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MEDITATIVE AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES  
OF CERTAIN HASIDIC MASTERS

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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by Richard Agler  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Meditative and Contemplative Practices of Certain Hasidic Masters

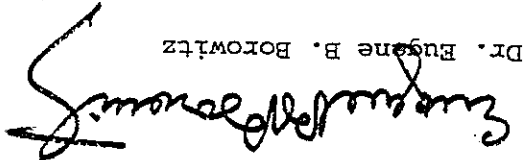
In the beginning, Mr. Agler's project seemed to set unsurmountable difficulties in his way. Out of his personal experience with meditative techniques, he sought to discover whether similar such practices were to be found in Hasidic traditions. Without secondary literature as an introduction to the topic, facing the reticence of mystics to set down the intimacies of their actions, utilizing texts which are notorious for their lack of organization, authenticity and proper publication, his project seemed doomed to yield few and tenuous results. Consultation with recognized experts in the field did little to solve these problems but did provide entry to the field, at least on related themes.

To my great delight, Mr. Agler's intense devotion to his investigation, manifested in his careful combing of large amounts of material for the occasional mention of his theme, began to yield substantial results. His

and learned since it is limited to his positive findings. With great sensitivity to the nuances of what he uncovered, with careful regard to key terms and their implications, with openness to the shift of vocabulary and ideas from teacher to teacher, he was able not only to bring Hasidic meditative practices to the surface but to trace their flow and development in a number of major masters. Mr. Agler makes only modest claims for what he has shown, acknowledging that some of his judgments are debatable and most of his findings require further investigation. This disciplined self-criticism adds to the scholarly maturity of his effort and the persuasiveness of his tentative conclusions.

This has been a most unusual thesis process, one which has seen a great deal created from what was initially near nothing. Mr. Agler deserves great praise for carrying it through with deep personal commitment and high academic achievement. I enthusiastically recommend the acceptance of this thesis.

Respectfully submitted,

  
Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz

April 25, 1978

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Whew! Although these are the first words seen by the reader, they are the last ones composed by the writer. It is with a great sigh of relief then, that I take a moment to thank G-d for sustaining me in life and permitting me to reach this most joyous of occasions. I thank all of my teachers, and that includes everyone, for their dedication to life, to knowledge, to growth, and to students like myself. Whether we have met personally or through books, I have gained from all of them and I thank all of them. I especially thank Irv and Sue Sarnoff for everything they have given me. I thank my Mom and Dad for all of the above as well as for the unlimited quantities of love and understanding that they have given me during the past twenty-six years. Specifically, for help with this thesis, I'd like to thank Rabbi Zalman Schachter, Arthur Green, John J. Peper, the library staff of the Hebrew Union College--Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, and of course Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz, who served as my advisor and whose aid was of inestimable value. Long after I've forgotten the many ways in which Dr. Borowitz has helped with this thesis, I will remember that he has helped to teach me that there's a little bit of the "mystic" in all of us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Finally, to my wife Mindy, for all the love,  
understanding, assistance, encouragement, and last  
but not least the patience that she has shown since  
day one, this thesis is dedicated.

Though I realized it in a limited way almost

immediately after beginning, five years of practicing

Transcendental Meditation have deepened my understanding

of the fact that there is a clear and meaningful con-

nection between meditative practice and any religion.

I found that meditation provided what I call, for want

of a better term, "a universal religious consciousness,"

that was too universal to be the sole domain of one

particular faith or another. As a Jew, I was especially

interested in the connection between meditation and

Judaism. I knew that Judaism was too great a faith to

have survived so long and to have overlooked such a

taproot of religious experience as meditative conscious-

ness.

But teachings of Jewish meditative practice have

hardly been made known to the average Jewish layperson,

in past eras or in the present era. When I reported to

a Jewish friend of mine who was interested in Eastern

religion that I wanted to be a Rabbi, he couldn't

understand why on earth I wanted to do such a thing.

Judaism, in his own words, was "a bunch of matzos".

