Hasidism and Neo-Kabbalah do not have ethical “spiritual paths” tailored for the individual as do the far-eastern traditions.¹⁹ Thus in order to adjust themselves to the rise of the utilitarian self they had to transform the very religious logic by which they work, and at times, as we have seen, also import and appropriate far-eastern meditative techniques. The fact that this was indeed accomplished demonstrates the force and thrust of the rise of the utilitarian self, and confirms its coercing influence. The reasons for this will now be explained.

As stated at the beginning of the article, I propose that it was the rise of the utilitarian self that brought the space, and indeed the need, for this transformation in religious character. In other words, it is no coincidence that Doron, Besancon, Berg and Laitman all present, *mutatis mutandis*, a very similar grasp of the function of religion, or the primal practices of religion, and their place in the individual’s life. Nor did they all independently come up with similar points of religious emphasis by chance. As can be seen from Philip Berg’s teaching career, it is only when he learned how to cater to the needs of the late twentieth century western spiritual seeker that the Kabbalah Centre succeeded in drawing the masses in. I will now briefly outline the process by which the utilitarian self came to dominate the contemporary spiritual scene.

As Charles Taylor has demonstrated, modernity has changed religion first and foremost through providing alternative sources of meaning and morality to the north Atlantic world, and subsequently to further areas of its influence. Under the general title of “the massive subjective turn of western culture” (Taylor 1991: 26), Taylor traces the process through which what was assigned and consigned to the transcendental beyond has, since the seventeenth century, gradually internalized and made a part of our very selves.

According to Taylor’s analysis, Descartes’ thought is an exemplary illustration of the central and predominant place given to disengaged rationality, first circulating among the elite in the seventeenth century, as a means for discerning not only the value and validity of the world around us, but the normative significance of our own inner world, and thus the actions following its motives and intentions. (Taylor 1989: 143-153).

This ethical direction, epitomized in Kant’s thought, was challenged in the second half of the eighteenth century by a cultural and intellectual movement that would later come to be known as Romanticism. It is then, expressed characteristically through the works of Rousseau, that we are asked to regain touch with the voice of nature within us, and thus contact what is most true and most specifically ourselves (Ibid. 356-363). This connection with the inner élan constitutes for humanity not only an indication of what is good, but also the authority to define the good (Ibid. 362). It thus marks “a transformation in modern culture towards a deeper inwardness and a radical autonomy” (Ibid. 363).

The next step is the rise of the fully blooming expressivist self, for which the inner contact with and the outward expression of its unique core are normative goals. In order to achieve these

goals, however, it needs to unburden itself from the influences that the society has laid upon it, and that includes not only fashions of dress and table manners, but moral norms and the truths of tradition. Correspondingly, certain feelings and experiences now come to be an essential part of the definition of the good life. Next, sensual fulfillment itself is made morally significant, beginning a path that will lead humanity, writes Taylor, up to the “flower generation” of the 1960’s (Ibid. 372).

As stated in the beginning of this article, the utilitarian self, presenting a development of the expressivist self, can be first identified as a cultural phenomenon in late nineteenth century North America. Having its most recent roots in Franz Anton Mesmer’s “Animal Magnetism” on the one hand and the American tradition of pragmatism as brought into spiritual context by Emerson’s Transcendentalists on the other, this concept of a self-sufficient and efficient individual responsible for and sovereign of his own spiritual development was made popular by New Religious Movements such as Phineas Parkhurst Quimby’s New Thought, Mary baker Eddy’s Christian Science and Elwood Worcester’s Emmanuel Movement (Heelas 1996: 167).

During the first decades of the twentieth century America saw the proliferation of what came to be called “self help” books, designed specifically for the individual utilitarian care of the self. The majority of these books relied on the assumption, which as an idea can be traced to Romanticism, that the individual has inner resources which need to be discovered and made use of (Ibid.; Yankelovich 1982: 232). As many of these books had no religious or spiritual message as such, we can detect quite clearly the influence of the modern capitalist and instrumental frame of mind that had produced them as a substantial cultural phenomenon.

During the 1960’s this utilitarian frame of mind suffered a temporary setback. The Counter Culture was in many ways a reaction against the spirit of capitalism and instrumental logic (or as Theodor Roszak calls it, Technocracy – Roszak 1969), and many of the New Religious Movements that originated at that time emphasized the need for a profound transformation of the egocentric self and the importance of the community (e.g. ISKCON, Meher Baba, and in general the Hippies).

This changed again in the 1970’s, which saw the rise of an intensified form of capitalism, what Ernest Mandel calls Late-Capitalism, a form of political and economic hegemony that is able to imbed its principles further and deeper than ever before (Mandel 1975; Harvey 1989). Using Mandel’s insights Frederic Jameson formulates the rise of postmodernism, in which capitalism has finally succeeded in the full colonization of the cultural sphere (Jameson 1991: 399-418), following the anti-metaphysical thrust of enlightenment rationalism turning upon itself, thus fragmenting what was left of humanism and its aspirations and leaving only the practical and utilitarian as valid (Ibid. 376-386). By the time New Age spirituality had to contend with the era of Reagan and Thatcher it was already debilitated as any form of social resistance. In fact, it had become one of the market’s most efficient agents.

