

***Hitbodedut* for a New Age**

• • • ***Adaptation of Practices among the Followers of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav***

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ABSTRACT: The quest for personal and inner spiritual transformation and development is prevalent among spiritual seekers today and constitutes a major characteristic of contemporary spirituality and the New Age phenomenon. Religious leaders of the Bratslav community endeavor to satisfy this need by presenting adjusted versions of *hitbodedut* meditation, a practice that emphasizes solitary and personal connection with the divine. As is shown by two typical examples, popular Bratslav teachers today take full advantage of the opportunity to infuse the *hitbodedut* with elements not found in Rabbi Nachman's teachings and to dispense with some elements that were. The article addresses the socio-political rationale at the root of these teachers' novel interpretation of Bratslav *hitbodedut* and the ways they attempt to deal with the complications that arise out of their work.

KEYWORDS: acculturation, Bratslav, contemporary spirituality, *hitbodedut*, Israel, mysticism, New Age, Rabbi Nachman

The Bratslav Hasidic community is currently experiencing an unprecedented burgeoning. As one of the primary sites for welcoming secular Jews "back into the fold" of observant Judaism, as a fruitful wellspring of contemporary cultural creation, and as the organizing and operating force behind the annual Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage to Uman, Ukraine, the field of its influence is wide (Baumgarten 2012; Mark 2011). The sect was founded by Rabbi Nachman (1772–1810) from the town of Bratslav (Breslov) in Ukraine, an early Hasidic leader.

As might be expected, just as the flowering of this old Hasidic community is itself new and surprising, many of the phenomena characteristic of



current Bratslav practices are novel and would surprise a veteran Bratslav Hasid. This is due not only to the changing times, but also to the fact that, as noted above, Bratslav is a dominant force amongst *ba'al teshuva* Jews, that is, Jews "returning" from a secular lifestyle to a religiously observant one (Garb 2005; Weinstock 2011). These individuals bring with them the dispositions and preferences of (post-) modern Western culture, and with that the thirst for expressivist and experiential religion.

The quest for spiritual experiences is prevalent among spiritual seekers today and constitutes a major characteristic of contemporary spirituality and the New Age phenomenon (Hanegraaff 1998; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). This cultural trend extracts both meaning and authority from the experiential field and seeks confirmation for the existence of personal religiosity, or the actuality of a connection with the divine, by turning inward, toward the psychological and emotional dimensions. The turn "inward," which has characterized Hasidism from its beginning (Margolin 2005), provides today's New Age Jews a subjectively-centered spiritual journey with a Jewish flair. Traditional kabbalah is also remodeled accordingly (Huss 2007a).

Following this cultural disposition, it should be no surprise that "Meditation is probably the most widespread kabbalistic practice today" (Huss 2007a: 115). As New Age spiritualities have become widespread in Israel since the 1990s (Ruah-Midbar 2012), the past two decades have seen the flourishing of rabbis and spiritual teachers aiming at outreach to, and teaching of, *ba'al teshuva* spiritual seekers.

Among the different strands of the Bratslav community it is *hitbodedut* practice in particular, emphasizing solitary and personal connection with the divine, which is offered for these "seekers" (Roof 2001) of internalized religion. Presented in Bratslav lore as Rabbi Nachman's own creation as a practice, *hitbodedut*, often framed as "meditation," draws to the community individuals who seek intense religious experience and who define such experience as a more authentic and "true" connection with the divine than that which is constructed by communal worship and delineated by tradition.

This article is devoted to Bratslav *hitbodedut* and its current manifestations. It attempts to understand, from Rabbi Nachman's own teachings, his aim when teaching this practice, and to compare his instructions to those of two of his contemporary followers. As elaborated upon in the concluding section of the article, an anomian practice such as *hitbodedut* can offer fertile ground for creativity and ingenuity. As we shall see, Rabbi Nachman's contemporary popularizers take full advantage of this opportunity to infuse *hitbodedut* with elements not found in Rabbi Nachman's teachings, and to remove elements that were. This in turn poses further problems for these

teachers. I address the socio-political reasons at the root of these teachers' original interpretation to Bratslav *hitbodedut* and the ways they attempt to deal with the complications that arise out of their work.

