

# Paul Philip Levertoff and the Popularization of Kabbalah as a Missionizing Tactic

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The abyss  
gapes at us.  
When shall we  
dare to fly?  
– Denise Levertov

Through the centuries there have been Jewish apostates that have availed themselves of kabbalistic lore, and particularly the zoharic compilation, to make the case for the coalescence of the faith they were leaving behind and the faith they were embracing, a coalescence that rests on the presumed shared mystical underpinnings of the teachings of Jesus, the Pharisees, and the Rabbis.<sup>1</sup> In this study, I will concentrate on one of the more interesting examples of this phenomenon, Paul Philip Levertoff, fittingly referred to as the ‘patriarch of Jewish Christian writers’<sup>2</sup> in the twentieth century.

<sup>1</sup> The bibliography of scholars who have opined on the esoteric nature of some of the teachings of Jesus, especially in Gnostic texts that may have been connected historically to the Jewish Christianity of the Ebionite Jerusalem Church, is considerable. A discussion of this subject lies beyond the purview of this study, so I will refrain from listing the relevant material with the exception of noting the recent summary by Samuel Zinner, *The Gospel of Thomas in the Light of Early Jewish, Christian and Islamic Esoteric Traditions, with a Contextualized Commentary and a New Translation of the Thomas Gospel*, London 2011, pp. 44-64, 88-96. See also the useful historical overview of Pinchas E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church: The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, Grand Rapids 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Yaakov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America*, Chapel Hill 2000, p. 91.

*Biographical Sketch*

The basic details of Levertoff's biography have been recounted<sup>3</sup> and here I will offer a brief summary. There are some facts for which we can assume a measure of historical veracity, but there is still much hidden by the haze of time. Originally given the name Feivel,<sup>4</sup> Levertoff was born in Orsha, Belarus (in the province of Vitebsk), either on October 12, 1875 or October 14, 1878.<sup>5</sup> The family moved to Krukov, a suburb of the Ukrainian city of Kremenchug. Paul's oldest daughter, Olga Levertoff (1914-1964), reported that her father's lineage can be traced to the Jews of Spain, who migrated to Russia at the time of the Spanish inquisition, and 'intermarried with other Jewish families noted for their piety and learning'.<sup>6</sup> If this information is accurate, then we can

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Quiñónez, 'Paul Phillip Levertoff: Pioneering Hebrew-Christian Scholar and Leader,' *Mishkan* 37 (2002), pp. 21-34. See F. N. Davey, 'Adolf Schlatter and Paul Philip Levertoff — A Brief Introductory Note,' in Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period*, translated by Paul P. Levertoff, London 1961, pp. ix-x; and the entry on Levertoff by Karina Lehnardt in the *Biographisch-Bibliographisches KirchenLexikon*, available at <http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/l/Levertoff.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Quiñónez, 'Paul Phillip Levertoff,' p. 22, notes that in a letter that Shaul Levertoff wrote to his son he refers to him as Feivel. The source he gives is the Denise Levertov Papers, M0601, Box 15, Folder 17. Quiñónez's study is adapted as 'Feivel the Chasid,' in Paul Phillip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, with Introduction, Biography, Bibliography, and Explanatory Notes, Marshfield 2009; pp. 1-9. Henceforth all references to this work will be from the first edition with the corresponding pagination of the second edition placed in parentheses. For a brief review essay of the new edition, see Boaz Michael, 'Love and the Messianic Age,' *Messiah Journal* 101 (2009), pp. 27-31. In my own examination of this archive on March 11, 2010, in the Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University, I came upon a postcard written by Shaul Levertoff to his son in M0601, Box 35, Folder 8. In that letter, which is a passionate expression of the father's concern for his son's departing from his ancestral tradition and for his failing to respond to previous communications, there is no reference to the name Feivel. The extent of Levertoff's filial respect, in spite of what must have been an incredibly strained relation, is attested in his dedication in *Love and the Messianic Age*, London 1923, based on the words of Jesus describing Nathaniel in John 1:47: TO MY FATHER: 'An Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile'.