Global corporate capitalism has learned to direct the Romantic expressivist self’s yearning for originality, authenticity, creativity and self expression towards participation in the market, through giving such participation identity and meaning manufacturing value. In other words, one doesn’t have to wear rags and live in a commune (thus “dropping out” and turning from “the system”) in order to be true to his or her unique self. One can express his or her true nature by shopping at particular chains of stores, buying natural soap or eating organic. Of course, for

those engaged in the spiritual quest, paying for rebirthing, energetic healing or Kabbalah merchandise is also an effective way of getting closer to the divine. Such value-invested economic activity is nothing other than the commodification of spirituality (Carrette 2005), in the course of which the answers to life's great questions are offered for sale.

It is this change in the character of contemporary spirituality that has enabled the rise of the utilitarian self over the last few decades. With spiritual truths and practices turned into commodities, the western spiritual seeker has become an investor, an individual patron of his own soul, a contractor for inner development. Such a seeker wishes to maximize the potential output of his psychical capital, and searches for the appropriate tools to do so. It is this rampant demand for control of inner assets that has created the spiritual market's supply of "methods" and "techniques" for the cultivation of the self that we are witnessing today in Israel and in the North Atlantic world.

Doron and Besancon's renovation of Bratslav *Hitbodedut* from an attempt – ecstatic or dialogical – at achieving intimacy with the divine into a universal meditative technique which is meant to inwardly transform the individual is a means towards providing Jewish Israeli seekers with a practical answer to their utilitarian needs. These seekers, mainly Orthodoxly observant, desire a technique for self development which the Halakha is obviously unable to provide. Redesigning *Hitbodedut* thus supplies an inner-Orthodox solution to their needs and prevents them from wandering off to seek answers elsewhere. From a Jewish-Orthodox perspective, the number of Jewish seekers attracted to New Religion Movements makes the development of an Orthodox alternative important (Linzer 1996).

Berg and Laitman turn to a larger crowd, assembled from Israeli secular Jews, with added American Jews and non-Jews for Berg, and Russian and other non-Jews for Laitman. They do not have any intent of keeping anyone bound to tradition, but quite consciously and explicitly create a tradition of their own, emphasizing that they are teaching "science" and not religion, and as such universal and eternal tools for the self. They fashion their interpretation of Ashlagian Kabbalah so as to fit the requirements of the spiritual marketplace, and are noticeably very successful in doing so. Their box of universal spiritual tools is used by many whose spiritual quest is at its base a utilitarian mission for self improvement and individual pursuit of happiness.

Through understanding the rise of the utilitarian self we can better comprehend the current focus maintained by New Religious Movements from various traditions and social circles on supplying tools and techniques for self improvement to the contemporary spiritual seeker. We can thus appreciate the fundamental correspondence and conformity of these diverse spiritual phenomena, responding as they all do to a specific cultural and social need. As a wide ranging social phenomenon the rise of the utilitarian self, discussed here in brief, is affecting the New Age cultic milieu in general, and a further, in depth analysis of its rise and significance is, I believe, very much to be desired.

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¹ Mark and Piekarz see this mystical experience as *Hitbodedut's* ultimate end (Mark 2003: 236-237; Piekarz 1981: 160-161), and in my opinion this is indeed so.

² Founded in 1968 by Margot Klausner, The Israeli Union for Parapsychology concentrated mainly in spiritualism, conducting séances and working out complex reincarnation theologies, along the lines of the Theosophical Society. As such, it was also interested in Eastern mystical traditions. Klausner herself was one of the forerunners of New Age culture in Israel, and tried to find the sunken IDF submarine Dakar, and the Ark of the Covenant, with her parapsychological powers.

³ In another interview, to a Bratslav internet site, he is said to have examined "philosophy, east, west, the New Testament, Anthroposophy" (Aharon, Adi David, "Ashreinu Shyesh Lanu Rabbi She'Kaze" [blessed are we to have such a Rabbi], no date, can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/63uu9fr> - last accessed 12.8.13.

⁴ In all likelihood Doron is here paraphrasing the teachings of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, who in his famous books on "Jewish Meditation" from the early 1980's promotes the same mantra-based meditative method. The widely circulated books can be assumed to have been read by Doron during his spiritual quest. Kaplan's books were and are highly influential especially in those Orthodox Jewish milieus which are seeking meditative practice (Persico 2012: 346, 357-369).

⁵ Religious Zionists are Halakhically observant Jews who believe that the state of Israel has Jewish religious (usually eschatological) significance. They assume a more involved and engaged social and political position than the Ultra-Orthodox, Haredi, community, and in many ways are similar to the American Modern-Orthodox Jews.

⁶ Besancon also defines *Hitbodedut* as the complete opposite of Rabbi Nachman's description of it, as the Bratslav Tzadik defined it explicitly as (at least potentially) dangerous, indeed life-threatening, and because of that very potent (*Likutey Moharan tinyana* 99). Not only that, but as Mark notes (Mark 2003: 248), Rabbi Nachman does not implore us to beware the danger to our lives, but quite the contrary: he entreats us to drive ourselves to it, all as part of his instructions for accomplishing the mystical goal. For Besancon *Hitbodedut* is not only safe, but the safest meditative technique.