The Practice of *Hitbodedut* According to Rabbi Nachman

The practice of *hitbodedut* is one of the central characteristics of the Bratslav Hasidic community, and its role within it is such that "it is hard to overstate its [*hitbodedut*'s] importance in the eyes of Rabbi Nachman and the Bratslav Hasids" (Mark 2003: 235). The term itself has a long history in the Jewish mystical tradition but, contrary to the uses made of it by different Jewish mystics—in whose works it often denotes a form of mental concentration (Idel 1988b, 1988c)—Rabbi Nachman (1997) uses it often in its basic and literal meaning, which simply means going into seclusion (e.g. *Likutey Moharan Tinyana*, part 25). At other times it simply designates a candid talk with God (e.g. *ibid.*, parts 25, 54, 96 (Nahman 1997); *Sichot Haran*, part 234 (Nahman 1991); *Chayey Moharan*, parts 436, 440, 441 (Nahman 1996)). Yet on other occasions, Rabbi Nachman emphasizes that seclusion and frank talks with God are supposed to bring about a potent mystical experience.¹ Mark (2003: 236–237) and Piekarcz (1981: 160–161) see this as the practice of *Hitbodedut*'s ideal culmination, and in my opinion this is indeed so.

Part 52 of *Likutey Moharan* is one of the main passages in which Rabbi Nachman (1997) explains *hitbodedut* as a mystical path (all the translations from Hebrew are mine):

To accomplish being included in his Root (*lehikalel be'shorsho*), that is, to go back and be included in the unity of God, blessed be He, who is Imperative Reality (*mechuyav ha'metziut*). That cannot be accomplished by any means other than annulment (*bitul*). That he nullifies himself completely, until he is included in His oneness. And there is no way to accomplish annulment, but through *hitbodedut*. Because by going into *hitbodedut* and laying out his talk between him and his Maker, through that he achieves annulment of all the lusts and bad qualities, until he achieves nullification of all his earthliness (*gashmiyuto*), and to be included in his root ... and he should turn his heart and mind (*libo ve'da'ato*) from all matters of this world, and nullify all, till he achieves true annulment ... And later still something remains of him etc., and later that too shall be annulled, until nothing remains of him. And when he achieves true nullification, then his spirit (*nafsho*) is included in his root, that is in Him, blessed be He, who is Imperative Reality. Then the entire world is included with his spirit in his root, that is Imperative Reality, because everything depends on Him, as we said above, and then the entire world is made by Him to be Imperative Reality.

The mystical flavor of these words is unmistakable: The practice of *hitbodedut* is capable of bringing the Hasid into *unio mystica* with the divine, following the nullification of his negative traits and bodily powers. Moreover, it seems that the *hitbodedut* here is a multilevel process: First, it cleanses one from his flaws; next, it nullifies his self and makes him void; following this, it unites him with his “root,” which is the divine; and finally it raises the whole world to the level of “as if ... Imperative Reality” (a locution which designates God in Nachman’s terms), thereby presenting the whole world in the eyes of the practitioner as imbued with divine presence.

But how is one to achieve such self-annulment? Emotional experience plays a crucial role in the spiritual path according to Rabbi Nachman.² In *Likutey Moharan Tinyana*, part 99 he underscores the extent of emotional intensity which his followers should reach:

That the primary element of *hitbodedut* and the talk between him and his Maker in wholeness is that he lays before God, blessed be he, his words so thoroughly, that he will be very close to abdicating his soul, perish the thought (*khas ve’shalom*), until he almost dies, perish the thought, until his soul is tied to his body only by a thread because of all his real sorrow and longing and craving to God, blessed be He, as it is said: “a man’s prayer is not heard unless he risks his soul” [*Ta’anit* 8A]. (Nachman 1997)

It seems that the talk before God is supposed to bring the Hasid to an ecstatic emotional fervor that begins with “a great arousal in body and mind” (Nachman 1997: part 98) and ends with a state that is close to the loss of consciousness, perhaps even to the loss of life. As Mark (2003: 248) notes, Rabbi Nachman does not implore us to beware the danger to our lives but rather, to the contrary, he entreats us to drive ourselves to it, as part of his instructions for attaining the mystical goal.

Rabbi Nachman’s way to the mystical experience is ecstatic—not one of passive quietism. In order to reach self-annulment, it is imperative that our mind not be occupied by daily matters, but a calm mind is only a preliminary condition for the long path ahead, filled with sorrow, pain, and anguish, which are the mystical keys that Rabbi Nachman offers his followers.