He had no idea whatsoever that much of what he had seen

and found meaningful in Eastern religious teachings was

available in Judaism as well. Yet I couldn't help but

understand his sentiments. Six months earlier I might

## INTRODUCTION

not have questioned his understanding. It is because I felt that Jews can and should be able to find a spiritual home within their own religious tradition, that I began my study of the teachings of meditation that are found within the Jewish tradition.

A cursory glance at Jewish spiritual history provides us with the knowledge that meditation and contemplation were practiced in some form by the ancient "pious ones" of the tannaitic period. This is reported in the Mishna, Berachot 5:1. The Merkabah mystics of the tannaitic and amoraic periods strove for the contemplative vision of the merkabah, the heavenly chariot.<sup>1</sup> In a possible reference to Jewish meditation, the eleventh century philosopher Bachya Ibn Pakuda, referred to hitbodadut-- being alone with G-d.<sup>2</sup> Abraham Abulafia wrote a detailed treatise on the doctrine of meditation in the thirteenth century. Abulafia's system was based on the mysteries of the Hebrew alphabet and the various Names of G-d.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a complicated system of meditation based on the kabbalistic understanding of the universe was developed by the Lurianic kabbalists in sixteenth century Safed. Unfortunately, the meditative teachings of the aforementioned spiritual leaders proved to be either too scanty or too complex on which to base a thesis. However, the Hasidim of eighteenth century Europe also practiced some form(s) of meditation and contemplation. I understood that the Hasidic teachings were both more available



and less complicated than were the teachings of the earlier luminaries. Hence the title of this thesis, "Meditative and Contemplative Practices of Certain Hasidic Masters".

The parameters in which this topic falls circumscribe the area of religious consciousness known as mysticism. Jewish mystics, as I had been told and was soon to find out first-hand, didn't like to talk much. They were especially reluctant to have their teachings appear in print for fear that all manner of uninitiated riff-raff would have access to that which was customarily transmitted privately, from master to trusted disciple. I reasoned that this problem would be minimized by studying the literature of the Hasidic movement, one of whose aims was to imbue a special religious consciousness in as great a number of Jews as possible.

The central problem now became where exactly to find written published evidence of Hasidic meditative and contemplative practices. Analysis of secondary literature provided very few leads. Probing the uncharted wilds of the card catalog also proved fruitless. I turned to two well known mavens in the field: Rabbis Arthur Green and Zalman Schachter. Both cautioned me that I was in difficult waters and suggested that I might be better off modifying my topic in one way or another. "Reb Zalman" suggested that I might be able to do a creditable thesis on hanhagot--the spiritual behaviors of various

Hasidic masters. This sounded close enough to what I wanted; he gave me a bibliography and I got to work. I found that the Hasidic masters, although more willing to publish such material than others, were still pretty tight-lipped. The research was difficult but much to my delight I did find some teachings dealing with meditative/contemplative phenomena. A special problem was how to judge each passage that was potentially usable to determine whether it was simply offering ethical moralistic advice or describing something more profound. I have no doubt made some errors in judgement in this area. They are on display in the body of the thesis.

There are additional problems that present themselves in this field of study. Most Hasidic literature is structured as sermonic material based upon the weekly Torah readings. Little of it is thematically organized. Several themes are often expounded upon in a single sermon and they may have little more in common than the fact they are somehow related to a particular verse of Torah. Indices are unfortunately, scarce. When they do exist they are not necessarily accurate and/or complete. The methodology that is used in dealing with this material is therefore simple: line by line, paragraph by paragraph, page by page textual examination. It is a slow process but thankfully not an overly painful one. Much of the material, even though it is unrelated to the

I believe that all mystics, the Hasidic masters included, understand this well. The silence of the mystic can be