<sup>5</sup> Quiñónez, 'Paul Phillip Levertoff,' p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Olga Tatjana Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' *Judaism and Christianity: Essays presented to the Rev. Paul P. Levertoff, D.D.*, ed. Lev Gillet, London 1939, p. 93. Based on this evidence, Quiñónez, 'Paul

presume Levertoff is of a mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazic heritage. There are other reports, including by Paul's younger daughter, the poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997), that her grandmother was the grand-niece of Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812),<sup>7</sup> the progenitor of the Habad-Lubavitch hasidic movement. According to a recent genealogical chart, the daughter of Mordecai Posner (d. 1823), the brother of Shneur Zalman,<sup>8</sup> married a Levertoff, and they had a son Yehudah Nathan, who married a woman named Basya, and they gave birth to Shaul, the father of Feivel/Paul.<sup>9</sup> In another version of the family history provided by Moishe Levertov, the son of Dovber (1885-1949), also known as Berel Kabalaker, the son of Shaul and Yehudis Levertov<sup>10</sup> and brother of Paul, his paternal grandfather was a descendant of Shneur Zalman of Liadi. Moishe recounts that a 'close family member had in his possession a family tree detailing this descent,' but, unfortunately, this was sold by the wife of that person and thus more meticulous information about this pedigree is not retrievable.<sup>11</sup> Moishe also relates that Shaul and Yehudis were dedicated

Phillip Levertoff,' p. 22, concludes that Levertoff's 'family came from a Sephardic background whose religious persuasion was Hassidic'.

<sup>7</sup> Denise Levertov, *Tesserae: Memories & Suppositions*, New York 1995, p. 1, refers somewhat elliptically to her father's celebrated lineage: 'Of my father's great-grandfather, the Rav of Northern White Russia, it was told that although when young he had abjured the temptation to learn the language of birds, yet in old age he understood all that they said'. See Quiñónez, 'Feivel the Chasid,' p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Yosef Y. Kaminetzky, *Qisṣur Toledot Ḥabad: The History of Ḥabad*, Kefar Ḥabad 2004, p. 64 [Hebrew].

<sup>9</sup> I refer to the entry on Mordechai Posner (Boruchovich) on the Geni website available at <http://www.geni.com/people/Mordechai-Posner-of-Orsha-br-Alter-Rebbe-/6000000001631639580/מֵרְדֵכַי-פּוֹזְנֵר>.

<sup>10</sup> There is some confusion about the name of Shaul's wife. According to Moishe Levertov (see the following note), her name was Yehudis, but according to other evidence, including documents in the Denise Levertov archive in the Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University, her name was Basya. See, for example, the letter signed by Shaul and Basya in the Denise Levertov archive, Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University, M0601, Box 15, Folder 18. Philip's name is not mentioned explicitly as the addressee of the letter, but the content makes it obvious that he is the one for whom the letter was written.

<sup>11</sup> Moishe Levertov, *The Man Who Mocked the KGB*, edited and adapted by Daniel Goldberg, Brooklyn 2002, p. 9. The information is also available at [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/312432/jewish/Family-History.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/312432/jewish/Family-History.htm). No mention is made of Feivel/Philip Levertoff. According to the Geni website managed by Yosef and Levi Levertov (available at <http://www>).

followers of the fourth master of the Ḥabad-Lubavitch dynasty, Shmuel, the Rebbe MaHaRaSh (1834-1882). Regrettably, but not surprisingly, Feivel is removed completely from Moishe's portrait of his family history, although there is extant evidence of communication between him and Denise.<sup>12</sup> In a spirit of generosity, we can postulate that Moishe took seriously the notion that conversion is a rebirth and thus the convert is cut off from his or her past. Still, it is troubling that in what purports to offer an official and exhaustive genealogy of the Levertov family, no mention is made of Feivel/Paul Philip.<sup>13</sup>