The correct order of things is obvious from the following passage from *Likutey Moharan Tinyana*, part 95:

As for the *hitbodedut* and the talk between him and his Maker and the saying of psalms and abjurations and requests, it is good that they are said with a truly whole heart, so he may be blessed with crying in front of God, blessed be He, as a son who cries before his father, but he said, that when a man says abjurations and requests and thinks in his heart and expects to cry, this

thought is not good, and it confuses also his mind, since because of it he cannot say the requests in a truly whole heart. Because what is needed in the time of saying of the abjurations is to distance himself from all sorts of outside thoughts of the world, only to focus his mind to what he says before God, blessed be He, as he talks to his friend, and then it will be easy for his heart to awaken, until he comes to a great crying. (Nachman 1997)

A multistage path is laid out before us: First, the person has to physically isolate himself; after his thoughts have calmed down, he will talk frankly to God; this in turn, when done properly, should bring him to tears, and thereupon to ecstasy; this state will annul the person's self consciousness and feeling of self, and bring him into a mystical experience of union; finally, after returning to a more pedestrian state of consciousness, he acquires joy,³ and the whole world is seen by him as filled with the divine presence.

Rabbi Nachman's *hitbodedut* is a mystical practice whose intentionality is toward the heaven, out of and away from the practitioner himself. It aims to bring about a surge of emotions, culminating in ecstasy, which in turn brings about a transformation of the state of consciousness, the annulment of the feeling of self, and the feeling of the presence of God in creation.

Practice of *Hitbodedut* by Contemporary Followers of Rabbi Nachman

Since the 1960s a number of circles have been involved in popularizing Rabbi Nachman's teachings, from the more traditional Bratslav Rabbis such as Levi Yitzchok Bender, Gedaliah Koenig, Eliezer Shlomo Schik, and Eliezer Berland, to figures that can be placed along different points on the Jewish Renewal spectrum, such as Shlomo Carlebach and Aryeh Kaplan. As noted, since the 1990s Bratslav has changed from a cultural and religious avant-garde to a well-known and accepted phenomenon in Israel.

Today the Bratslav community is made up of a central group of veteran Hasidim, a few groups of *ba'al teshuva* rabbis (e.g., Eliezer Berland's group and Yisroel Ber Odesser's followers), and a few other groups that circle it like satellites, without coming into any real contact with the core communities (Baumgarten 2012). It is within the *ba'al teshuva* groups that we find a number of rabbis who, over the last few years, have risen to the status of popular spiritual leaders. Some of these teach and emphasize the practice of *hitbodedut* and are the focus of this article.

The spiritual leaders examined below use Bratslav *hitbodedut* as a Jewish source for the satisfaction of the contemporary quest for spiritual experiences. With this practice, dubbed by them "Jewish meditation,"⁴ they wish to fulfill the desire for an expressivist and psychological religious path.

In their effort to do so they have changed the practice in order for it to fit into their and their followers' conceptions of what Jewish Meditation is supposed to be. Studying the works of the best-known rabbis presenting popular instruction for *hitbodedut* to the Hebrew reading public in Israel, I have found specific instructions for meditation in the works of Israel Isaac Besançon and Erez Moshe Doron. The remainder of this article discusses their interpretation of Rabbi Nachman's teachings on the matter.⁵

Besançon and Doron, like other Bratslav leaders, disseminate their teachings by writing books. These works, which make Bratslav *hitbodedut* accessible to the general public, are usually not more than the Bratslav version of self-help books⁶ and concentrate on explaining how we should administer our lives vis-à-vis God and Man, in all walks of life, toward our emotional well-being and financial fortitude. Our concern will be with those that explain how to practice *hitbodedut* as meditation in plain and simple language.

***Hitbodedut* as Jewish Meditation in the Thought of Rabbi Israel Isaac Besançon**

Rabbi Israel Isaac Besançon was born in France in 1944. He was a student of Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Bender, one of the most influential Bratslav leaders of the twentieth century, but today belongs to the "Na-Nach" group, who follow the late Yisroel Ber Odesser. He leads a small community in Tel Aviv, and is popular among modern Orthodox youth. Besançon testifies that he has experienced the beatific vision a few times, and accordingly his instructions emphasize mystical contact with the divine. He has written over ten books, one of them, *Hitbodedut: To Talk With God* (Besançon 1991), devoted to *hitbodedut* practice, and it is this book that we shall examine.

