

# Rainbow Hasidism in America — The Maturation of Jewish Renewal

A Review Essay of  
*Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters*  
by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi  
(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

BY SHAUL MAGID

“Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts.”

— Salman Rushdie,  
*Midnight's Children*

“When Kabbalah came, it made of God a human; when Hasidism came, it made of the human, a God.”

—Rashbatz

“The primal danger of man is ‘religion.’”

—Martin Buber, “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi, and the Baal-Shem Tov”

Over the last 35 years, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Reb Zalman) has developed what is arguably one of the most creative and influential movements in American Judaism in the past half century. Now known as Jewish Renewal, this movement has made an impact on all existing Jewish denominations. Beginning

with Havurat Shalom in Somerville, MA and continuing with B'nai Or (later changed to P'nai Or) in Philadelphia, PA, Reb Zalman's vision of creating a modern and countercultural American “post-Hasidic” Hasidism has expanded into a national and international phenomenon. Annual conferences and *kallot* (gatherings) are commonplace, and scholars of religion are beginning to take an interest in Jewish Renewal as a unique dimension of American religion.

This essay is not only a review of a new book by Reb Zalman, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters*. More specifically, it is about the way *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is a lens through which one can view the maturation of Jewish Renewal. As is well known, the organizational, communal, and ideational vision of Reb Zalman's Jewish Renewal arises out of

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the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe and its transplantation to America initiated by Habad Hasidism in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hasidic teachings, devotional practices and lifestyle (tapered to fit the particular needs and values of countercultural America) are the foundation of Reb Zalman's ongoing project. Practical guidebooks, such as the *The First Jewish Catalogue* in the early 1970s were the first popular manifestations of his new approach to Hasidism.<sup>1</sup>

## Writing and Teaching

Reb Zalman's writings were not as widely influential as his public teaching and mentoring. Although he served as a professor of Judaism at several universities (University of Winnipeg, Temple University, and now at the Naropa University in Boulder, CO), he rarely chose academic venues for his publications. In the spirit of Habad Hasidism, the source of his own Hasidic training, Reb Zalman's early works were intended for a young, estranged Jewish audience, many of whom were traveling the country and globe in search of an alternative lifestyle that was organic, joyful, non-materialistic and spiritual. His later work widened this narrow lens and contributed to the burgeoning new-age religiosity of contemporary America.

Reb Zalman is a master organizer, creating a network of Renewal groups that have started to become part of the existing American synagogue structure, as well as creating their own grass-roots prayer and ritual centers. In some way,

Jewish Renewal has become the pan-denomination of contemporary Judaism, recently adding to its organizational structure a decentered course of study toward rabbinical ordination mediated through the Internet and a network of devoted mentors around the country.

## Trilogy of Major Works

Although Reb Zalman has been quite prolific (his works include translations of Yiddish poetry as well as of Hasidic literature, theology and spirituality), to date two main works stand out: *Fragments of a Future Scroll* (1975) and *Paradigm Shift* (1993).<sup>2</sup> The first is largely selected translations of Hasidic texts accompanied by Reb Zalman's modest commentary. It is a work that breaks the ground for what will become a more mature statement of Jewish Renewal in *Paradigm Shift* almost 20 years later.<sup>3</sup>

Before *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, *Paradigm Shift* was the most comprehensive statement of Jewish Renewal. In it, Reb Zalman addresses the major themes of his humanistic, universal, ecumenical, yet deeply ritualistic Judaism. *Paradigm Shift* is a collection of previously written essays, interviews, meditations, theology, practical advice (e.g., "transcending the Sefer Barrier") and even politics (e.g., "An Open Letter to the Honorable Teddy Kolleck").

The book has a stream-of-consciousness (some would say disorganized) feel, but I have always thought at least part of this was intentional. Reb Zalman's Judaism is one that seeks to chal-

lunge the linear and scholastic way of thinking about religion. In this sense, the literary style of *Paradigm Shift* accurately reflects the literary style of many Hasidic works, although many Hasidic texts import the order of the Hebrew Bible or the yearly cycle as a structure.<sup>4</sup> *Paradigm Shift's* non-linear trajectory moves from theology to prayer to ritual to politics to the Holocaust almost inadvertently. It does not seem to be a book that is intended to be read cover to cover.

## Hasidic Spirituality

The final piece to Reb Zalman's trilogy is *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*. This book is much better organized, structured as a collection of Hasidic teachings and stories according to Hasidic masters. However, underlying this seemingly non-ideological guise, it is a radical reconstruction of Hasidic spirituality. It seeks to do what *Paradigm Shift* and his other works do not — it is Reb Zalman's attempt to place himself in a particular modern trajectory as a Jewish theologian of Hasidism. In short, it is his personal summa of Jewish Renewal. In this work, one can most readily discover Reb Zalman's "project," although it is easily missed if one reads it only for the retelling of Hasidic teachings.

Reading this book, one can understand how Jewish Renewal is both an outgrowth of, and also an impetus for, a radical reconstruction of Hasidism. That is, Jewish Renewal's success beyond its own cultural context requires an unambiguous reevaluation of Hasid-

ism. This work moves far beyond previous similar exercises (for example, in the works of Aryeh Kaplan or Adin Steinsaltz)<sup>5</sup> because there is no resonance of apologetic thinking.

Reb Zalman is not trying to present Hasidism, and by doing so, to defend it. As he puts it, "Jewish Renewal differs from Restoration, which seeks to hold on to a dying or former paradigm."<sup>11</sup> In fact, at moments he is quite critical of Hasidism and is quick to point out areas where a particular Hasidic value or teaching simply cannot be salvaged. It is in this sense that it is post-Hasidic and neo-Reconstructionist. (A chapter in *Paradigm Shift* entitled, "Reconstructionism and Neo-Hasidism: A Not-So-Imaginary Dialogue" addresses this issue directly.)

## Creative Reconstruction

For readers interested mainly in the tales and teachings of the Hasidic masters as retold by Reb Zalman, the first chapter, "A Renaissance of Piety," might seem merely prefatory. However, this chapter is one of the most important in the book. Without it, one can easily overlook the underlying purpose of Reb Zalman's retelling and reconstructing these Hasidic teachings into something useful for the new age. This creative reconstruction is scattered throughout the book, and is largely an extension of this chapter, where Reb Zalman reflects on the trajectory of modern interpreters of Hasidism and finds his place among them. The chapter also contains some important au-

tobiographical material in that it traces Reb Zalman's thinking over 30 years on the two fundamental questions that this book attempts to answer: "What is Hasidism?" and "How can one be a Hasid?"

In order to analyze this important chapter, I have taken the interpretive license of dividing it into four distinct parts: the situational, the psychological, the theological and the methodological. In each part, Reb Zalman demonstrates how Hasidism has and can continue to survive the test of time, as well as create and carry us to a new paradigm.

## Reb Zalman and Buber

Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel are the two most influential figures who introduced Hasidism to a modern, North American audience. Reb Zalman engages both thinkers in a way that resembles Buber's analysis in his essay, "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi and the Baal Shem Tov."<sup>6</sup> There, Buber argues that Spinoza and Sabbatai Zevi, both of whom waged their critique of normative Judaism in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, each had the right idea (albeit manifest differently). Yet each lacked something to enable that idea to mature and blossom — more specifically, to become a full-blown devotional life.

The Baal Shem Tov came along in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and served as a corrective — not that the others were "wrong" in principle (in fact, Buber argues, both offered accurate critiques of Judaism), but they simply did not go far enough in what was right about

their respective theories. And, Buber adds, each failed by overextending his respective critique: Spinoza by eliminating the personal God completely, and Sabbatai Zevi by overextending the universality of Jewish messianism by converting to Islam.

The historical, or theological, accuracy of Buber's argument is not at issue here. What is relevant is that Reb Zalman claims that, in a similar way, both Buber and Heschel paved the way for Jewish Renewal, but could not take their theological observations into the realm of a devotional life. Each contributed to a reevaluation of Hasidism, but neither answered the fundamental question, "How can one be a Hasid?"

Reb Zalman understands Buber's neo-Hasidic project and agrees with it up to a point. Yet for Reb Zalman (and this is still his early thinking, c. 1960), Buber gives us the individual "I," and even gives us a systematic philosophy/theology of the "Thou," but he doesn't give us a human other who can point the way. For Buber, at least as Reb Zalman reads him, the Rebbe is not an integral part of the Hasidic experience. And Buber would agree with this — as an existentialist, it is the individual who points the way; it is subjectivity that creates the possibility of living authentically.