As I have noted, the exact relationship of Paul's ancestors to the Alter Rebbe is unclear. What we can reliably assume, however, is that the young Feivel was raised in a family and in a community that exposed him to Ḥabad teachings and practices. It is reasonable to conjecture that his early schooling as well would have likely reflected that commitment to a ḥasidic lifestyle. As a teenager he was sent to the Volozhin seminary, one of the most prestigious places of talmudic study. After completing his studies there and receiving ordination from Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (1817-1893), Feivel went to the University of Königsberg, where he began to broaden his intellectual and spiritual horizons, encountering 'a world of cafés and open lectures and libraries and concerts, a world where Jews and Gentiles mingled in bewildering freedom'.<sup>14</sup> The family legend alleges that Levertoff's interest in Jesus was sparked at an earlier age when he happened upon a fragment of a Hebrew translation of a passage in the New Testament (identified in one report as the Gospel of John), much to his father's dismay and disapproval.<sup>15</sup> The

geni.com/people/Shaul-Levertov/3954179299500021297?through=6000000006929062029), the name of Shaul's father is identified as Yehudah Nathan, his mother as Basya, and his wife as Yehudis. In that site, the only son of Shaul that is mentioned is Berel Kabalaker, that is, Dovber.

<sup>12</sup> Denise Levertov archive, Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University, M0601, Box 15, Folder 16. There is also a letter from Moishe Levertoff to a Mrs. Goodman (dated September 26, 1963) in Box 15, Folder 18.

<sup>13</sup> One is here reminded of the efforts on the part of Lubavitchers to conceal or to alter the fact that Shneur Zalman of Liadi's son, Moshe, converted to Christianity. See the detailed analysis of the apostasy of this figure in David Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, translated by Dena Ordan, Waltham 2010, pp. 29-96.

<sup>14</sup> Levertov, *Tesseræ*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Beatrice Levertoff, 'Thirty Years Work,' *The Church and the Jews* 180 (1954), pp. 3-4; Levertov, *Tesseræ*, pp. 4-5; Quiñónez, 'Paul Phillip Levertoff,' pp. 22-23; idem, 'Feivel the Chasid,' pp. 1-2.

exploration of the Christian religion, however, began in earnest when he experienced the new-found liberty as a college student in Prussia. In the words of his daughter Denise, through reading the Gospels in German and in Hebrew, he experienced 'a profound and shaking new conviction. This Jesus of Nazareth ... had indeed been the Messiah!'<sup>16</sup> On August 11, 1895, he officially converted.<sup>17</sup>

Levertoff's adult life was split between scholarly and missionary activities in several Mediterranean and European cities. He was involved with the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst Jews from 1896-1910; in 1901, he also joined the staff of the Hebrew-Christian Testimony to Israel, founded by David Baron and Charles Andrew Schönberger in 1893, where he was employed as translator and writer; he served as an evangelist in Constantinople for the United Free Church of the Scotland Jewish Committee from 1910-1911; he taught rabbinics, New Testament, and Yiddish at the Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum in Leipzig (1912-1918); he relocated to Wales (the birthplace of his wife) where he was ordained as an Anglican minister in the Church of England and from 1919-1922 held the position of librarian at St. Deiniol's Library, Hawarden; in 1923, he moved to East London, established a Hebrew-Christian congregation in the Holy Trinity church in Shoreditch, and assumed the role of director of the East London Fund for Jews (also known as the London Diocesan Council for Work among the Jews) from 1923-1954. Levertoff passed away on July 31, 1954.<sup>18</sup>

### *Literary Activity and the Missionizing Use of Jewish Mysticism*

By any benchmark, Levertoff's scribal activities were impressive. He is probably best known to the world of Judaic scholarship for his contribution to the English rendering of the *Zohar* published by Soncino Press (1931-1934). Levertoff translated the zoharic section on Exodus, which appears in volumes three and four of the five volume Soncino edition. According to the account of Beatrice Levertoff, her husband was initially asked to allow his translation to