Besançon (2001: 3–4) begins his book by stating that *hitbodedut* is a "secret" that Rabbi Nachman has disclosed to us, a secret that will allow us to develop a pure heart, simplicity, faith, and joy. As such, *hitbodedut* "allows anyone to achieve his calling, to reach private redemption" (ibid.: 4). These proclamations are followed by a more technical explanation:

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. (ibid.: 5)

Devekut is a common name for a mystical objective of worship in Hasidism. The path to *Devekut*, according to Besançon, passes through calm and mental stability. This calm is achieved by disconnection from the environment, apparently through cultivating some sort of concentration. Following this Besançon explains that *hitbodedut* is one of many “techniques” that

guide [us] how to focus our consciousness [in order] to get out of the imagination and into the mind and out of profanity and into holiness. As is known, most of them require precise preparations, without which the meditator is liable to endanger himself. Therefore, the safest method is that of Rabbi Nachman, which is centered on withdrawing into seclusion in order to manifest a dialogue with God in a spontaneous way, in our mother tongue. (ibid.)

Notice that *hitbodedut*, according to Besançon, is only one of many methods of meditation. It is, however, the safest. Thus Besançon not only aligns *hitbodedut* on par with many other “techniques,” formally making it into a therapeutic method (and not simply a way to worship God), but he also defines it as completely opposite to Rabbi Nachman’s description of it: It is not dangerous or life-threatening and because of that very potent, but safe—indeed, the safest—and thus recommended. From here, Besançon continues to describe the workings of the method itself:

As far 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 complicated net of our feelings, and expose the sources of wrong patterns of thought and behavior, which we were not aware that existed. (ibid.: 6)

We can notice that for Besançon the primary site for spiritual work is the mind, and not the body or the emotional range. Besançon directs his followers not to an ecstatic surge, but to developing “calm” and “mental stability,” which allow for introspection. In fact, more than Nachman’s words, the language Besançon uses is similar to that of the Western interpretation of *Vipassana* (basic Buddhist mindfulness meditation), in which meditators are directed to observe their mental and emotional world and promised that this will liberate them from negative habitual patterns and obstructing emotional complexes. Also corresponding to Besançon’s wish

to allow God to “mend our errors and see in a clearer way” (ibid.: 57) is *Vipassana*’s aim, which is to develop a “right vision” (that is, in fact, the literal meaning of the Sanskrit word) (Batchelor 1994: 341–352; Fronsdal 2002: 286–289; Seager 1999: 146–151; Wallace 2002: 36–39).

Besaṅçon’s meditative path uses awareness and introspection in order to analyze and cleanse the practitioner’s psyche. Calm and mental stability are employed so that *Devekut* is attained, though the meaning of this classic Hasidic concept equals, in Besaṅçon’s thought, “universal enlightenment” (2001.: 8), and means seeing the “real inner self” and being liberated from “wrong patterns of thought and behavior.” This ideal is quite different from Nahman’s ecstatic self annulment. In fact, it seems that Besaṅçon is influenced by the contemporary spirituality scene,⁷ and within it notably by modern Buddhist *Vipassana* meditation, whose model of practice he uses in order to construct his own.

***Hitbodedut* as Jewish Meditation in the Thought of Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron**

Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron (b. 1962) is one of the most popular leaders among the groups of *ba’al teshuva* Bratslav Hasids. As a measure of his public reputation it can be noted that in his Hebrew Wikipedia page he is characterized as a “spiritual teacher whose thought is based on Rabbi Nachman’s writings,”⁸ and it is clear that his followers indeed see him less as a *halakhic* (Jewish legal) authority and more as a guide for their spiritual development.

Doron began his own spiritual quest during his mandatory army service. He joined the Israeli Union for Parapsychology⁹ and within two years became its chairman. He testifies that 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). After his release from the army Doron started a process of *teshuva*, and ten years later self-published his first book on Bratslav thought. Today, more than 15 years and 20 books later, he heads the Lev Ha’Devarim organization for the propagation of Bratslav teachings, and proclaims he has become “an authority for questions regarding *hitbodedut*” (Doron 2008c: 16).