G-d is silence rather than speech... The most beautiful thing which man can say of G-d is that, knowing His inner riches he becomes silent...<sup>4</sup>

great mystics Eckhart and Sankara; this field be sensitive to this. In the words of the than words. It is imperative that the researcher in meditative silence if you will, speaks more eloquently of the mystic encounter. When this is the case, silence, lished words, fail to express the full depth and breadth at which any words, to say nothing of printed and published. Mystics, even Hasidic mystics, reach a point that this search would have proved qualitatively more reveal rather than conceal, there would be no guarantee teachings have been consulted made it their business to and meticulously indexed, and even if the masters whose Yet even if the material were thematically organized been discovered in the time allotted for this project. The findings presented here simply amount to what has and exhaustive analysis of the topic under consideration. this thesis is in no way intended to be a complete single "diamond". It should be understood then, that one must mine much "coal" before coming up with a Still, the process of research is time-consuming and topic under study can be delightfully refreshing.

understood at times to reveal, rather than conceal. In the words of the Hasidic masters [227: 172271]--And he who understands will understand. I believe that this phenomenon accounts in no small measure for the difficulty in finding texts describing the meditative/contemplative way in a movement in which that way played a not insignificant role. Still, a part of that way has been revealed, and I share with you here that which I have discovered.

I invite and welcome any and all comments, criticisms, and suggestions from any and all readers.

Inasmuch as meditation and contemplation fall within a sector of the religious spectrum that can be labeled "mysticism", we would do well to possess a working knowledge of that sector if our attempt to comprehend meditation and contemplation is to be a successful one. Therefore, before looking at meditative and contemplative practices, let us examine for a moment the religious context in which they are best understood. The term "mysticism" has been defined by Rufus M. Jones as the "immediate experience of a divine-human intercourse and relationship."<sup>1</sup> According to Jones, this experience is marked by the emergence of a type of consciousness which is not sharply focalized or clearly differentiated into a "subject-object state", as is our everyday consciousness. In mystic consciousness the subject and object are perceived as being fused into an undivided one.<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Underhill explains that the primary aspect of the mystic experience is "the overwhelming consciousness of G-d and of the mystic's own soul: a consciousness which absorbs or eclipses all other centres of interest."<sup>3</sup> To state it simply, we might say that the mystic experience is the all absorbing consciousness of union of man and G-d.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION  
 IN MYSTICAL TRADITIONS OF RELIGION

CHAPTER ONE:

unity of experience and perspective common to each  
itself differently, there remains a certain essential  
While each religion's mystic tradition expresses  
for our purposes.

this indeed will serve as an adequate working definition  
religion on an intensified and more personal scale and  
and Spencer, it could be said that mysticism is simply  
In light of the above descriptions by Jones, Underhill,

Mystics recognize that the human self is  
capable of an immeasurable transformation and  
enlargement, and this capacity is almost universally  
regarded as a thing intrinsic to its nature. It  
is commonly believed that man, because of the  
deeper life within him, may transcend the normal  
limits of his nature and may enter into oneness  
with G-d...<sup>5</sup>

fulfill the high destiny of man. He writes:  
that mystics of all schools believe in and attempt to  
Sidney Spencer in Mysticism in World Religion holds

It (the consciousness) brings to the recipient  
undemonstrable yet irrefragable certainty of  
higher personal life in contact with the personal  
self and reveals new depth levels of truth...  
The experience... consists in leaps of insight  
through heightened life (and) in an intensifying  
of vision through the fusing of all the deep  
lying powers of intellect, emotion, and will.<sup>4</sup>

This experience has been well attested to and well  
documented in the annals of every major religion and  
the consciousness is considered to be one of the great  
sources of personal religious faith. According to Jones:

"brand" of mysticism. As we've seen, self-transcendence is a goal common to all mystics. The greatest obstacle to that goal is also agreed upon by all. Spencer writes:

...the mystics are thoroughly realistic in their view of human nature. They see that the obstacle which stands in our way also lies in ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Spencer points out that "the necessity for self-

naughting" is stressed in many forms of mystical religion. He notes also that it is common to find a distinction

drawn between the lower or "separated" self, which finds expression in egoistic impulses of every kind, and the higher self, the "spark" or "ground of the soul", the