<sup>16</sup> Levertov, *Tesserae*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> Quiñónez, 'Paul Phillip Levertoff,' pp. 21-34. For other accounts of Levertoff's spiritual and intellectual biography, see Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' pp. 93-110; Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship between Judaism and Christianity*, Cambridge 1942, pp. 203-204; Leonard Prager, *Yiddish Culture in Britain: A Guide*, Frankfurt am Main 1990, p. 405.

appear under the name of the other translators, Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, but when he refused, a compromise was reached and his name appeared together with the others, even though he did the work on his own.<sup>19</sup> To be precise, volume three, which includes a translation from *Shemot* to part of *Terumah*, is attributed to Sperling, Simon, and Levertoff, and volume four, which includes the remainder of *Terumah* until *Shemini* of Leviticus, is attributed to Simon and Levertoff. The exact wording in the 'Publishers' Note' to the third volume of *The Zohar* is: 'The Soncino Press desires to acknowledge the services of Dr. Paul P. Levertoff, whose work in collaboration with the translators of the first two volumes has materially helped to expedite publication of Volume III'. The information was purposely misleading, since Levertoff was solely responsible for the translation of the zoharic material on Exodus.

Less known are other works that Levertoff translated as part of the campaign to propagate his messianic faith: the Hebrew translation of Augustine's *Confessions* (1906); the English version and annotation of the *Midrash Sifre on Numbers: Selections from Early Rabbinic Scriptural Interpretations* (1926); and a hitherto unpublished German translation of *Pesiqta Rabbati*, which was prepared for the Research Institute for Comparative Religion at the University of Leipzig.<sup>20</sup> As part of his missionary activity, he also translated the work of others, for example, Franz Werfel, *Paul*

<sup>19</sup> Beatrice Levertoff, 'Ten Years at Holy Trinity, Shoreditch,' *The Church and the Jews* 94 (1933), pp. 18-19, The matter is recounted as well in Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary*, Marshfield 2009, p. 18. Compare Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> A copy of the translation is available in the Denise Levertov Papers, M0601, Box 33, Folders 1-2, Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University. On occasion in other publications, Levertoff would refer to his translation. See, for example, the xerox of the summary of a lecture delivered by Levertoff to the Society of the Study of Religions, 1951, 'The Shekinah Motif in the New Testament Literature,' Denise Levertov Papers, M0601, Box 34, Folder 1, p. 2, Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University. The summary of the lecture has been published more recently as 'The Shekinah Motif: Levertoff's Jewish Christology,' *Messiah Journal* 100 (2009), pp. 43-49. I will cite from this version since it is more readily available to the reader. The relevant passage where the translation of *Pesiqta Rabbati* is mentioned appears on p. 45. According to Olga Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' p. 99, her father was also commissioned to translate the Palestinian Talmud with a commentary, but the project was never accomplished.

*among the Jews: A Tragedy* (1928); Gustav Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua: Studies in the Gospels* (1929) and *Sacred Sites and Ways: Studies in the Topography of the Gospels* (1935); and Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period* (1955). Additionally, he was the author of many monographs in German, Hebrew, and English, including *Israel's Religion and Destiny* [ישראל ותעודתו] (1902); *The Son of Man: A Survey of the Life and Deeds of Jesus Christ* [בן האדם חיי ישוע המשיח ופעליו] (1904); *St. Paul or Saul, Man of Tarsus: His Life, Works, and Travels* [פולוס השליח או שאול איש טרסוס חייו] (1905); *Dei religiöse Denkweise der Chassidim nach den Quellen dargestellt* (1918); *Love and the Messianic Age* (1923); *St. Paul in Jewish Thought: Three Lectures* (1928); *The Messianic Hope: The Divine and Human Factors* (1938); and *St. Matthew with Introduction, Maps, and Explanatory Notes* (1940). He also wrote numerous essays and editorials for *The Church and the Jews*, the mission quarterly of the London Diocesan Council for Work among the Jews, which he edited from 1928-1954 (the last issues were edited by his wife).