Doron has published several books on the subject of *hitbodedut*. While in his first book (Doron 1997) he acknowledges Rabbi Nachman’s instructions on emotional arousal and ecstatic mystical experience, in all his later books on the subject he abandons this path and teaches a different one. This was done concomitantly with halting the publication of his first book, while claiming that everything in it can be found in his later books (Doron 2008a: 77)—a claim that is false. Here I focus on his later works, which represent his central and current thought:

1. *The Limit of Holiness: In the Light of 'Ezavra' and 'Aye' Teachings* (Doron 2008a), published by Lev Hadevarim (Doron's own organization) in 2006, expounding on the two parts of *Likutey Moharan* mentioned in the title.
2. *Talk to God: a Practical Guide to the Work of Hitbodedut* (Doron 2008b) published by Lev Hadevarim first in 1991 under the title *Alone*, and then in 2006 under the current heading.
3. *The Art of Hitbodedut: 60 Questions and Answers on Hitbodedut* (Doron 2008c), published in 2000.

In *The Art of Hitbodedut*, Doron attempts to answer frequently asked questions on the subject. He first stresses that *hitbodedut* is “an essential thing” which “all is dependent upon” because it is “the only key” for “real closeness to God forever” (2008c: 13–15). He defines *hitbodedut* as a law that is, in actuality, “the original form of prayer” (2008a: 255; 2008c: 29), rather than the traditional *Amidah* prayer recited by observant Jews.¹⁰

Doron sees *hitbodedut* as a mystical practice. He writes that it is:

“Jewish Meditation,” that is a Jewish method [used in order] to cut consciousness from the senses and to connect it to the higher worlds ... [*Hitbodedut* is] a spiritual practice able to detach man from tangible reality and connect him to much deeper levels. (Doron 2008c. 30–32)

Note the clearly dualistic anthropology that Doron presents here. While Rabbi Nachman also frequently displayed such a dualistic approach to the relation of the mind (for him, the soul) to the body, his answer to this state was not disconnecting from the senses, but rather exciting them to the point of exhaustion. Doron's meditative path, on the other hand, seems similar to contemporary Hindu and Neo-Hindu forms of meditation, in which concentration is used in order to detach from sense impressions. This form of concentration-based meditation has been widely practiced in India since the second half of the last millennium BCE (Eliade 1969; Radhakrishnan 2000; Wynne 2007; Zimmer 1956). Its contemporary descendants, influenced by an interpretive adaptation of Franz Anton Mesmer's “Animal Magnetism,” by the Theosophical Society (Hanegraaff 1998: 450–451; Lubelsky 2012: 158–159) and by the work of Swami Vivekananda (De Michelis 2008: 114–119), are popular across the New Age cultic milieu. Doron was likely introduced to them during his spiritual search.

In *The Limit of Holiness*, Doron explicitly states that

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 them to the higher worlds. It also seems that it is possible to practice this method during the practice of *hitbodedut*, as we shall see below. (Doron 2008a: 256)

It is clear that the meditative method Doron begins to describe here is not what Rabbi Nachman taught. Rather, as stated above, it is similar to yoga and other concentration-based techniques. Doron does not keep his promise to lay out the connection of this method to *hitbodedut* later in his book.

He does, however, elaborate on such a meditative technique in his *Talk to God: A Practical Guide to the Work of Hitbodedut* (Doron 2008b). Here, Doron offers a special practice designed for *hitbodedut*, and it is this that is probably the meditative method he mentions in *The Limit of Holiness*:

One of the most efficient ways that Rabbi Nachman discovered for delving deep is the way of repetition. One should choose a specific Bible-verse or a saying of the Sages, or even his own combination of words, and repeat it again and again in intense concentration (it seems that comfortably sitting while closing the eyes is very suitable for this method) ... What to say? “If you do not know what to say,” the Rabbi once taught, just say ‘*Ribono Shel Olam*’ [“Master of the universe”] one thousand times. (It is interesting to discover, that saying ‘*Ribono Shel Olam*’ one thousand times takes exactly one hour, the same amount of time our holy Rabbi taught us to devote to *Hitbodedut*.) ... Chose one of the [divine] names, sit so that you are comfortable, close your eyes and call Him. With all the concentration you can muster, with all the honesty you can find, again and again and again, until the husk of the heart is broken, and the great light of God shines and floods everything. (Doron 2008a: 52–54)