"spirit". It is this higher self, reports Spencer,

which is considered to be the source of all that is good in our life and which must become the activating principle of our being if we are to rise to union with G-d.<sup>7</sup>

Underhill concurs that the egoistic self is the

principle obstacle to the mystical encounter. She writes:

...that if you acquiesce in the heroic demands which the spiritual life now makes upon you, if you let yourself go, eradicate the last traces of self-interest even of the most spiritual kind... thus dying to your own will... you will presently find that... those who said self-loss was the only way to realization taught no pious fiction but the truth.<sup>8</sup>

Rudolf Otto, in Mysticism: East and West, writes

similarly:

Almost every type of mystical experience demands surrender of the will, but in most cases it asks simply the submissive resignation of self-will, a denial of man's will before the will of G-d...but at the same time there is also something greater: the unifying of the will with the will of the Highest...<sup>9</sup>

We should be aware, however, that not all mystical experience is distinguished by self-negation leading to self-transcendence. Otto is exceedingly helpful in pointing out that different species of mysticism do exist, for all the seeming generic similarity. In Mysticism: East and West, he differentiates between two distinct types of mysticism. The first type is characterized as:

...excited emotionalism, and mysticism as an intoxicated eroticism. This includes seeking and striving after "sensations" and "experiences", after the emotional excitement and consolation of ebbing and flowing rapturous states, half or wholly sensual; a striving after the bliss of the secret intercourse of the "bridal chamber", and a general overemphasis of personal feelings and moods...it seeks to attain unity with the Highest through coalescence by an emotional exaggeration and glow of feeling. And even the Highest is thought of as responding to amorous longings.<sup>10</sup>

The second type of mystic encounter is considered intellectual rather than emotional. Otto describes it as "a knowledge which is to be translated into a comprehensible doctrine with all the aids of proof,

scholarly presentation, and keen dialectic." In this

kind of mysticism man becomes beautifully silent, rather



Virtually all the classics of devotion announce the cultivation of the meditative mood as indispensable to the devout life... and in all alike there is the recognition that the most sublime object of thought demands the deliberate and definite concentration of man's whole soul in a "current of contemplative feeling."<sup>14</sup>

According to W. Major Scott:

... (mystic) awareness cannot be "produced", we cannot reason it out... The way may be prepared by the words of the (Scriptures) and by meditation on them, but in the end it must be our own vision.<sup>13</sup>

attaining that relationship. Otto wrote:

sort between G-d and man, it also implies a "way" of just as mysticism implies a relationship of some clear-cut distinctions are hard to come by. serve as a heuristic device to aid us in an area where cool, clear-sighted serenity. This distinction can mysticism as emotionalism-eroticism and mysticism as as we progress, to keep in mind the distinction between always and everywhere true. However it will be useful, type of mysticism is "higher" or if the distinction is It is not within our purview to determine here which

... the real knowledge... is not a matter of "having visions". It is rather an awareness of identity... a dawning of insight, our own clear sighted realization of that which the Scriptures taught;...<sup>12</sup>

Otto concludes that:

than ecstatic, in his encounter with the Divine.<sup>11</sup>

Meditation or active contemplation has been described

as "a long process of internal quietude, of abstraction

from sense, and of absorption in reason, by which the

human soul is attuned to the Divine.<sup>15</sup> W. R. Inge tells

us that intense concentration of the will is one of the

chief characteristics of the mystic.<sup>16</sup> Inge quotes

T. H. Hughes who, in The Philosophic Basis of Mysticism,

wrote:

When the soul is said to be passive, the

passivity is not a state of inactivity or lassitude

indeed... All the faculties are directed to one

centre, so that there is a narrowing of the

field of consciousness, through the intense

concentration of the will to one focal point.<sup>17</sup>

We can now readily see the close relationship that exists

between mysticism and the mystic encounter, and meditation

and contemplation.