For Reb Zalman, Buber got it right about the subject, but he was afraid "that the word would become flesh," that dialogue would yield to obligation. Buber's fear of "objectivity" made "becoming a Hasid" impossible. He could not submit to a devotional life (even in the non-Orthodox way Reb Zalman constructs it), because his commitment

was principally to the moment alone. And he could not commit to the centrality of the *Tzaddik* or Rebbe, because, for Buber, the individual was the ultimate authority.

## Reb Zalman and Heschel

For Reb Zalman, Heschel comes closer, but he still does not give us what we need for a new paradigm. He gives us a theory of “radical amazement” and “divine pathos,” models whereby *halakha* can survive, where we no longer need to respond to Buber’s fear of incarnation as the destruction of the subject. Heschel gives us a Judaism that can be lived, an alternative piety that will not submit the subject to the heteronymous dictates of the law, but neither will it make the law inoperative. Heschel can teach us a lot about Hasidism, suggests Reb Zalman, but his theology is just that — a theology of Hasidism. It cannot teach one how to become a Hasid.<sup>7</sup>

Reb Zalman’s critique of Heschel is quite undeveloped, even transparent. He never explains what he means by Heschel’s limitations, implying only that for Heschel, like Buber, God is mediated through the experience of the individual alone. In short, Reb Zalman ends his “old thinking” (here refracted through an abbreviated critique of Buber and Heschel) with the proclamation that to be a Hasid, one needs a Rebbe.

## Renewing the “Rebbe”

With *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, we

pick up again some 25 years later. Much has happened: the ’60s, the Vietnam War, psychedelic drugs. Reb Zalman has left the Lubavitch movement and Orthodoxy; Far Eastern religions have saturated the American landscape and Reb Zalman’s imagination. If Judaism can survive these seismic changes, Reb Zalman believes, it will be because of Hasidism.

But what about Hasidism? What about the Rebbe? The Rebbe model, he concludes, must stay, since being a Hasid necessitates having a Rebbe. But the old hierarchical model of rebbehood, one person around whom a community gathers and submits itself, cannot and should not survive — it must undergo a transformation. The Rebbe can no longer be a specific person. The hierarchical nature of community that this requires has not survived the progressive movement of contemporary culture.

Yet relation, what used to be the relation between the Rebbe and the Hasid, must survive. “Relation is filling the space between a subject and an object. It is the process bridging the two. Renewal is always a process of ‘togetherness,’ of partnering with something else. For in truth there is nothing in the physical world that is not of a dependent nature” (85). Re-envisioning the Rebbe is perhaps the first seismic move Reb Zalman makes from Hasidism to Renewal.

If the Rebbe does not survive in some manner, all we are left with is a “theology of Hasidism,” but not a lived devotional practice. That is, we are left with Buber and Heschel. Part of being

a Hasid is an act of submission, the feeling of being less rather than more, in need rather than in command. And here we are introduced to Reb Zalman's "organismic" model of rebbe-ing (13). Rebbe-ing is a function whereby we all serve each other at different times and for different purposes. "The Rebbe" is no longer a title but a station; I can serve the community as a Rebbe and then walk away and resume my ordinary life. It is a type of "playing Rebbe" (Reb Zalman even uses that language, 14). "So I've come understand that the Rebbe of the future is not going to be 'the Rebbe' we knew in the past. For some time, the Rebbe will serve as the Rebbe, and when that's done, the person will have dinner and go to see a movie and not necessarily be a Rebbe" (14).

### **Becoming Expansive Hasidim**

In other words, we teach one another to be Hasidim, not Hasidim of one person, but Hasidim in the wide sense, that is, living Judaism, or simply living, in an expansive way (24). "So, to be open and fluid, 'walking' is the way of the Hasid. When one is static and certain of life's limits, when one stands still, one is closed to the joy of endless possibilities, even on a spiritual path" (31).

Reb Zalman attempts to substantiate this claim — that Hasidism's original intent was not about the Rebbe per se — in portraits of Hasidic masters. The Rebbe/*Tzaddik* model was a particular, and necessary, instantiation, given the religious and cultural climate of the time. Thus, this book makes a

quasi-apostolic claim, a reconstruction of origins, attempting to revive a genealogy of the internality (*penimiut*) of Hasidism as expressed by its great masters. And yet, its apostolic claim is buttressed by a positivistic claim of creative progress.

Reb Zalman does not claim to have rediscovered the past, but only to have viewed a dimension of the past through the lens of a new future, making extraneous all that does not cohere to the internal message of Hasidism as he sees it through his contemporary eyes. This new vision of the Hasid directly connects to the second theological piece of his introduction, the new theological paradigm.

### **From Deism to Pantheism**

One of the advantages of being trained in, or at least conversant with, the study of religion more generally is the ability to employ categories in order to explain the internal movements of specific traditions. Reb Zalman employs the language of the study of religion (albeit a language that is now somewhat dated in the academy) to place Hasidism within a certain spiritual trajectory.

The theological component of this prelude is to view Hasidism as moving from deism (the old paradigm) to pantheism (the new paradigm), using biblical and post-biblical characters. In this reading, biblical and rabbinic figures embody or represent world views expressing certain theological positions. Again, the historical accuracy of this exercise is not an issue, as it wasn't for

Hasidic masters who thought similarly, albeit without Western theological categories. When we no longer look at Jewish tradition as a seamless tapestry where there is essentially no theological difference between Abraham, Moses or Rabbi Akiva (and here the historical method does play an important role in Reb Zalman's thinking), we can posit how different epochs (the biblical period, the talmudic period, the Middle Ages) offer different and contesting world views.<sup>8</sup>

Historical events (the destruction of the Temple or the Holocaust, for example) also serve as markers for paradigm shifts, making the God of the old paradigm (or the particular way God is envisioned and served) obsolete.<sup>9</sup> In some way, the success of a new paradigm is the extent to which it can read itself back into the old paradigm without succumbing to the theological limitations of that paradigm. That is, to transform the old into the new without detection.<sup>10</sup>

Without giving us a detailed account of "why" (this can be found in *Paradigm Shift*), Reb Zalman suggests that the new theological paradigm of our age is pantheism, that is, that everything is God. He rightfully discounts panentheism (God is in everything) as basically meaningless and, I would add, a kind of uncourageous pantheism (20). Pantheism undermines the hierarchical structure of classic theism and, by extension, threatens the theological suppositions of classical Judaism.<sup>11</sup> For Reb Zalman, pantheism's most useful dimension is the notion of the divine in the person, something that he ar-

gues stands at the center of Beshtean Hasidism.<sup>12</sup> This suggests a new model of leadership whereby we all contain within us both the Rebbe and the Hasid, depending upon the situation. Each person contains a manifestation of the divine that can serve another, whose divine nature lies elsewhere.

## Seeking God

For Reb Zalman, his new-fangled Hasidism is the Jewish "philosophy" of this new pantheistic age. The Baal Shem Tov already did much of the work by chipping away at the hierarchical structure of classic theism (here Reb Zalman is in full agreement with Buber). "Where may God be found, if not in space or time? In person, because it turns out we are not doing so well with time today; time is not shared as much as it used to be. . . . First we sought God in space, in *olam*. The new started to look for God in time. And now we are looking for God more in person" (21).<sup>13</sup>

This, of course, is Reb Zalman's take on the triadic division of worldly existence in *Sefer Yetzira*; *olam* (space), *shana* (time), *nefesh* (person). Instead of a description of existence more generally, Reb Zalman presents this triad as a developmental description of how human beings envision God ("where we find God"). Taking Hasidism's redirection of kabbalistic metaphysics to the person, Reb Zalman offers us a model tracing God-consciousness from classical theism to pantheism.<sup>14</sup>

New theological epochs, as it were, are never clean. "Primitive" polytheis-

tic elements remain in all religions as civilization moves to different theological positions. To soften apologetically the edge of these polytheistic-like rituals in Judaism is not aligned with paradigm-thinking. Rather, Reb Zalman acknowledges that these rituals emerged during a different theological epoch and thus they are seen for what they, in all their limitations, are, and not viewed negatively.

## Abandoning Old Paradigms

This does not mean that everything in the past, practically and theologically, must remain. What can be salvaged should be, and what is too deeply rooted in the old paradigm should be abandoned.<sup>15</sup> It was Hasidism, after all, that took us away from the more dualistic constructs of good and evil that dominated classical Kabbala and offered a more dialectical model of the good in the evil (Buber's "hallowing the mundane"). While this surely existed in earlier Kabbala (e.g., in Moshe Cordovero and Isaac Luria and even the *Zohar*), what Hasidism added was the centrality of the person, the *nefesh*, as the new paradigm where God is most readily found.<sup>16</sup> Implied here is that apologetic thinking, a part of the old paradigm, impedes theological progress. For Reb Zalman, to reconstruct unapologetically Hasidism is both to bind us to it and liberate us from it. Or, perhaps, to make it useful by freeing us from having to defend some of its outdated values.