Doron wishes to use the words “*Ribono Shel Olam*” as a mantra, claiming that Rabbi Nachman taught this. In so doing he continues a fallacy that was propagated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (1980) in his famous books on “Jewish Meditation,” which can be assumed to have been read by Doron during his spiritual quest. Kaplan’s book was and is highly influential, especially on Orthodox Jews seeking meditative practice, as it caters to that audience’s taste (Persico 2012: 346, 357–369). As I have shown elsewhere (ibid. 377–379), nowhere in Rabbi Nachman’s teachings does he direct his followers to use these words as a concentrative meditative technique meant to break through the “husk of the heart.” Likewise, I have been unable to locate the sentence quoted above by Doron (his own addition to Kaplan’s thoughts on the subject) in Rabbi Nachman’s works, and

it seems it does not exist. It is also hard to connect sitting comfortably with closed eyes to Rabbi Nachman's meditative path.¹¹

Rather, what we are witnessing here is evidence of neo-Hindu influence on Doron's thought, probably rooted in exposure to this material at the beginning of his spiritual quest, while head of the Israeli Union for Parapsychology. Doron readily admits to have read about and practiced spiritual paths from the East, and it is likely that he was exposed to these, as well as to other neo-Hindu meditative material (on neo-Hindu meditation in the West, including its forms and popularity, see Williamson 2010).

More specifically, Doron adopts yoga-like metaphysics, which insist on detachment from the senses in order to reach "higher worlds," and combines it with the meditative practice of mantra recitation, which, it can be assumed, he inherited from Aryeh Kaplan, influenced by the Transcendental Meditation movement in the United States of the late 1970s (Persico 2012.: 378, 382–387).¹² The result is quite different from the instructions of Rabbi Nachman. Reference to Rabbi Nachman's authority serves here to legitimate the use of non-Jewish meditative techniques.

Reasons for Incorporating Foreign Meditative Techniques

In the last section of this article I answer briefly two connected questions that have a wider bearing on the subject. First, I discuss the social and cultural bases for Besançon's and Doron's original interpretations of Rabbi Nachman's instructions on *hitbodedut* and their incorporation of material from the New Age cultic milieu. Second, I consider the ways in which it is necessary for these teachers to address the tension that inevitably arises between the proposed new meditative methods on the one hand and the *halakha* (traditional Jewish law) on the other.

In answer to the first question, I see the reason for these contemporary spiritual leaders' creative interpretation of Rabbi Nachman's words and their incorporation of New Age techniques currently in vogue as a combination of a mundane concern riding on the surface of two strong social currents. The first is the simple concern of these spiritual teachers for their followers' well-being following an extreme ecstatic experience, such as one is supposed to reach following Rabbi Nachman's instructions. Such intense experiences, bringing one close to death, are hardly appropriate for the average person. While Rabbi Nachman spoke to a small, select group of disciples in nineteenth-century Ukraine, these teachers are addressing tens of thousands in modern-day Israel. Responsibility requires that the instructions a public figure would disseminate widely to be of a different nature than the guidance and encouragement one would give to his close friends and adherents.

The second cause, more subtle but of much greater importance and effect, is the development of what has been called “the therapeutic society” (Wright 2011), that is, the burgeoning interest in Western society, since the end of the nineteenth century, in the subjective, “inner” worlds. This includes finding in one’s mind not only ever-deepening levels and dimensions, but also inner sources of meaning, authority, and identity. This “subjective turn,” as a major cultural adjustment, has been referred to by a group of social theorists (Bellah et al. 1985; Inghelhart and Welzel 2005; Rieff 2006; Sennett 1992; Taylor 1989; Trilling 1972) and posits a religious stage favoring inner-directed (e.g. soul, psyche) meditation based on introspection or concentration, rather than outer-directed (e.g. God, nature) meditation based on prayer or dialogue.¹³

The third cause, and the second deep-seated social current at the root of this change, is the rise during the 1970s of what can be called “late capitalism.” This intensified form of capitalism is characterized by its ability to embed its principles not only in almost all social strata, but in the modern subject’s psychological life as well (Harvey 1989; Mandel 1975). Frederic Jameson (1991: 399–418) formulates the rise of postmodernism as a complementary phenomenon, a social condition in which capitalism has finally succeeded in the full colonization of the cultural sphere. Carrette and King (2005) go on to demarcate the religious and spiritual adjustments following such developments, and elsewhere I examine how these led to the rise of a utilitarian religious self in the contemporary cultic milieu (Persico 2014).