We should pause here to clarify the distinctions

between the two terms "meditation" and "contemplation"

for they are not always synonyms. Underhill explains

meditation as a halfway house between thinking and con-

templating and explains that as a discipline it derives

its chief value from its transitional nature.<sup>18</sup> She

describes three stages of a spiritual hierarchy as

follows: "the Beginner meditates upon reality, the

Proficient contemplates reality, and the Perfect is

united with reality.<sup>19</sup> The etymology of the word

meditation is a helpful tool here. The root "med" is

derived from the Greek "mete" meaning to measure, as in to measure or consider all aspects of a subject, or to reflect upon a certain matter.<sup>20</sup>

Contemplation, on the other hand is more of a

directed mental effort. Bradford Smith says that to

contemplate is to wonder at clear truths and to keep

one's attention steadily upon a single thought.<sup>21</sup>

Underhill says that contemplation is "unlike idle musing

and more like the intense effort of vision and the

passionate and self-forgetful act of communion pre-

supposed in all creative art."<sup>22</sup> It should be kept in

mind here that within the mystic realm distinctions

such as these are not necessarily hard and fast ones.

There is much overlapping, and the foregoing is not

meant to serve as anything more than a helpful guide.

This practice of meditation/contemplation requires

no small amount of self-discipline. Underhill wrote:

All the scattered interests of the self have here to be collected; there must be a deliberate and unnatural act of attention, a deliberate expelling of all discordant images from the consciousness--a hard and ungrateful task.<sup>23</sup>

But despite the difficulties, as we have seen above,

"virtually all the classics of devotion announce the

cultivation of the meditative mood as indispensable

to the devout life." The classics of Beshnian Hasidism

are no exception and it is to that movement we now turn.

Beshtian Hasidism placed heavy emphasis on various  
 theoretical concepts and doctrines which had a substan-  
 tial effect on the practice of the Hasid. Some of  
 these ideas were called by old names which were invested  
 with new significance. Others were entirely new creations.  
 Theories we are interested in were "mystical", that is,  
 their underlying intent and purpose was to bring man  
 and G-d together in a mystic consciousness. In this  
 section, using secondary material, I will attempt to  
 show that meditation and contemplation often played an  
 important part in the fulfillment of the various  
 doctrinal and conceptual ideals. I should like to  
 clarify a number of these theoretical notions as this  
 will make it far easier for us to understand the  
 specific texts to be studied in the body of this thesis.  
Devekut is probably the most important and most  
 well known of these doctrines. In general Hebrew usage,  
devekut means attachment or devoutness, but since the  
 thirteenth century the term was used by the mystics to  
 describe the sense of close and intimate communion  
 with G-d.<sup>1</sup>

IMPORTANCE AND PURPOSE OF MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION  
 IN CENTRAL HASIDIC CONCEPTS

CHAPTER TWO:

J. G. Weiss has suggested that the Hasidic ideal

of devekut was influenced by as early a figure as

Maimonides<sup>2</sup> who called for "complete devotion during

prayer and during the fulfillment of religious duties",

and urged people "to spend more time in communion with

G-d, or in the attempt to approach Him. Louis Jacobs

in his book Jewish Mystical Testimonies quotes from

Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed as follows:

The exhortation /to seek G-d/ always refers to intellectual apprehensions, not to imagination; for thought concerning imaginings is not called knowledge but "that which cometh into your mind." (Ezek. 20:32). Thus it is clear that after apprehension, total devotion to Him and the employment of intellectual thought in constantly loving Him should be aimed at. Mostly this is achieved in solitude and isolation. Hence every excellent man stays frequently in solitude and does not meet anyone unless it is necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Jacobs then comments:

It appears that Maimonides was convinced that if his method of constantly reflecting on G-d, after adequate intellectual preparation for the purpose of refining one's ideas about G-d, is followed, the result will be that man becomes close to G-d and therefore immune from all bodily mishap, at least during the time he is actually in a state of meditation.<sup>5</sup>