Accompanying this, Reb Zalman readily admits the fissures and the en-

demic weakness that lie at the heart of monotheism — the tendency toward irreconcilable divisions between good and evil, yielding fundamentalist theories that are presently threatening our civilization. This is manifest in many ways, including patriarchal language, intolerance toward the other, hatred of nature and human desire, and "ethnic cleansing" as a religious precept. "One thing people don't like about religion is the hierarchical and patriarchal language, the antifeminist sentiment that goes all the way through the Vatican to the Taliban, Meah Shearim to the Laws of Manu, and that is a big part of the problem" (293).

The equating of Meah Shearim with the Taliban is intentional — it is to state that, rooted in monotheism, both paths are susceptible to the same dangers. To argue for a disanalogy between the two, arguing that one is more susceptible to distortion than the other, is simply to misunderstand the problem.<sup>17</sup> The problem of the Taliban isn't Islam per se (although it surely manifests there); it is a corrupted deism endemic to all monotheistic religions.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of Far Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism) in the West plays a positive role in the correction of corrupt versions of monotheism. These non-monotheistic religions do not share the particular dangers of monotheism (although they have their own vulnerabilities). For Reb Zalman, the appearance of these atheistic or non-monotheistic religions is a sign that Western civilization has entered a new paradigm, a more "organismic way of looking at the universe."

## Hasidism Anticipates New Paradigms

Those committed to a particular monotheistic faith (and Reb Zalman is, in the end, deeply committed to Judaism) are challenged to search out dimensions of the old paradigm that can be reformatted, transformed, even reconstructed, to fit this new organic model.<sup>19</sup> He views Hasidism as a movement that contained fundamental components of this new paradigm. Here, he is in full agreement with Buber's assessment of Hasidism as a "Jewish Orientalism." The problem with traditional Hasidism is that, given the fact that it was living in a world still wed to the old paradigm, it oftentimes lacked the courage of its convictions.

Among the last great religious movements in that second religious age — and not only for Judaism — was Hasidism. Coming on the very eve of modernity, it represents the second age of religion trying to transcend itself; it steps forward and peers beyond the blinders of its age, but then moves back again out of understandable fear or hesitation. Its original claim, that *kavannah* (inwardness) is what true religion is all about, was still too revolutionary for its day (213).

Hasidism thus becomes the model, but cannot be the solution to Reb Zalman's project. Without significant reformation, Hasidism remains stuck in cultural, ideological and even spiritual values of an old paradigm, even as it may have felt the confines of its own world and, at moments, tried to expand beyond its own limitations. To employ

computer terminology so common in Reb Zalman's later writings, Hasidism needs to be reformatted. That is what *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* attempts to do.

## History and "How to Read"

In order to contextualize what I understand has happened in this new book, I want to suggest four major trends in reading Hasidic texts in the modern period: the traditional, the quasi-scholarly, the scholarly and reading for renewal. The traditional reader studies these texts as sacred canon. Their sacrality prevents historical or critical analysis and denies, or at least ignores, contextualization or the impact of foreign influences. The texts are read solely for inspirational purposes, that is, to understand "how to be a Hasid." (As stated above, this is also Reb Zalman's concern, which is why reading for renewal is, in a sense, closing a circle.)

The quasi-scholarly has two subgroups. The work of the first subgroup constitutes a kind of scholarly apologetics, presenting Hasidic material to a wider audience, not necessarily Jewish, applying a critical and historical method but still viewing the texts as sacred, although the intent of their presentation is not purely devotional. Buber falls into this camp, although his interests were more philosophical, as does Samuel Abba Hordetzky, Zalman Shargai, and, to a certain extent, Hillel Zeitlin (who, interestingly, Reb Zalman includes as a Hasidic master). This group was popular in Europe in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but has not

really reproduced itself either in Israel or the Diaspora.<sup>20</sup>

## Making Hasidism Accessible

The second subgroup is more openly apologetic and less wed to scholarly discourse. This group has flourished in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, consisting largely of Orthodox thinkers who translate and comment on Hasidic texts as a way of making them more accessible to a wider Jewish audience. The purpose of this group is largely inspirational (*kiruv*), geared toward fostering the religious life, but it is more knowledgeable of scholarly method than the first traditional model, although scholarly method is only superficially deployed. Examples include Aryeh Kaplan (although I think his agenda is a bit more complicated), Adin Steinsaltz, Nissen Mindel, and Jacob Immanuel Schochet of Lubavitch, and Chaim Kramer and Avraham Greenbaum of the Breslov Research Institute. In many ways, this group is a direct outgrowth of the *kiruv* movement in North America.

The third group consists largely of academics whose interests are more critical and less theological, reading Hasidic literature in order to understand how and why it emerges when it does. Many are historians interested in Eastern European Jewish culture more generally, and some are scholars of Jewish mysticism who view Hasidism as the “latest phase” (to borrow Gershom Scholem’s phrase from *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*) of this genre. These individuals are not necessarily Jewishly

affiliated, some are not even Jews, and their intended audience is primarily academe and not religious communities.

## Reading for Renewal

These three groups all have permeable boundaries, especially the latter two. Many academics also have more theological interests, just as some in the second group live and write in the academy. Many write for multiple audiences, either simultaneously or via different venues of publication. My point is simply to present a map of Hasidic readers in order better to situate where Reb Zalman, his literary oeuvre, and his emerging school fit.

Reb Zalman’s reading of Hasidism exhibited in this book constitutes the fourth group — reading for renewal. His intended audience is both Jews and non-Jews (the distinction is, in fact, irrelevant, as Reb Zalman’s quasi-syncretistic theology makes all spiritual literature useful for all traditions). He writes with the hope that the reader will be inspired but not necessarily return to tradition (i.e., Hasidism or conventional Orthodoxy).<sup>21</sup> He does not read Hasidic texts as an academic, yet freely employs scholarly terminology and categories when it suits him. The reading is not historical in any conventional way, but utilizes, and even needs, a historical/critical approach. He does not read apologetically, but does read theologically.

More crucially, I suggest that Reb Zalman reads “paradigmatically.” That is, he assumes that Hasidism was the last

vestige of an old paradigm and sometimes touched on the first stage of a new one. Reading for renewal looks for the paradigm shift in these texts. He also readily acknowledges that Hasidism's paradigm has progressed and therefore the contemporary world cannot use all of what Hasidism has to offer.

## Finding the Fissures

In some way, Reb Zalman's reading is always looking for the fissure, the break — not to exploit it but to show how these fissures serve constructive purposes and productive ends toward serving God. He bridges the historical and the ahistorical. "If I try to judge the paradigm of the past with my understanding of the present, I am going to find myself in trouble." And, ". . . I believe that we still need to understand how to learn what they were saying, to look at things through their eyes and to apply their method" (23). Our need to understand their world (the historical) is not because that is the best or most accurate way to read (the academic approach) or because we need to mirror their world in our world (the traditional approach), but simply because "theirs was a unique approach to God and to life" (23). While it is often correctly argued that historical reconstruction can weaken a text's inspirational potential, Reb Zalman holds that while it does reveal the weaknesses of the theological position, it also provides the necessary material to reenvision what is valuable for a future paradigm.

An example Reb Zalman gives of how reading for renewal is a departure

from the old paradigm is the abandonment or at least attenuation of the proof-text. "We don't treat proof-texts the same way nowadays. What does a proof-text mean to us? If I want to say something is really so, we mean that it corresponds to a pattern that sits very deep in the reality map. So by referring to scripture, we want to say, this is a very strongly shared thing" (121).<sup>22</sup>

When scripture was the fundamental reality map of a community and truth was determined solely through it, the proof-text was the strongest case one could make for truth. This is common in pre-modern Judaism.<sup>23</sup> When other reality maps emerged in the Middle Ages (e.g., philosophy), the use of proof-texts began to change. Taking Maimonides as an example, both sources (philosophy and scripture) are used to argue for truth, but the underlying assumption was that both were essentially expressing the same truth.<sup>24</sup> Maimonides would sometimes use a proof-text to illustrate a philosophical point in his *Guide for the Perplexed* and other times he would not. In fact, there are cases (e.g., *Guide* II: 25, on creation) where Maimonides acknowledges that he can make the text (here, Genesis 1:1) support any position he finds philosophically most viable.<sup>25</sup> And, when he does cite a proof-text, it is legitimate to assume that the point in question was not true for Maimonides because of the proof-text but independent of it.