In spite of his notable linguistic skills,<sup>21</sup> wide-ranging intellectual pursuits, and exceptional literary accomplishments, there has been minimal interest in Levertoff, and surely nothing that approaches a systematic or comprehensive analysis of his religious philosophy. By his own admission, his writing on the historical Jesus served as a momentous catalyst, provoking responses from a number of prominent Jewish thinkers, Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg (better known by his *nom de plume* Aḥad ha-Am), Shai J. Horowitz, Simon Bernfeld, and especially Joseph Klausner,<sup>22</sup> who dismissed Levertoff's book on Jesus as an attempt 'to win adherents to Christianity from among Russian Jews who read Hebrew' and thus lacking 'objective and single-minded scholarship'.<sup>23</sup> It

<sup>21</sup> Levertoff could boast knowledge of Russian, German, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, English, Yiddish and Arabic. See Levertov, *Tesserae*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Phillip Levertoff, 'Editorial,' *The Church and the Jews* 79 (1929), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, translated by Herbert Danby, London 1925, p. 124. On the propagandist nature of Levertoff's work, see *ibid.*, p. 11, and compare p. 62, where Klausner characterizes Levertoff's study on Paul as having a 'veiled conversionist tendency'. See Daniel R. Langton, *The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations*, Cambridge 2010, p. 138 n. 219. The hardship that Levertoff faced is expressed movingly by his daughter in Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' p. 95: 'From the day that Levertoff became a Christian the enmity of the Jewish community was directed against him. The very fact that he was *sincere* in his profession made his apparent apostasy the

is certainly true that Levertoff's work is motivated by the desire to enlighten other Jews in the truth of Christ, but the matter is more complex than the way that Klausner presents it. The decidedly prejudicial assessment obscures what Levertoff—together with other Jewish thinkers of his time, as he acknowledged, such as Martin Buber<sup>24</sup>—sincerely believed to be the historically justified kinship between the two liturgical communities. I shall return to this point below, but what is necessary to emphasize at this juncture is that in his time Levertoff could legitimately lay claim to being a pioneer in Jewish scholarship on Jesus, Paul, and Christian origins.

Beyond this area of expertise, Levertoff's works display a keen and penetrating understanding of kabbalistic and ḥasidic lore, upholding the highest standards of historical and philological scholarship in his day,<sup>25</sup> but, lamentably, his name has been basically erased from the history of the study of Jewish mysticism in the twentieth century. Even his association with the team responsible for the English translation of the *Zohar* have been largely overlooked.<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, his independent views about the literary and ideational nature of this anthology have not been part of the scholarly conversation.<sup>27</sup> More generally, critical insights of Levertoff that contribute to

more heinous a crime. ... Yet, strangely, the very fact that he was sincere, while it magnified the crime, enhanced the prestige of the criminal!' (emphasis in original).

<sup>24</sup> See the brief comments on Buber in Paul Levertoff, *Die religiöse Denkweise der Chassidim nach den Quellen dargestellt*, Leipzig 1918, p. 153, and see idem, 'The Changing Attitude of the Modern Jew to Jesus Christ,' *The Church and the Jews* 177 (1954), pp. 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, see the section on the origin and history of Ḥasidism in Levertoff, *Die religiöse Denkweise*, pp. 128-145.

<sup>26</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1974, p. 241, where mention is only made of Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon as translators of the Soncino edition of the *Zohar*. By contrast, Daniel C. Matt, 'Translator's Introduction,' *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Translation and Commentary by Daniel C. Matt, vol. 1, Stanford 2004, p. xix, does include Levertoff's name, even though he concurs with Scholem's overall negative assessment of the translation.