It is generally accepted however that the doctrines

of devekut in eighteenth century Hasidism are more

closely based on the forms given the concept in Safed

in the sixteenth century. These kabbalistic doctrines

were highly esoteric and since for the most part, the

doctrines were preserved only orally, we do not know very much about them.<sup>6</sup> However we do know the Safed kabbalists held that devekut gave a sense of beatitude and intimate vision<sup>7</sup> and that it was the last rung in the mystical ladder of ascent. According to these kabbalists, devekut was realized only by rare and sublime spirits at the end of a long and difficult path.<sup>8</sup> The Sefer Haredim, written in sixteenth century Safed by a student of Isaac Luria named Eliezer Azikri, describes the three highest values as aloneness, or retreat from society, asceticism, and devekut. He described the latter as "the fixing of the thought on G-d."<sup>9</sup> We see from Azikri's description that in kabbalist circles, devekut was a contemplative practice. The followers of the Besht, however, altered the Lurianic doctrine in a significant way. In Hasidism, devekut becomes the first rung in the ladder of ascent rather than the last. It is no longer the extreme ideal to be reached by the few--it is available to all Jews. Devekut is the starting point and according to Hasidic teaching, "one must only take one's monotheistic faith seriously" to realize it instantaneously.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, this is by no means as simple as it sounds. According to Scholem:

Hasidic devekut is extremely difficult to attain as a sustained state of communion...it has the unmistakable ring of a mystical practice which has its esoteric side and is by no means as easy to carry out as it appears to be.<sup>11</sup>

..However the term does not always have a mystical connotation, and it is not always easy to determine what is meant by it. Sometimes it only means concentration of mind by uniting all its powers on one focal point, sometimes it means even less, namely the acknowledgement of G-d's unity.<sup>13</sup>

It could be said that in its non-mystical sense, devekut requires meditation. After all, the acknowledgement of G-d's unity, or nituk would seem to require some degree of reflection and consideration beyond simple intellectual agreement with the idea. Furthermore, since the mystical connotation of devekut requires "concentration of mind by uniting all its powers on one focal point", it can be said that this aspect of devekut is contemplative. Scholem appreciates this aspect fully. He has written that "Devekut is reached by a fixation of ones thought ( nituk ) or mind ( lev ) on G-d"<sup>14</sup>; "Devekut was preached...as a contemplative realization of the immanence of G-d in the concrete"<sup>15</sup>, and "Devekut is a value of the contemplative not of active life."<sup>16</sup> J. G. Weiss has also described the aspect of devekut that is meditative/contemplative in nature:

continues:

Scholem says it means "communion with G-d."<sup>12</sup> But he

What exactly is the Hasidic notion of devekut?

or communion, remained a difficult state to attain.

So despite the democratization of the practice, devekut,





five. Scholem goes so far as to say that Hasidism places devekut at the center of man's spiritual activity.<sup>22</sup> If this is in fact the case, it would indicate that meditation and contemplation, given their importance in attaining and achieving devekut and yihud, are also in place at center stage.

There is one statement by the Baal Shem--apparently the only one--stating that yihud, which is accomplished through devekut, transforms the Ego or yan into the Naught or lun.<sup>23</sup> This concept of lun --attainment of the Naught--apparently plays no central role in the Baalshem's teaching. However, his most important disciple, Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mesritch, made it one of the cornerstones of his thought. It is an idea preached often and with great enthusiasm by the Maggid and his pupils.<sup>24</sup> It has a direct and substantial effect on the Hasidic practice of contemplation.

J. G. Weiss describes lun as:

The withdrawal of the human ego from his individual consciousness (which) conduces to the entry of the divine ego. In this process, the Shekhinah, or G-d, takes the place of the human ego that has been converted to ayin.<sup>25</sup>

The doctrine of lun or "attainment of the Naught", is therefore intimately related to the notion of lun --self-nullification or self-annihilation. According to Jacobs, bitul ha-yesh includes "annihilation of the selfhood, the soul soaring to G-d with the ego