## New Reality Maps

Reb Zalman's point exists along this trajectory; however he takes it one step

further. What happens when there are other reality maps (for example, Freud, neuroscience, other metaphysical systems) that are so far removed from the reality map of scripture that citing a proof-text to justify a point from these reality maps becomes futile?<sup>26</sup> Reb Zalman writes that in the old paradigm (even in its last stages in Hasidism) “the text is proof of what you are saying” (121).

However, today we have accepted things as truth that are not founded in scripture and are often a contradiction to scripture. How do we then read scripture as a reality map; that is, what are we looking for in an era of conflicting reality maps? Or, more strongly, how do we read when the new reality maps upon which we build our lives undermine the reality map that is scripture? Regrettably, Reb Zalman never gives us any detailed discussion on this important matter.

## Hasidism as an Approach

Finally, Reb Zalman concludes this chapter with an important observation. “This book is not a book about Hasidism. I don’t want to talk about Hasidism as a static thing; Hasidism is an approach. It is an approach to Judaism” (24).<sup>27</sup> What Reb Zalman does not tell us explicitly is what exactly this book is really about. My suggestion is that this book is an attempt to create a Hasidic text in English, an example of Hasidic anthology with a very specific agenda. We have numerous examples of this in Polish Hasidism (e.g., Yoakhim Kim Kadish’s three-volume *Siah*

*Sarfei Torah*, Shmuel of Shivaneh’s *Ramatayim Zofim to Tanna d’b’Eliyahu*, and various examples in Bratslav literature). But this book is a kind of radical anthology, one where Reb Zalman’s commentary is not meant to clarify a text or present a coherent statement of a Hasidic school, but to turn, re-shape, in some cases transform the texts being retold from their original paradigm to the present paradigm.<sup>28</sup>

Below, I will discuss what I see as the central method utilized to accomplish this. Here, I just want to point out the way in which Reb Zalman applies the distinction he draws between earlier readers of Hasidism, between theologians of Hasidism (i.e., Buber and Heschel) and himself. The latter two were writing books, Reb Zalman implies, about Hasidism, whereas he is writing a Hasidic text by reading other texts and retelling older stories. Whereas *Paradigm Shift* delineates the architecture of Jewish Renewal, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is its applied dimension. It is only here where the genealogy of Renewal is revealed, albeit in a largely implied fashion.

## To Retell and to Interpret

As a Hasidic anthology, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is trying to accomplish two things: to retell and to interpret. But what is interpretation? This age-old question stands at the center of this book, but it is never explained in any systematic way. Conventionally, one could say that to interpret is to explain, to explore, or to understand a text. Or, to interpret could be to make a text

one's own, to manipulate or massage a text, to enable it to speak to you. But there are limits; anarchic interpretation will always evoke ire among more conventional readers. The great talmudic scholar Saul Lieberman once warned a student who was offering a far-fetched reading of a talmudic text, "You can seduce a text, but you can't rape it."

Philosophers interested in hermeneutics, such as Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Georg Hans Gadamer, E.D. Hirsch, Wolfgang Iser, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, et al., always attempt to navigate between text and reader, between exegesis and eisegesis, between what a text says and what it can say, or, whether a text says anything at all. Reb Zalman offers his understanding of interpretation through the voice of the Baal Shem Tov. "All right, let's take a little detour. I am the Baal Shem Tov, and I am about to interpret Torah. What am I trying to do by interpretation? I am trying to modify reality . . . How we interpret something will make a difference in reality. It is almost as if to say that this interpretation that I am going to give determines how the world will come out" (40).

### **Bringing the Text to Life**

To interpret here is not to understand the text at all — in fact the text (once read) loses all meaning until it is given new meaning by the reader. More importantly, it is not the text here that is ultimately important; it is how the reader brings it to life and, by so doing, changes the life of subsequent readers.<sup>29</sup> The claim made here argues that

the meaning garnered through interpretation changes the way we (the reader and the listener) live in the world. Textual interpretation as reality modification is quite compelling as a Hasidic theory of reading, especially when put in the mouth of the Baal Shem Tov.

The hagiographical literature of the Baal Shem Tov is replete with instances where his "interpretation" of a text changes someone's life, in fact, creates disciples. The most well-known instance is the story (extant in numerous versions) of the Dov Baer of Mezritch's first meeting with the Baal Shem Tov, in which the Baal Shem Tov explained a passage from Isaac Luria's *Etz Hayyim* that transformed Dov Baer's life, instantly making a devoted disciple. There are many similar stories in Hasidic literature related to other masters.

Reb Zalman's notion of interpretation as reality modification suggests that truth is created through reading, not the truth of the text but the truth of reality as lived by the reader.<sup>30</sup> Is this what Reb Zalman is trying to do in this book? That is, instead of showing how Hasidism reflects and serves as a foundation for Jewish Renewal (this would still be a book about Hasidism), he is interpreting Hasidic texts to modify reality, to bring about and not just illustrate a paradigm shift through these texts.

### **Fusion of Soul and Mind**

Our world is no longer the world of miracles or of *tzaddikim* traveling long distances in a matter of seconds. That

is an old paradigm, where fantasy and reality were blurred, a method popular in Yiddish storytelling and also captured in the description of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels as "magical realism."<sup>31</sup> Our paradigm, teaches Reb Zalman, is more mind-oriented, where spirituality has been psychologized, where miracles are phenomenological and not ontological, where the soul/spirit and the mind have become fused.

Psychology plays an important role in Jewish Renewal. The work of Carl Jung and Viktor Frankl and contemporary figures such as Edward Hoffman and Ken Wilber serve as models for Reb Zalman's theory of reality modification. He takes these new models and applies them to the interpretation of texts in general and Hasidic texts in particular. To read is to create — not only to create meaning in the text but to create worlds into which one can then enter and live. New religious schools and communities begin with reading, and recreating through rereading, old texts. This seems to me Reb Zalman's first lesson for the new paradigm.

## Encounter with Other Religions

Someone comparing this volume as an anthological Hasidic text in English to other classical Hasidic texts will notice that Reb Zalman offers us frequent, in fact almost constant, references to masters and teachings of other religious traditions. While this is not uncommon in classical Jewish literature — for example, in medieval philosophical and pietistic literature, such as Maimonides'

*Guide for the Perplexed*, Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*, or Abraham Maimonides *Treatise on Beatitude* — Hasidic literature rarely, if ever, offers a positive assessment of other spiritual paths.<sup>32</sup> The non-Jew is depicted as inferior at best, demonic at worst. Other religions, when not described as idolatrous, are deemed inferior to Judaism in both substance and form.<sup>33</sup>

It is surely the case that contemporary constructive Jewish thinking, even in a more traditional context, employs other religious traditions. However, in most cases, these sources are employed pragmatically, that is, to entice the reader, who has likely been exposed to other traditions, into taking Hasidism, or Judaism, seriously. In other words, it is a tool of *kiruv*.<sup>34</sup> While this may have also been true in Reb Zalman's early writings (he begins his career as an emissary of the Rebbe of Lubavitch in the late 1940s), I think his more mature works, and this work in particular, has a different end in mind.

## Misunderstanding the Other

It is appropriate that Reb Zalman begins his discussion of the other with an admission of guilt. That is, he feels compelled to undermine popular Hasidic apologetics by acknowledging Hasidism's (and Judaism's) past failure in understanding the non-Jewish other, both as person (the Gentile as neighbor) and thought (Gentile religions). The following is another good example of how Reb Zalman expresses his own ideas through the mouth of another, a

tactic that filters through this entire book and is quite common in Hasidic literature more generally. Speaking about Hillel Zeitlin, a fascinating and complex personality from early 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe who was murdered by the Nazis on the road to Treblinka, wrapped in phylacteries and a prayer shawl, Reb Zalman writes,

For Jews, Christians were expendable. Often they were only seen as useful expedients — *Shabbos Goyim* — and the rest were superfluous. This was the attitude that they took. We are finally emerging from that attitude. But there he was in his time (1930s), and how was he going to say that? Zeitlin reached into what people have called the second Isaiah and that universal vision, and he realized that nobody can be redeemed without everybody else being redeemed. When a person becomes fully aware of that, it ushers in a whole new way of thinking (283).