<sup>27</sup> Typical of this lacuna is the complete lack of reference to Levertoff in the otherwise comprehensive treatment of previous views on the zoharic literary phenomenon in Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism*, with a foreword by David Greetham, Los Angeles 2010, pp. 224-428. I mention Abrams not to disparage his contribution, but only to demonstrate how irrelevant Levertoff has become to the history of zoharic scholarship.



both the philosophical and historical assessment of kabbalah and Ḥasidism, as well as his creative adaptation of these traditions in the endeavor to circulate the esoteric doctrines, have been passed over in silence in the academic world. This is all the more puzzling in light of the fact that some of his contemporaries were well aware of his contributions. For example, Abram Poljak (1900-1963) remarked that Christian and Jewish scholars alike acknowledged that Levertoff was ‘the leading exponent of mystical Judaism’.<sup>28</sup> I grant the exaggerated nature of this contention but it does harbor a grain of truth that has been deplorably ignored by scholars. Whatever the personal agenda behind Levertoff’s writings, they exhibit a deep understanding of Jewish mysticism that deserves to be taken seriously and assessed on its own scholarly merit.

A recent attempt to redress this imbalance has been mounted by the ministry of the First Fruits of Zion, an organization ‘dedicated to resurrecting the voices of Messianic pioneers and scholars of the past’.<sup>29</sup> As part of this project, Levertoff’s *Love and the Messianic Age* was republished together with a *Study Guide and Commentary* (2009) prepared by Toby Janicki, D. Thomas Lancaster, and Brian Reed. These authors have duly noted Levertoff’s wish to show the parallels between Ḥasidism and Christianity, and especially his indebtedness to the kabbalistic teachings of the *Zohar* and the specific

<sup>28</sup> Abram Poljak, ‘The Cross in the Star of David,’ *The Church and the Jews* 114 (1938), p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> These words appear on the copyright page of Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary*. See Boaz Michael, ‘Vine of David: The Glory of the People of Israel,’ *Messiah Journal* 101 (2009), p. 13, who notes that the work and biographies of Levertoff and Yechiel Ševi Lichtenstein ‘provide the modern Messianic Jewish movement with a much-needed sense of rootedness. It reminds us that we are not just a late-twentieth-century, North-American phenomenon, but rather the result of God’s spirit moving for more than a century. They remind us that we have our own scholars, our own heroes, and our own saints’. In addition to the publication of a new edition of *Love and the Messianic Age*, Levertoff’s *Die religiöse Denkweise der Chassidim nach den Quellen dargestellt* is presently being translated into English as part of the Messianic Luminaries Series, according to the website of the First Fruits of Zion, <http://vineofdavid.org/projects/index.html>. See also Michael, ‘Vine of David,’ p. 14. Two short selections from this work translated by Kevin Hanke have already been published. See Paul Philip Levertoff, ‘The Chasidic Doctrine of Salvation: Religious Ideas of the Chasidim Chapter 1, Section 1,’ *Messiah Journal* 106 (2011), pp. 44-49; idem, ‘The Love of God: Religious Ideas of Chasidim Chapter 1, Section 2,’ *Messiah Journal* 107 (2011), pp. 47-52.

influence of the Ḥabad tradition.<sup>30</sup> Although Levertoff clearly had at his command a plethora of rabbinic, philosophic, kabbalistic, and ḥasidic sources, not to mention non-Jewish texts,<sup>31</sup> a perusal of his work indicates that the Ḥabad material served as the primary wellsprings of inspiration and wisdom that shaped his understanding of Ḥasidism and, by extension, Christianity. Thus, in the preface to *Love and the Messianic Age*, he remarks that in addition to the *Zohar* and other 'medieval books,' the following sources<sup>32</sup> are the ones that he chiefly used: Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, *Liqqutei Torah*, and *Torah Or*; Dov Baer Schneersohn, *Quntres ha-Hitpa'alut*; Aaron Halevi Horowitz of Staroselye, *Sha'arei ha-Yiḥud we-ha-Emunah* and *Sha'arei Avodah*; and Yiṣḥaq Aizaq ha-Levi Epstein, *Shenei Me'orot*.<sup>33</sup> The notes to the volume indicate, moreover, that Levertoff availed himself of additional Ḥabad treatises, for example, Dov Baer's *Sha'arei Teshuvah*<sup>34</sup> and *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*,<sup>35</sup> and Epstein's *Hannah Ariel*.<sup>36</sup> Given the lineage delineated above, which links Levertoff to Shneur Zalman of Liadi, this influence should come as no surprise.<sup>37</sup> The full intellectual and spiritual depth of this apostate's synchronism can only be appreciated if one has access to these sources in their original languages. After all, the Hebrew expression he used to refer to Jews who accepted Jesus was *ha-ḥasidim ha-meshiḥiyim*.<sup>38</sup> The choice of this

<sup>30</sup> 'Preface' to *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary*, pp. 11-21.