...That the human soul must conduct itself in a mode of passive receptivity whilst G-d takes the active part is said to be one of the fundamental

posited:

article entitled "Via Passiva in Early Hasidism", if not all mystic traditions. Weiss, writing in an Divine is an important one and it is common to many The idea of self-nullification/attainment of the

...One formulation of the ayin doctrine urges a mystical anawah, that is humility and self abasement before G-d. It is practiced in contemplative exercises leading to the mystical annihilation of self. As the contemplative Hasid annihilates himself viz; his individual consciousness, the vacuum thus created within his soul is invaded by G-d., viz., the Divine Shekhinah.<sup>28</sup>

this:

Scholem, are closely related to yihud. Weiss confirms hasagat ha-ayin/bitul ha-yesh, which according to an important role for meditation and contemplation in meditative/contemplative, it follows that there must be just as the processes of devekut and yihud are

G-d through the nullification of the self.<sup>27</sup> negative aspects of the doctrine--becoming united with with the divine. The two names imply the positive and Hasagat ha-ayin focuses on what comes from this, union Ha-yesh focuses on man and his self nullification.

Yet there is a sense of development in them. Bitul ha-yesh are, for all intents and purposes synonymous. The terms hasagat ha-ayin and bitul left behind."<sup>26</sup>

principles of mysticism. Indeed it is claimed that this particular quality of consciousness is a permanent postulate of all mystical experience.<sup>29</sup>

Evelyn Underhill also recognized the "passive way" to be a common thread linking divergent mystical traditions.

She wrote:

...This unmistakable experience has been achieved by the mystics of every religion; and when we read their statements, we know that all are speaking of the same thing. None who have had it have ever been able to doubt its validity. It has always become for them the central fact upon which all other realities must be tested and graduated... In every case, they are the passive objects upon which it works.<sup>30</sup>

While the via passiva may be called by different

names in different traditions it is nonetheless

essentially the same in all of them. In each tradition the mystic, through the process of emptying the self,

allows the Divine to enter without attempting to "grab" G-d. Sidney Spencer describes the via passiva--though

he does not refer to it by name--in Buddhism:

...The essential feature of this discipline is meditation, leading to a complete concentration of mind, "one-pointedness", or absorption. Attention is progressively withdrawn from outer things, so that a man may become entirely unconscious of them... at its highest point the consciousness of self disappears along with that of the outer world.<sup>31</sup>

The correspondence between what Spencer refers to as "the consciousness of self disappearing" and what the

...The human being begins fulfilling his merely passive role in the moment when he recognizes his own nihilism: he is empty and immobile, activated only by the power of G-d within him. His sole task is to understand that he is no more than a passive instrument and mentally to prosecute himself in repudiation of all selfhood... By thinking of oneself in a repeated contemplative way--whether in the image of the shofar, the hammer, or the harp--one comes to accept the nature of G-d as the sole agent not only in the world, but even more emphatically, within oneself. 33

Messiah and his disciples:

of the via passiva in the thought of the Maggid of J. G. Weiss testified to the workings and importance to two systems of belief as widely separated as these. which take us from the worldly to the Divine--are common to the via passiva--a forgetfulness and a concentration etc. However, we also see that two elements crucial concentrated on, the place of ecstasy, prayer, etc., Hasidism and Buddhism differ with regard to what is Apparently, even in their use of the via passiva

... (In Hasidic prayer) it is essential... to forget oneself--such forgetfulness reaches its highest point in ecstasy, in which a man is wholly absorbed in G-d, losing the consciousness of himself and his surroundings, and attaining what is described as the extinction of separate existence. It is said that the man who is in ecstasy is above nature and above time and above thought... 32

passiva in Hasidism, we see why: Hasidism are equivalent. As Spencer describes the via readily apparent. This is not to say that Buddhism and Hasidim refer to as b'tul ha-yesh/hasagat ha-ayin is

Sigmund Hurwitz concurs that self-detachment is the pre-requisite for religious vision, at least for the Maggid (whose homilies we shall consider in detail in chapter five) and his followers:

...It (self-detachment) leads to a turning away from self, a self-surrender, a self-submergence in G-d and finally to that which the Hasidic mystic is wont to term bondage to G-d or devekut.<sup>34</sup>

We should note that Hurwitz sees self-surrender,

i.e. bitul ha-yesh and self-submergence in G-d, i.e.

union, as leading to devekut. Scholem, on the other hand,

has stated that devekut leads to Yihud. This is a

contradiction that I do not believe to be a critical

one for our purposes. In any event, I do not feel

competent to solve it at this juncture.