The utilitarian self seeks simple methods or techniques that allow him or her to delve deeply inward and reclaim hidden powers or beneficial character traits. In the context of the capitalist commodification of spiritual paths and ideas, the modern seeker is interested less in an ecstatic or dialogical attempt at intimacy with the divine, such as *hitbodedut* was, as taught by Rabbi Nachman. Rather, these social and economic developments generate the conditions that lead to a contemporary spiritual scene characterized by a utilitarian search for universal meditative techniques meant to inwardly transform the individual as a practical answer to his or her therapeutic needs. Thus we find not an ecstatic cry to the skies but, rather, a “technique”-based inward-turned search for inner splendor.

Incorporation of Foreign Meditative Techniques and Their Discontents

Inner directed, calming, and introspective meditation is less of a threat to the socio-political order than are ecstatic bursts of self-annulling passion bringing their subject to the brink of death. In a deeper and more essential

level they also conform better to the present cultural turn inward, and to the social rise of the utilitarian self. But this very characteristic poses a problem, for these practices display not only non-traditional, New-Age-influenced meditative methods, but anomian ones at that.

In using the term “anomian,” I am referencing Moshe Idel’s definition of the term. He defines “nomian” mystical practices as “the spiritualization of the halakhic *dromenon*, which is thereby transformed into a mystical technique,” while anomian practices are “those forms of mystical activity that did not involve halakhic practice” (Idel 1988a: 74). This disconnect from *halakha* underscores the novelty of these new spiritual paths vis-à-vis classical kabbalah, and in turn increases greatly the tension between these paths and the social order which the rabbis teaching them want at all costs to maintain. When Besançon (2001: 83) claims that “the last link able to tie the faithful [to God] is specifically *hitbodedut*,” and Doron (2008a: 255; 2008c: 29) affirms that *hitbodedut* is “the original form of prayer” and that “the crux of *teshuva* [repentance]—*hitbodedut*” (Doron 2008c.: 135), it is quite clear that the practice of *hitbodedut* is in danger of usurping *halakha*’s place as the main Jewish religious practice and method of worship.

The anomian danger from *hitbodedut* practice stems from its very advantage: that of offering a personal, spontaneous, and inner-directed spiritual practice (and as such, catering to the contemporary spiritual palate). This is opposed, for example, to *halakhic* prayer—a fact that Doron (2008a 127–128, 255) acknowledges and even celebrates. The threat to *halakha* here is that a subjective, inner relation with the divine might be preferable to maintaining a commitment to the heteronomous *halakhic* structure directing the Bratslav Hasid further down the anomian road, and leading towards antinomianism. Doron is well aware of this, and offers an appropriate admonition:

Many movements of the heart frequent a person in [*hitbodedut*] prayer and all influence him deeply, as prayer is an intense experience and an important part in the life of the believer ... this supreme virtue of *hitbodedut* carries great danger if a person is quick to draw conclusions from every feeling which passes through his heart. That is why he should remember what Rabbi Nachman said there: “and to achieve that, a purity of heart is needed.” And anyway he must be careful not to give any importance to feelings and thoughts that are against the words of our holy Torah and the advice of the true righteous men, of course. (Doron 2008a.: 241–242)

Understanding that *hitbodedut* threatens the primary status of *halakha*, Doron is very explicit in his warnings: Thou shall not hearken to any feeling or voice conflicting with the Torah. In any case, you probably do not have enough purity of heart even to consider it.

Rabbi Nachman's contemporary popularizers are caught in a subtle fix: On the one hand, they wish to reconcile Rabbi Nachman's teachings with current religious sentiment and refine it for those spiritual seekers (including themselves) who prefer to pursue an inner-directed, subjective spiritual path; on the other hand, they are steadfastly determined to keep their followers within the bounds of traditional orthodox Judaism. The result is a turn toward perceptions and practices found in the New Age cultic milieu, while at the same time intoning fierce warnings never to deviate from the observance of *halakha*.

No doubt, there remains an unresolved tension between the inner drive and the outer admonitions. While this in itself is not new to the observant Jewish world, the fact that this tension focuses on the very way the observant Jew defines and practices his or her relationship with the divine, is. From the above sources we find that the tension arising between these poles can be tempered in one of two ways. The first turns to apologetics, explaining the spiritual, esoteric, and "internal" side of the *halakha* (Besançon 2000; Doron 2008d). The second uses this very tension and directs it, as psychological fuel for extracting discipline out of fear, towards maintaining a continual and strict adherence to the *halakha*—adherence which attempts to remain immutable while cultural trends change, and with them, inevitably, anomian Jewish meditative methods as well.