How bizarre yet powerful to make such an admission of guilt about the Jewish attitude toward the non-Jew through someone who was brutally murdered for no other reason than his own Jewishness! It is true, as Reb Zalman recounts, that Zeitlin saw a deep and corrosive fissure in Judaism's antipathy toward the non-Jew. However, surrounded by the dark cloud of Nazism and baseless anti-Semitism, Zeitlin had no audience, and no program, to correct this.

But this is why Reb Zalman includes

him as a Hasidic master. He is viewed as a proto-advocate of Renewal, a visionary of a new paradigm that would only arise from the ashes of the Holocaust, from his own ashes. Reb Zalman views the lifting of that cloud as an opportunity (one part of a paradigm shift) once again to confront the fissure Zeitlin described, a blemish that prevents us from moving forward and meeting the shifting paradigm of post-war reality. And so the attitude toward the non-Jew must be addressed and the incorporation of non-Jewish religions must be programmatically employed to create a new Hasidism for the future.

## Ending Isolation

Comparisons with other religious traditions serve an essential function in this reconstruction of Hasidism. While the comparisons are not detailed or particularly sophisticated, they function to open the mind of the reader, who may be accustomed to viewing Judaism in isolation. Reb Zalman's comparative exercise is not academic, that is, it is not historical, nor is it polemical in any way. Rather, it implicitly suggests that when one views Judaism refracted through the lenses of the other, even one that is/was your enemy, one's vision of Judaism is both attenuated and deepened. That is, Judaism becomes smaller because it is severed from its myth of exclusive superiority. Yet it becomes deeper because it is now understood as one very creative and often profound way of addressing perennial issues of human existence.

Such comparative analysis also di-

minishes (although it does not erase) the propensity for exclusivist and fundamentalist readings. When these comparative readings of religion are contextualized within the secular via psychology and science, what emerges is a Judaism that is both usable and malleable.

For example, when Reb Zalman explores Shneur Zalman of Liady's theory of the animal soul (*nefesh ha-behamit*), in conjunction with the Sufi concept of *nafs* ("the soul seeking its own pleasure") (119), he is not suggesting any historical confluence. He is also not using Sufism as a foil to show how the "Jewish" idea is superior. He is simply arguing that Shneur Zalman's theory of the animal soul is not original, and its very unoriginality is an indication of Shneur Zalman's deep thinking (the Hebrew saying *barukh sh'kavanti*, "thank God I have independently understood an already existing observation," is quite apt here). That is, by isolating the *nefesh ha-behamit* and trying to understand its place in the human condition, Shneur Zalman enters into one of the great perennial spiritualist struggles.<sup>35</sup> And further, Sufism's long tradition of struggling with the issue of human desire and the human spirit can, and should, be a resource for Jews trying to make sense of Shneur Zalman's thinking.

I would go even further to say that the logic of this argument suggests that utilizing Sufism in this case may enable us, in this new paradigm, to have a broader sense of what the *nefesh ha-behamit* means than Shneur Zalman's own contemporaries. The question is

no longer, "Is it permitted to study other religions?" — a question that reaches back to the Mishna and served as the foundation of many internal medieval Jewish debates. For Reb Zalman, that is a question of the old paradigm. The new question is, "Is it permitted not to?"

## Undermining Tradition

This raises another important dimension of paradigm-shift thinking that needs further exploration. Reb Zalman's broadening of the Jewish discourse through the necessary incorporation of non-Jewish sources and traditions and the implicit belief that these "external sources" (*seforim hizonim*) can deepen one's understanding of Judaism, undermines an important concept in traditional Judaism — "the descent of the generations" (*yeridat ha-dorot*), one fundamental component of rabbinic authority. While it is true that this doctrine does not appear before the geonic period in the work of Sherira Gaon and was, as Menahem Kellner has argued, likely rejected by figures as seminal as Moses Maimonides, it has become a dominant trope in traditional Judaism.<sup>36</sup>

Most non-traditional modern Judaisms, including Zionism, have largely rejected this notion, even as some try to retain it by bifurcating legal (halakhic) and non-legal (aggadic) dimensions of Judaism. However, Reb Zalman is constructing his Judaism from the ultra-traditional sources of Hasidim and Kabbala, traditions that *prima facie* accept this idea. I think

paradigm-shift thinking unapologetically undermines “the descent of the generations,” and it would be a desideratum for Reb Zalman to weigh in on this. It shows, on my reading, an underlying positivism in Reb Zalman’s thinking, a kind of spiritual reconfiguration of Auguste Comte’s foundation for secularism.

Here again, I think there is an interesting, yet still unexplored, correlation between Reb Zalman and Mordecai Kaplan. How does one create a life of devotion and piety wed to a traditional body of classical literature while espousing a positivistic theory of civilization? While Kaplan has much to say about this, it remains largely undeveloped in Reb Zalman’s work, yet constitutes an important part of the Renewal project.

### Stretching the Paradigm

More generally, what this book attempts to do, and I think does so quite successfully, is to rend the veil of the so-called traditionalist mind-set of Hasidism — not by arguing that Hasidic masters were overt heretics, but that they were, in a sense, engaged in stretching their own paradigm to its limit. In some cases, they may have broken momentarily into the next paradigm and then quickly retreated, fearing the sociological consequences of marginalization and exclusion from traditional society.

To illustrate this, Reb Zalman shows both the radical underside of Hasidism as well as the instances where Hasidism fails to remain true to its inner drive and becomes a product of its time and

place. This is exhibited through its inability to engage seriously in, among other things, the question of gender and the truth of non-Jewish religions. By freely exhibiting both, Reb Zalman opens up a treasure chest containing jewels and charcoal and asks his reader not to discard the former for the latter or to deny the existence of the latter in order to salvage the former.

### Creative Act of Translation

In the broadest sense, Reb Zalman’s deconstruction and reevaluation of the Hasidic legacy is enacted through the creative act of translation. By translation, I do not mean simply rendering a word or phrase from one language into another. Rather, I refer to an act whereby a value expressed in a word or phrase is subverted to mean something other than what it has come to mean (what it was intended to mean, no one really knows), yet the initial term remains, albeit in a new state.

This is perhaps captured in the zoharic phrase *milin itin haditin* (new ancient words).<sup>37</sup> If successful, tradition is transformed but not effaced. In many cases, especially in esoteric literature, the transition of translation is not between one term and another, one language and another, even one culture and another — it is between language, any language, and the experience it seeks to express. This is a common theme in translation theory from Dryden to Benjamin and appears in a different form in Gershom Scholem’s attempt to define Jewish mysticism in the beginning of his *Major Trends in*

*Jewish Mysticism*. Reb Zalman is simply applying it to Hasidic teaching.

## Translation and Experience

For example, writing about the Hebrew term *bittul ha-yesh* as “the annihilation of the self,” he notes: “It is not that it is a poor translation of the Hebrew, but the words are a bad translation of the experience” (76). I do not read this claim to be transhistorical. That is, at one time, and under certain historical and ideational circumstances, *bittul ha-yesh* could very well have meant “the annihilation of the self.” That is, at one time this could have been an accurate description of a human experience that was deemed a positive part of the devotional life. In this time, given the paradigm shift of postwar postmodernity, Reb Zalman claims the annihilation of the self is not an experience we deem healthy or useful. (Perhaps the brutal program of annihilation of “the other” in Nazism destroyed any positive value of annihilation more generally?) Hence the translation, once appropriate, now becomes obsolete.

Looking for a concept that better represents what we may be trying to achieve, Reb Zalman suggests “becoming transparent” to express a notion whereby distance between the self and God is narrowed without the effacement of the self in the process:

And so the Hasidic masters are using old language about the body to talk about the ego. If you do *bittul ha-yesh*, if you take your

‘selfness,’ your ego, and you annihilate it, you ‘bash’ it, that is going to take you closer to the love of God. But today I don’t even think it is a good strategy to bash the ego. I think a better strategy is to make the ego transparent(171).

“Transparency” is not set in stone, and Reb Zalman seems open to other possibilities. What is accomplished here is simply that the open engagement with the conscious act of reevaluation creates a new strategy for the aspiring paradigm-thinker.

## Generosity, Not Fear

Hence, while creative translation is a classic exercise of all religious systems, Reb Zalman’s self-conscious and open deployment of this method offers his readers a transparency that is both refreshing and productive. In Reb Zalman’s Hasidic text, the reader is invited to evaluate, accept, expand, or reject a particular translation precisely because she becomes part of the very act of translation. The hidden agenda of creative translation in tradition, often protected through the concealment of its method, is a reflection of the old paradigm. The new paradigm, built on the principle of generosity and not fear, unity and not polarity, pantheism and not deism, can abandon the protective garments of hidden translation, since progress and change become positive values for religion and not ones that threaten to undermine it.