<sup>31</sup> A list of the primary sources used by Levertoff is provided as the third appendix in *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary*, pp. 165-169.

<sup>32</sup> The same sources are referenced frequently in the German study, *Dei religiöse Denkweise der Chassidim nach den Quellen dargestellt*.

<sup>33</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. v (21 n. 10).

<sup>34</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, pp. 5 n. 7 (34 n. 28), 11 n. 20 (38 n. 42), 27 n. 13 (52 n. 91).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16 n. 29 (42 n. 53), 21 n. 16 (46 n. 73), 25 n. 6 (50 n. 84). Technically, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah* is a section from the first part of *Sha'arei Teshuvah*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6 n. 9 (35 n. 30).

<sup>37</sup> The influence of Shneur Zalman of Liadi on Levertoff's *Love and Marriage* is duly noted by Michael, 'Love and the Messianic Age,' p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> The expression appears, for example, on the title page of Paul Phillip Levertoff, *Seder Qiddush di-Se'udata de-Malka Qaddisha al pi Nusah ha-Ḥasidim ha-Meshiḥiyim* [*The Order of the Meal of the Holy King: A Hebrew-Christian Liturgy*], second, revised edition, London 1926. The first edition was published in 1925; see Quiñónez, 'Paul Phillip Levertoff,' p. 29. A Latin translation appears in 'Dr. Levertoff's Liturgy in Latin: Missale Judæorum Fidei Christianæ (Ordo

phraseology is quite deliberate, encapsulating his belief that the theology and practices promulgated by Ḥabad Ḥasidism are in perfect accord with the teachings of Christianity.<sup>39</sup> My objective here is to provide a more exacting philological and textual analysis that will pinpoint precisely the ways in which Jewish mystical doctrines are exploited by Levertoff to shape his messianic vision. In Levertoff one can detect the unrelenting ambition to popularize kabbalistic teachings, and especially as they are expressed in Ḥabad doctrines, refracted through the prism of his Christological reading.

*Jewish Esotericism and the Hebrew Christian Hybridity*

Levertoff's transmission of kabbalistic and ḥasidic teachings in a non-technical way had a twofold purpose, to convince Jews of what he considered the inexorable truth of Christianity and to educate Christians of the spiritual depths of Judaism. Other Jewish converts to Christianity have utilized kabbalistic lore as part of their proselytizing stratagem, but Levertoff does so in a way that corresponds to a more general trend, which grew exponentially in the course of the twentieth century, to disseminate long-kept secrets of the mystical tradition.<sup>40</sup> Surely his participation in the Soncino translation of the *Zohar* is indicative of this proclivity. For Levertoff, the ultimate rationale for the popularization is his conviction regarding the similarity of the Jewish mystical teachings—especially as they are inflected in Ḥabad Ḥasidism—and Christian doctrine. The underlying hermeneutical principle is stated lucidly in Olga Levertoff's *The Wailing Wall* (1937), a composition that is essentially an

Cæremonia Communionis Sanctissimi Regis),' *Judaism and Christianity*, pp. 57-70. See below, n. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Jakób Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ: A Study in the Relationship between the Jewish People and Jesus Christ*, London 1949, p. 209; Poljak, 'The Cross in the Star of David,' p. 56. I avoid engaging some of the recent studies that have compared the messianic fervor surrounding the seventh Rebbe and basic tenets of Christianity, as we find, for example, in the discussions on the belief of the second coming and of the incarnation of the messianic figure in David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, London 2001, pp. 28-30, 53-61, 95-110, 128-131, 159-174. For less polemical assessments, see Joel Marcus, 'The Once and Future Messiah in Early Christianity and Chabad,' *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001), pp. 381-401; Simon Dein, *Lubavitcher Messianism: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails?* London 2001, pp. 122-138.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah*, translated by Yaffah Berkovits-Murciano, New Haven 2009, pp. 21-36.