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NOTES

1. I am approaching Bratslav *hitbodedut* as a practice holding an explicit mystical potential, i.e., one that can help the subject attain a mystical experience. I define "mystical experience" as the feeling and/or cognitive knowledge of the magnification of the presence of the Absolute in one's life, from his or her point of view. This feeling or knowing is brought about by a change in the state of consciousness of that individual, i.e. a break with the habitual rhythm of human consciousness, which is achieved at times spontaneously, and at

- times by effort and use of different kinds of meditation techniques. I treat the field of mystical experience from a naturalistic and phenomenological viewpoint. This definition is based on definitions of the subject by Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, and developed in my PhD thesis, titled “*Jewish Meditation*”: *The Development of a Modern Form of Spiritual Practice in Contemporary Judaism* (Persico 2012: 26–27). For a critique of the use of the very category of mysticism, see Huss (2007b, 2007c, 2012).
2. In a number of instances in *Likutey Moharan*, Rabbi Nachman instructs his followers to achieve mystical experience through techniques that do not bring calm, but rather an ecstatic surge, and from a broad perspective of his guidance in such matters it is evident that this is his preferred mode of mystical assent. See, for example, *Likutey Moharan* part 156, *Likutey Moharan Tinyana* part 49 (Nachman 1997). See Don Seeman (2008: 470) for an explanation of the metaphysical background for this view.
 3. See Mark (2003: 242). Rabbi Nachman talks about the *reshimu*, a kabbalistic concept referring to heavenly remains, left after the mystical experience is over (i bid.: 122–123, 128).
 4. The first to present *hitbodedut* as “meditation” was Aryeh Kaplan (1980), in his book *Outpouring of the Soul: Rabbi Nachman’s Path in Meditation*. He further elaborated on Rabbi Nachman’s meditative methods, as it were, sometimes contradicting himself, in his books *Meditation and Kabbalah* (Kaplan 1982) and *Jewish Meditation* (Kaplan 1985). On Kaplan’s meditative path see Persico (2012: 359–390).
 5. I have studied how *hitbodedut* is interpreted in the works of Eliezer Shlomo Schik, Shalom Arush, Ofer Erez, Ofer Gisin, Israel Isaac Besançon and Erez Moshe Doron and have written of them in an unpublished manuscript. I dealt with the last two in my PhD dissertation as well (Persico 2012).
 6. Self-help is a genre of books popularized in the early twentieth-century United States. It is closely connected to the turn toward subjective spirituality and to the rise of what may be called “the utilitarian self” (Persico 2014). I elaborate further on these at the end of the article. On the relationship of this genre with New Age spirituality see Heelas 1996: 167–168.
 7. Besançon (2001) seems to be quite familiar with New Age writings. He uses the words “meditation,” enlightenment (*he’ara*), and “enlightened one” (*mu’ar*) (ibid.: 8, 61). In another book Besançon (2000: 80) talks about a Jewish “mantra.”
 8. <http://tinyurl.com/b7m2pph> (accessed on 9 November 12).
 9. The Israeli Union for Parapsychology was founded in 1968 by Margot Klausner, one of the forerunners of New Age culture in Israel. The group dabbled mainly in spiritualism, conducting séances and working out complex reincarnation theologies, but was also interested in yoga and Eastern mystical traditions.
 10. See also *The Limit of Holiness*, where Doron (2008a: 253) writes that “one who is used to pray without intent (*kavana*) has never observed the *mitzva* (commandment) to pray,” while, on the other hand, anyone who practices *hitbodedut* “surely intends what he says.” There is a clear tension here between the regular, traditional, prayer, and the practice of *hitbodedut*, which is broken

in obvious favor of the latter. This no doubt has severe consequences regarding the status of *halakha* as defining the primary, if not exclusive way of Jewish worship. I address this issue in the final part of this article.

11. On closing the eyes as a part of Jewish meditative practice, see Idel (1988b).
12. On the transcendental meditation movement, its meditative method, and wide influence see Williamson (2010: 80–105). On its widespread attraction for Americans Jews see Ariel (2011).
13. I addressed this process in my doctoral thesis (Persico 2012).

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