The best way to illustrate Reb Zalman’s tools of translation is through a

series of brief examples. In them, I hope to show that translation is the core to Reb Zalman's thinking. I will begin with a simple list of seven translations and briefly explore how I think these translations function.

1) *olamot* — usually rendered as “worlds”; Reb Zalman suggests “genres” (154).

2) *sinat ra* — usually rendered as “hatred of evil”; Reb Zalman suggests “aversion to evil” (151).

3) *tumah* [related to *niddah*, menstruation] — usually rendered as “spiritual uncleanness”; Reb Zalman suggests “aversion-therapy” (161).

4) *bittul ha-yesh* — usually rendered as “self-nullification”; Reb Zalman suggests “transparency” (172).

5) *aimah* — usually rendered as “fear” or “trepidation”; Reb Zalman suggests “paralyzing anxiety” (166).

6) *kelipot* — usually rendered as “extraneous matter” or “demonic forces”; Reb Zalman suggests “energy systems” (150).

7) *devekut* — usually rendered as “communion with God”; Reb Zalman suggests “One-ing” or “sticking to God” (53).

Reb Zalman never suggests that his new translation is what the term actually means. This would render his project scholastic, even apologetic, but not constructive. In fact, he is often clear that his rendering is not what the term has come to mean or even originally meant. There is rarely any philological basis for his translation (an exception would be *aimah*, 166). There is often a hyperliteralism (e.g., *devekut*

as “One-ing” or “sticking to God”), which is a classic kabbalistic way of translating.

## Saving Torah

On the other hand, one could suggest that what Reb Zalman is doing here is classic Maimonideanism. In the first part of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides engages in a lengthy exposition of biblical terms, translating and defining them as a necessary prelude to the remainder of his philosophical treatise. Maimonides, of course, believed he was actually telling us what the term “really” meant; that is, philosophy was employed as the handmaiden of philology, but that is beside the point.

In one sense, there is a Maimonidean strain throughout Reb Zalman's thinking, perhaps in the trajectory of Maimonides' more spiritualistic disciples, his son Abraham and his grandson Obadia. Yet Maimonides was arguably looking for synthesis between philosophy and scripture, whereas Reb Zalman has no such illusion. He is not seeking to merge “reality maps,” but, in fact, to make a new reality map of Torah (here exemplified in Hasidism) by reenvisioning it through a series of new reality maps. In this way, Torah is not coming to save civilization (an older apologetic stance) but, rather, the new paradigm is coming to save Torah through its devoted and creative reader — saving Torah from obsolescence and the dustbin of history.

When he speaks of *olamot* as genres, he views them as “reality systems that

are perpendicular to one another” (154) — that is, a web of different but not mutually exclusive intersecting systems through which and into which we live. *Olamot* ceases to mean something “out there.” They are stripped of their metaphysical characteristics and become modes by which one can ascertain, explain or simply think about the human condition and one’s relationship to others, be they organic or inorganic. If Reb Zalman’s work is successful, the term *olam* will enter into the lexicon of contemporary reality that Reb Zalman is always looking to expand. Once the term enters, its multivalent meanings from the past can impact on the present. In this sense, translation is a vehicle for confluence. We must remember that for Reb Zalman, the new paradigm is not a “Jewish” paradigm, but one of human civilization. Judaism can contribute to this new era to the extent to which it allows (and trains) itself to enter into its emerging and developing discourse.

## Understanding Evil

The translation of *ra*, or evil, as “aversion” is another telling example. Evil is a concept from the old deistic paradigm, a term that thrives on the bifurcation of reality into God and not-God — good and evil. Even if we understand this in terms of negative theology (i.e., evil as the absence of good) or the more modern dialectical approach of classic Beshtean Hasidism, I think Reb Zalman is suggesting that evil is a term that cannot survive the pantheism of the new paradigm. Reb

Zalman’s pantheism is not fully antinomian; that is, all is not permitted. There are things that we should simply avoid for all kind of reasons: They are destructive, unhealthy, corrosive; they take us away from loving God and loving others. In Renewal, prohibitions remain.

Reb Zalman’s question — which is metahalakhic at its core — is not, “What is prohibited?” or even “Why is this or that prohibited?” Rather, the question that concerns him is “How do we succeed in distancing ourselves from that which is prohibited?” Calling it “evil” is one sure way, since it presents the prohibited object or idea as threatening. Evil is a tool used by religious authorities to assure compliance with religious standards. The downside is that evil breeds a desire, even an obligation, to destroy or annihilate. When the object or act is ontologically “evil,” its very presence in the world undermines the religious life. The “sacred” act of killing in a religious war, the enemy being the embodiment of evil, is the obvious example of how evil functions negatively. Sadly, this corrosive language has been revived in a quasi-secular context by the current president of the United States.

Reb Zalman suggests the term “aversion” as an alternative. Healthy aversion (Reb Zalman brings Stanley Kubrick’s film, *A Clockwork Orange*, as an example of unhealthy aversion therapy) is born out of love. “In my life, I’m totally connected with the energy of God, and I so love God that to do anything contrary to God’s will is something I couldn’t handle. If I did

that, my consciousness would be cut off from God. It is an aversion driven by the resultant separation from the Beloved" (153). That which is contrary to God exists, as it always will, but it only threatens me when I give it my attention. When I ignore it, it remains "out there," but it is outside the sphere of how I want to live my life. And, more importantly, when it is ignored, its power is diminished, an interpretation of the classic kabbalistic idea that the life-force of the demonic realm is dependant upon its interaction with the holy.

### **"Paralyzing Anxiety"**

The final example of translation that I will discuss is the term *aimeh*, usually rendered as "fear." Reb Zalman calls it "paralyzing anxiety." To illustrate this example, he retells a teaching he heard from Rabbi Yisrael Jacobson, a teacher of his in the Lubavitch yeshiva, that *aimeh* is a fear that is malevolent, one that is not healthy, but yet many have to overcome to get to the healthy fear of God, or *yeriah*. Reb Zalman uses the example of a peyote ritual and the fear of impending doom that often accompanies a hallucinogenic experience. The heightening of one's senses through these stimulants often brings about a feeling of uncontrolled movement. When this is coupled with fear (as it often is initially) it results in a consciousness of impending doom and the inability to do anything about it — the fear one experiences immediately before one is hit, anticipating the pain.

This experience, he suggests, cap-

tures the Hebrew term *aimeh*. His rendering is based on a loose philological observation. *Ai-mah*, "Where is it?" or "What is it?" That is, "I don't know what it is, I don't know where it is, but I got this uncanny feeling something is impending" (166). Reb Zalman admits, "nobody says that we need to have this kind of fear of God" (166). Yet it is an anxiety that is all too common, even under normal conditions, a fear that can only be overcome by succumbing to it — moving past it and not allowing oneself to get stuck in the paralyzing moment. This kind of fear is natural and, unless one can move beyond it, the true fear of *yeriah* may elude one.

In these brief examples — and there are many more — Reb Zalman builds his theory of reading for renewal: reading as an act of creative reconstruction. His translations are not meant to be scholarly but useful; they serve one who needs and wants Hasidism, but refuses to dwell in the old paradigm where it resides. These terms, this new Hasidic lexicon, are the building blocks of Jewish Renewal. It is only in *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* that Reb Zalman explores this systematically and comprehensively, exposing the reader to his theory of reading for renewal, one that would allow the reader herself to continue his work.

### **Engaging Islam**

There are two brief and interconnected observations that will serve as a conclusion to this essay. First, one of the lesser-known dimensions of Reb Zalman's contribution to contempo-

rarity Judaism is that he was one of the first constructive Jewish theologians seriously to engage Islam as a well-spring for Jewish devotional life. Much of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish theology in America was rooted in the European tradition, where the only serious “other” was Christianity.

A good example of this, in fact the exception that proves the rule, is Franz Rosenzweig’s somewhat pathetic treatment of Islam in his *The Star of Redemption* (and this was likely the product of Hegel’s superficial assessment of Islam and not of any serious engagement with the tradition).<sup>38</sup> American theologians such as Soloveitchik, Heschel, Fackenheim, Kaplan, Herberg, Wyschogrod, Greenberg, et al., almost never deal with Islam in anything more than a perfunctory way.<sup>39</sup> Almost all ecumenical work, until very recently, has been between Jews and Christians.