Scholem and Hurwitz however, do agree on the answer

to a different question often asked of those espousing a

quietistic way: Does all this talk of self-submergence,

self-annihilation, and self-nullification by the Hasidim

add up to a flight from the world of reality? Both are

clear and emphatic in answering in the negative. According

to Hurwitz:

...Turning away from outer reality must by no means be interpreted here as a flight from the world. It means neither a negation of life nor a devaluation of the here and now... (rather) it signifies an introspective self-submergence. For as (the Maggid) says... "a man should gradually detach his ego from his body until he has passed through all the worlds and has become one with G-d," thus self-detachment is the pre-requisite for religious vision.<sup>35</sup>

... (The) admonition, "Let him consider himself as nougth"... becomes the practical programme of a specific kind of contemplation. What we are presented with here is not, for the most part, an abstract account of the nature of man, or even of the mystic, but rather practical advice on contemplative procedure. Rather than constituting a comment... on the essential nothingness of man, it is a practical guiding principle as to how to reach experimentally one's true nature, which is non-existence... The mystic's contemplation here means a specialisation in his mental activity, and its simplification by narrowing down the field of consciousness and thus intensifying the activity of thinking. In

to by Weiss:

ha-ayin requires contemplation is beautifully attested

That the attainment of bitul ha-yesh/nasakat

... According to the Maggid, in devekut, man finds himself by losing himself in G-d, and by giving up his identity he discovers it on a higher plane... Devekut is said to lead not only to communion but to mitn, union. But this union is, in fact not at all the pantheistic obliteration of the self within the divine mind which he likes to call the naught, but pierces through this state on to the rediscovery of mans spiritual identity. He finds himself because he has found G-d. This, then, is the deepest meaning of devekut of which Hasidism knows... After having gone through devekut and union, man is still man--nay, he has, in truth, only started to be a man, and it is only logical that only then will he be called upon to fulfill his destiny in the society of men. 36

The religious vision, we understand, is to be used to help teach and preach to the yet to be enlightened. The understanding gained in introspection is to be put to use in the everyday world. Scholem also tells us that devekut and self-negation do not indicate a flight from reality, but rather help one to find it:

hierarchy of religious values at least one value that is

belief each one placing at or near the summit of its

We have now seen several systems of religious

closely later on.

apparent in Habad thought. We will examine this more

The importance of meditation/contemplation are readily

..awaken the powers of the divine soul by  
engaging in contemplation. Through profound  
reflection on the tremendous idea that there  
are no divisions in reality and that all is  
in G-d, man's divine soul is helped to exert  
its influence on the emotions, so that he is  
moved in self-annihilation.<sup>39</sup>

Louis Jacobs wrote, that in Habad man strives to:

acquired via contemplation upon <sup>38</sup> or G-d.

attachment, and association--

acquired through meditation, <sup>נח</sup> is a deep involvement,

intellectual knowledge. <sup>נח</sup> is a more deep understanding

understanding, and <sup>נח</sup>--knowledge. <sup>נח</sup> is considered

of the first letters of the words <sup>נח</sup>--wisdom, <sup>נח</sup> --

of Lubavitch Hasidism. Habad is an acronym comprised

was first espoused by Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder

to consider comes from the doctrine of <sup>נח</sup> (Habad) which

Another fundamental Hasidic doctrine that we need

plativa.

It is clear that the via passiva is also the via contem-

other words, it means thinking more and more  
about less and less. The content of this thinking  
is very limited: it is the passivity or nullity  
of the human being.<sup>37</sup>