⁷ I am referring to the male gender alone because though not explicitly stated by Besancon, *Hitbodedut* is usually offered as a practice for male followers of Rabbi Nachman. Rabbi Nachman certainly did not speak of women practicing it.

⁸ *Devekut* is a common name for a mystical objective of worship in Hasidism, meaning a “cleaving” to the divine.

⁹ Meaning Vipassana as it is presented in the west today, i.e. as a “technique” for “cultivating mindfulness”, divorced from any religious context. See Porterfield 2001: 125-162; Seager 1999: 146-151.

¹⁰ “There is an inner and universal Bratslav Hasidism available for all souls while recognizing each soul’s right to be itself”, writes Besancon in a recent publication (Israel Isaac Besancon, “Kulam Yagiu Le’uman Ba’sof?” [Will everybody get to Uman in the end?], *Adraba* 50, August 2013, p. 36). Another instance from which the utilitarian character of Besancon’s *Hitbodedut* can be understood is his insistence that “It is impossible to achieve real purification (holiness) without periodic and delineated application of *Hitbodedut*” (Besancon 2001: 72)

¹¹ “The Renaissance of the 12th century” gave Europe its first universities, early bureaucracy, the emergence of vernacular literature, and of course the acquaintance, through the Islamic world, with Hellenistic philosophy.

¹² The first article, **מהותה של חכמת הקבלה, הדת וחכמת הקבלה בין שדרות העם, קונטרס א קונטרס מתן תורה: מוקדש להפצת ידיעות מקוריות של נשמה יהודית, תל אביב, א ניסן תרצ"ג, עמ' ו-ח**. The second, **תורת הקבלה ומהותה, פרי חכם: מאמרים בנושאי דת וקבלה ומחשבת ישראל מהאדמו"ר יהודה אשלג, בני ברק תשמ"ה, עמ' קמג-קסז**, was only published in 1985 by Ashlag’s grandson, Yechezkel Ashlag, in **עמ' קמג-קסז**, but was written long before that date, of course. I am quoting from the edition of Ashlag’s collected writings, Ashlag 2009, published by Bnei Baruch, who today hold the original manuscripts to these texts. I thank Boaz Huss and Jonathan Meir for this information.

¹³ Langford is today a well known artist. He left Berg due to dissatisfaction with his interpretation of Kabbalah, and like Laitman joined Baruch Ashlag’s study group. Today he teaches Kabbalah to small groups and individuals.

¹⁴ Information from a private correspondence with Shaul Youdkevitch, a teacher in the Israeli Tel-Aviv center since 1980, 1.10.13. I thank him for his good will.

¹⁵ Ben-Tal mentions fifty thousand Israelis “who are connected to Bnei Baruch in some way” (Ben-Tal 2010: 161), though his source is the public relations office of the movement itself. Yet the number of people connected to Bnei-Baruch is no doubt very high, as formal conferences, held once a year, draw over five thousand attendees (Ibid.).

¹⁶ See for example Uri Blau, “Kabbalah for the People, Millions in the Bank”, *Haaretz*, 22.8.12 (Heb); Amos Shavit, “Ultra Laitman”, *Ha’Musaf Le’Shabat, Yedioth Ahronoth*, 30.7.10 (Heb); Roni Kuban, “The World of the Zohar”, *Uvda, Channel 2*, 22.12.08 (Heb).

¹⁷ Contrary to Berg, Laitman does not provide specific practical “tools” to be used in Kabbalistic spiritual exercises. He explicitly objects to any sort of meditation (Laitman 2006d: 102; Laitman 2006e: 101; Aharoni 2007: 222), and insists that the promised spiritual transformation will take place by the intense study of Kabbalah alone (Laitman 2006d: 40, 102, 113; Laitman 2006e: 79, 97, 103). In a private conversation with the author (24.10.2010) he insisted that nothing other than study of Ashlag’s interpretation of Kabbalah is needed for the spiritual development of man, and nothing else, indeed, could work. It is this insistence on study that allows Bnei Baruch to structure itself as a hierarchical “academy”, in which students are devoted to the words of their one and only master. In this it is quite different than the Kabbalah Center, which is much less centralized, and whose “tools” can be, as it were, picked up and taken away.

¹⁸ On modern western Yoga as conforming to utilitarian needs see De Michelis 2008, 118. It is interesting to note that Karen Berg is fully aware of Neo-Kabbalah’s principal resemblance to modern western Yoga. Talking to Jody Myers she claimed that non-Jews practicing Kabbalah at the Kabbalah Center are similar to western people who practice Yoga for the exercise and calming benefits without accepting Hindu religious principles (Myers 2007: 123).

¹⁹ I am referring to the distinction between a religion centered around ritual and dogma and one presenting ethical transformative paths. On this distinction see Stroumsa 2009; Foucault 2005.