While 9/11 has changed all that, as early as the 1960s Reb Zalman was seriously reading Muslim literature, dialoging with Muslim contemporaries, and using Islam, mostly Sufism, as a source of his own inspiration. Given the recent turn of events since 9/11, Reb Zalman’s visionary notion that Islam is an important part of this new paradigm has come to fruition. The fact that our world is now confronted with radical Islam, a secular America driven in part by evangelical (radical) Christianity, and an Israeli political environment influenced by religious (radical) messianism, makes Reb Zalman’s work even more pertinent. Most Jews and Americans more generally have a stereotypic and “Orientalist” view of Is-

lam, and much of Islam conflates democracy and freedom with secularism and the Judeo/Christian tradition they view as incompatible with their theological world-view.

## Resisting Change

I do not feel that the political and theological polarization following 9/11 and the collapse of the Oslo accords undermine Reb Zalman’s engagement with Islam – in fact they give it new immediacy. Reb Zalman’s ecumenical (really post-ecumenical) and even syncretistic project is that Islam is not the only thing that needs to be saved – Judaism and Christianity also need to be saved, and perhaps the Muslim struggle to come to terms with modernity is a mirror for our struggle to come to terms with this new paradigm. Islam is not the problem but the symptom of a more global reluctance to move into this new paradigm, manifest in many ways, including post-colonialism, imperialism, military hegemony, unsympathetic capitalism, and the profiteering dimension of globalization. Of course, the problem is more complex, but to place the onus solely on Islam is to ignore a more global crisis that implicates all of us. The solution is not to eradicate the symptom, but to come to understand the underlying cause of the disease.

Reb Zalman, like most of us, knows that Islam is a rich tradition with centuries of enlightened teachings. His global vision of Renewal includes employing these teachings, thereby exposing Jews and Christians to them, as well as

exposing contemporary Muslims to the ways in which Judaism was positively influenced by the golden age of Islam. There would not have been a rich medieval Judaism without Islam — no Saadia Gaon, Moses Maimonides, Bahya ibn Pakuda, or Judah Ha-Levi. Perhaps Reb Zalman believes it is time for us to pay back the Islamic tradition. I would love to hear a more detailed discussion about the place of Islam in Renewal, given the present state of world.

### **An Unrealistic Vision?**

The second related point is that any reader of this essay, or of Reb Zalman's work more generally, can rightfully respond that his progressive vision of unity, this Aquarian Age of spiritual renewal, seems unrealistic. Religious fundamentalism is on the rise, in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. It seems as if we are heading back toward a dangerous old paradigm that preceded modernity, a time when holy wars and accusations of an "axis of evil" were commonplace. Reb Zalman never addresses this issue. Given his predictions of a new paradigm, he never tells us why human civilization seems to be heading in the opposite direction, and what can we do about it. Reb Zalman has given us much, but maybe his work is not yet done. Perhaps he can also offer advice in these most pressing matters in light of his lifelong struggle to explicate and articulate a new paradigm.

Unlike many books, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is actually much more than

it claims to be — it is more than a collection of Hasidic teachings and stories. It is an important step in the maturation of Jewish Renewal. In *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, Reb Zalman has left us a treasure, but one that must be read closely and creatively, not only to enjoy, but more importantly to use.

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1. Richard Seigel, Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld, *The First Jewish Catalogue* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1973).

2. *Fragments of a Future Scroll: Hassidism for the Aquarian Age* (Germantown, PA: Leaves of Grass Press, 1975); *Paradigm Shift* (New York/London: Jason Aronson, 1993). Another short book that continues this trajectory is *The First Step: A Guide for the New Jewish Spirit* (Toronto/New York: Bantam Books, 1983). Reb Zalman's dissertation, written at HUC/Cincinnati, has also been published as *Spiritual Intimacy: A Study of Counseling in Hasidism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991). This work explores the relationship between the Rebbe and the Hasid as a relationship of counseling, and thus develops his notion of the Rebbe as an integral part of the Hasid. While playing a role in his Renewal trajectory, its focus is more limited than either *Fragments* or *Paradigm Shift*.

3. Both *Paradigm Shift* and *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* contain chapters that were published previously as essays, some as early as the 1960s.

4. The structure of Hasidic books, that is, how they were composed, collected and published, has been comprehensively studied by Zeev Greis. See his *The Book in Early Hasidism* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1992).

5. For example, see Aryeh Kaplan, *The Light Beyond: Adventures in Chasidic Thought* (New York: Moznayim, 1981);

and *The Chasidic Masters and Their Teachings* (New York, Moznayim, 1984). For Adin Steinsaltz's writings on Hasidism, see *In the Beginning: Discourses on Hasidic Thought* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992); and *The Candle of God: Discourse on Chasidic Thought* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998).

6. Martin Buber, "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi, and the Baal Shem Tov," in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988), 89-112.

7. Here I believe Reb Zalman is hinting at the pedagogical model of R. Kolonymous Kalman Shapira of Piasecno, the rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto, whose trilogy on Hasidic pedagogy was focused on this question (i.e., how does one become a Hasid?). See his *Hakhsharat Arekhim* and *Mevo Shearim* (Jerusalem, 1962).

8. For example, Reb Zalman is quite open about the way he thinks Hasidism rubs against the grain of traditional Judaism. Discussing *Sefer Ha-Tanya*, Reb Zalman writes, "Now, Reb Shneur Zalman makes a very important move from the way of the Talmud. He is not really interested in behavior as much as he is interested in attitude and transformation" (108). This may sound like a benign and obvious point, but what is being suggested here is that *Sefer Ha-Tanya* really takes its reader in a direction away from the basic assumption of Rabbinic Judaism (i.e., that behavior stands at the center of Jewish worship).

9. This theory is developed more comprehensively in *Paradigm Shift*, 247-308. It also has precedent in medieval kabbalistic works, such as *Sefer Temunah*, *Sefer Peliyah* and *Sefer Ha-Kaneh*. This thinking also influenced Sabbateanism. For example, see Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 183-212. Another worthwhile comparison here is between Reb Zalman and Emile Fackenheim.

As far as I know, Reb Zalman never mentions Fackenheim in his writings.

10. In some way, then, Reb Zalman tells us too much; that is, he shows us his hand and thus excludes those whose commitment to tradition is steadfast. His recent works in Hebrew are closer to the older model. I have discussed this in a yet unpublished essay, "Translating into Tradition: Subversion and Constructive Heresy in the Hebrew Writings of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi," presented at Awakening, Yearning and Renewal: Conference on Neo-Hasidism, New York City, March 26-28, 2003. On this exercise in Kabbala, see Daniel Matt, "New Ancient Words: The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: Fifty Years After*, P. Schafer and J. Dan, eds. (Tubingen: Mohr, 1993), 181-209.

11. There is an interesting connection here between Reb Zalman's pantheism and Mordecai Kaplan's theological a-theism. A more detailed comparison of Reb Zalman and Kaplan would be useful. One fascinating comparison that touches on the pantheistic components of Kaplan's thinking can be found in Jack Cohen, *Guide for the Age of Confusion: Studies in the Thinking of Avraham Y. Kook and Mordecai Kaplan* (New York: Fordham Press, 1999)

12. I have dealt with the issue of the divine in the human in Hasidism in "Ethics Disentangled from the Law: Hasidism and Dispositional Ethics," in *A Companion to Religious Ethics*, William Schweiker, ed. (England: Blackwell Press) in press. It is also noteworthy that this theological move in Judaism, one that places Judaism in much closer proximity to Christianity, can only be achieved in a climate where Judaism can grow without the fear of seeming too "Christian." So much of modern Jewish thinking has been stunted because it was always concerned with marking how

Judaism was unlike Christianity. See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, Sandmel, Signer, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 240. Reb Zalman's new paradigm transcends that fear.

13. Here I would say Reb Zalman is gently criticizing Heschel's space-time discussion in *The Sabbath* by arguing that Heschel's notion of Judaism as a religion of time is part of an old paradigm.

14. The argument that this new pantheism, the divinity of the person, takes Judaism closer to Christianity is not lost on Reb Zalman. I will discuss the ecumenical dimensions of this work later in this essay.

15. This appears quite close to Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism and, in a way, it is. However, Reb Zalman is more willing than Kaplan to creatively reinterpret (I call it translate) old paradigm ideas to fit in the new paradigm. This is partly because Kaplan's rationalism and dedication to plain-sense meaning (*p'shat*) made it more difficult for him to engage in the kind of creative reading that Reb Zalman, who was raised in a world of Hasidic exegesis, deploys. Also, coming from mysticism, Reb Zalman is not nearly as put off by the "polytheistic" dimensions of Judaism as Kaplan and does not think they need to be totally purged.

16. Both Yehuda Liebes and Lawrence Fine, in different ways, argue that the person is indeed central to the Lurianic worldview, but I would suggest that what Hasidism does, in effect, is to allow the person to overshadow, and even efface, the metaphysics that still loom large in classical kabbalistic systems. See Liebes, "Two Young Roes of a Doe: The Secret Sermon of Isaac Luria before His Death," [Hebrew] in *Mekharei Yerushalayim* 10 (1992): esp. 114-126; and Fine, *Physician of the Soul*,

*Healer of the Cosmos* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

17. For an argument on the disanalogy between Jewish and the other monotheistic religions on the question of fundamentalism, see Zvi Kurzweil, "Fundamentalism and Judaism," *L'Elyah* 25 (1966), 8-10. Kurzweil argues that the centrality of law and the oral law, in particular, enables Judaism to successfully circumvent many of the problems of fundamentalism. In my view, his argument is weak, never delving into any substance, and traffics largely in stereotypes of all three religion. Reb Zalman is able to acknowledge both the strengths of other monotheisms and the weakness that is endemic to all monotheism. For an example of how fundamentalism plays a central role in the *ba'al teshuva* movement in Judaism, see Janet Aviad, *Return to Judaism: Religious Renewal in Israel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Aviad examines comments by prominent rabbis and newly observant Jews involved with this movement, which exhibits a hatred for secularism, Western civilization and modern values, all quite reminiscent of Christian evangelicalism and militant Islam.

18. Reb Zalman does not use deism in the classic sense of one God who is no longer engaged with the world but rather as a substitute for a monotheism in opposition to pantheism. It is also important to note that Reb Zalman does not equate non-monotheistic religions with idolatry, even from a Jewish perspective. Idolatry can be manifest in both monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions.

19. This book, and Reb Zalman's work more generally, do not address the fact that contemporary Hasidism has become, in some way, more fundamentalist and more intolerant than in the past — in short, that Hasidism may be reinventing an old para-

digm to counter Jewish Renewal's new one. 20. Buber's early work on Hasidism was not intended for a Jewish audience but rather an intellectual/spiritual German audience in search of authentic Orientalism, For example, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siecle Orientalism: The Ousjuden and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation," in *Divided Passions* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 77-132.

21. Reb Zalman writes, "Some seekers have reacted against all this (i.e., Renewal), as you well know, and have decided to pick another time and place — a medieval Tibet, for example, or 18<sup>th</sup>-century Poland — in which to live. They have constructed small universes for themselves and have paid a dear price personally and intellectually, but in some cases have reached remarkable spiritual attainments. To these people we can only offer our blessings — but it is not with envy that we see them. The life of the spirit must move forward; the God who created those earlier ages made this one and also the ones to come" (*Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 209).

22. Another example common in the medieval period, especially in Kabbala, is the notion of "proof person." In the words of Eitan Fishbane, "Legitimate meaning ultimately only requires that the source of transmission be considered authoritative within the specific cultural context." See E. Fishbane, "Authority, Tradition, and the Creation of Meaning in Medieval Kabbala: Isaac of Acre's Illumination of the Eyes," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72-1 (March, 2004), 65. This notion, which has its modern correlate in the notion of *daas torah*, would be, for Reb Zalman, an example of old-paradigm thinking.

23. This is not to say that *s'vara*, or rational reasoning, did not also play a role in

the rabbinic mind, but that the proof-text was the most commonly deployed method of making a case for both textual and extra-textual truth.

24. Maimonides' scholarship indicates that this assertion is very complex and not at all as straightforward as it sounds. I simply employ Maimonides here for the sake of argument.

25. Even though in *Guide* II:25 he seems to accept the traditional notion of creation over eternity, he does not do so by using a proof-text (as does, for example, Saadia Gaon in his *Emunot ve De'ot*), but rather because he is not convinced (or so he says) by Aristotle's theory of eternity. However, in *Guide* II:14, he presents a very strong case for Aristotle without asserting his own position.

26. It is Michel Foucault who argues that only in modernity do we find arguments evaluated outside the confines of the authority of the author as normative. See Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Re-Thinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 446-464.

27. This language immediately reminds one of Heschel's essay, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," reprinted in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Susannah Heschel, ed. (New York: FSG, 1996), 33-39.

28. Anthology is a fascinating and under-examined genre of Jewish literature. For one very insightful analysis, see Eugene Sheppard, "'I am a Memory Come Alive': Nahum Glatzer and the Legacy of German Jewish Thought in America," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 94-1 (Winter, 2004), 123-148.

29. On this reading, Reb Zalman's thinking on interpretation is more aligned with the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur and the reader/response

criticism of Wolfgang Iser and against the belief in the possibility of recovering authorial intent argued in E.D. Hirsch. See Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967). For a discussion of this in Jewish sources, see Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 45-50; and E. Fishbane, "Authority, Tradition, and the Creation of Meaning in Medieval Kabbala: Isaac of Acre's Illumination of the Eyes," 75-78.

30. Buber makes a similar but not identical claim in "Saga and History" in his *Moses* (London: East West Library, 1946), 13-19. Cf. Ahad Ha-Am, *Moses* (Berlin: Juedisch Verlag, 1905).

31. See, for example, David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), especially pages 1-20. The classic example of "magical realism" is Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

32. See Menahem Mansoor's "Translator's Introduction" to Bahya Ibn Pakuda's *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, M. Mansoor trans. (Routledge & Kegan/Paul: London, 1973), 1-82; and Paul Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool* (London: Octagon Press, 1981), 1-23.

33. This is, of course, true of Kabbala as well. For an interesting series of examples about kabbalistic attitudes toward Judaism and Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, see Reuven Kimelman, *The Mystical Meaning*

*of Lekha Dodi and Kabbalat Shabbat* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles and Jerusalem: Cherub Press and Magnus Press, 2003), 82-133; and Ronald Keiner, "The Image of Islam in the Zohar," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989). 42-65.

34. Aryeh Kaplan's work is a good example of this kind of usage.

35. See, for example, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 126. "The issue here is so clear, and this is what yoga and all these other things are about: to make the body and the Animal Soul, as it were, a more and more transparent and willing subject. To allow them to do what is required."

36. See Menahem Kellner, *Maimonides on the "Decline of the Generations" and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), esp. 37-54; and *Iggeret of Rav Sherira Gaon*, Nossin Dovid Rabinowich trans. (Jerusalem, Vagshal, 1991).

37. See Daniel Matt, "'New Ancient Words': The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends 50 Years After*, 181-209.

38. On this, see Gil Anidjar, *Arab/Jew: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 87-98.

39. One notable exception was Martin Buber, who did engage Islam more than his contemporaries. However, this engagement was largely the product of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalism practiced by a circle of German intellectuals led by the Hart brothers. On this, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siecle Orientalism," cited above in note 20.

Now the Jay and Jeannie Schottenstein Professor of Jewish Studies at Indiana University, Magid has published numerous and valuable scholarly studies of Hasidism and modern Jewish thought. But he has not left Jewish Renewal behind. His first book was on the Hasidic thinker Rabbi Gershon Henokh of Radzin, whose work was prized by Carlebach and Schachter-Shalomi for its antinomian daring.Â Magid doesnâ€™t think that ethnicity has disappeared or will disappear in America, but he does believe, following the historian David Hollinger among others, that it â€œwill become something other than purely a consequence of ascription or descent.â€ Descriptions of the Jewish Renewal movement which relegate it primarily to the category of â€œNew Ageâ€ limit understanding of its contemporary importance because it cannot be thought of only in those terms. This paper examines the key themes of the Divine and Redemption in the written works of Rabbi Zalman Schachterâ€”Shalomi, the founding figure of the Renewal Movement. Schachter-Shalomi's Renewal theology is firmly rooted in mystical and Hasidic Jewish traditions, and builds on Jewish Reconstructionist thought to develop a post-Holocaust Jewish theology.Â Rainbow Hasidism in America-The Maturation of Jewish Renewal', *The Reconstructionist*. Jan 2004. 34-59. Shaul. Magid. Hasidism in America â€œ The Maturation of Jewish Renewalâ€, *The Reconstructionist*. 68 (2004): 34-60; idem, â€œThe Jewish Renewal Movementâ€, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., (Farmington Hills, 2005), vol. 7, 4868â€”4874; idem, â€œJewish Renewal â€œ A New American Religion?â€Â Following earlier scholars, Scholem defined Kabbalah and Hasidism as â€œJewish mysticismâ€ and determined the major categories and methodologies for its study and the main suppositions concerning its essence, historical development, and cultural impact.