elucidation of her father's work, at times even repeating his words verbatim without attribution:

The Hasidic, i.e. mystical, movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century released all the incipient mysticism in Judaism. Jewry has always repressed this tendency, preferring to be known to the world as a legalistic rather than as a contemplative people. Yet genuine Jewish spirituality is found in Hasidism and in the cabalistic movements which preceded it. ... They have produced a type of mysticism, piety and meditation which approaches uncannily near to the Christian method and spiritual language.<sup>41</sup>

Even though the daughter has conscientiously transmitted the teaching of her father, I would mark a decisive difference in nuance between the two, which may be related to the fact that Olga was not as conversant with the texts and rituals of traditional Judaism. The clichéd characterization of Judaism as a spiritless religion of law is precisely what Levertoff set out to combat. Consider, for example, his remark in the preface to *Love and the Messianic Age* that his goal is to prove that 'traditional orthodox Judaism has no lack of spiritual fervour' and that even the 'sea of Talmud' has 'its gulf stream of mysticism'.<sup>42</sup> I will return to this theme below, but suffice it here to say that from Levertoff's standpoint, the fount of Jewish mysticism had to be opened and channeled in a relatively straightforward way to reveal the Jewish nature of Christianity and the Christian nature of Judaism. This is not to deny that Levertoff was keenly aware of the disparity between the two faiths. He thus concludes the preface by stating that it is his hope that 'Jewish readers of this little book will realise that the difference between Hasidic and Christian conceptions of Love is not a difference of degree, but of quality, a difference between expectation and realisation'.<sup>43</sup> At first glance, this would seem to be ratifying the standard supersessionism—Judaism is the expectation and

<sup>41</sup> Olga Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, London 1937, pp. 34-36. In the note, the author refers to her father's *Love and the Messianic Age* and *Die religiöse Denkweise der Chassidim*.

<sup>42</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. vii (23).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii (19). Compare Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' p. 99. Olga writes that her father was seeking 'a form of Christian expression which should enshrine the mystical aspirations of that Chassidic Judaism which he considered to be the highest form of Jewish thought, and which he has always found exceedingly valuable as a bridge between the Jewish outlook and the theological concepts of Christianity. In other words, 'Christianity expressed in Jewish terms' has always meant, to Levertoff, "Chassidic terms" (emphasis in original).

Christianity the realization. The nature of the latter is clarified by citation of the verse from the Gospel of John, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt in us' (1:14). From Levertoff's vantage point, the doctrine of immanence implied in the Johanian pronouncement is the bridge that connects and separates Jews and Christians. I will explore this matter in more detail, particularly how it relates to the Ḥabad doctrine of *dirah ba-taḥtonim*, but here it is necessary to reiterate that Levertoff insisted that Jews would not accept Christian dogma and practice unless they believed that in Jesus they could find an authentic way of being Jewish. By pointing out the commonalities between Ḥasidism and Christianity, Levertoff forged a path to present the latter as the natural complement to the former.

This concern took on extreme urgency and poignancy in the period of Nazi persecution. In 1936, Levertoff invoked the tenets of Hebrew Christianity to publicize the view that belief in Christ could strengthen rather than weaken loyalty to the Jewish people,<sup>44</sup> a theme accentuated by Olga in *The Wailing Wall*, specifically with reference to the salvific power of the Crucifix as a symbol of vicarious suffering.<sup>45</sup> Several years before, in his 1933 essay on 'Worship,' Levertoff wrote that 'compassion and sorrow alike are swallowed up in acute and amused irritation when one is faced by the spectacle of an avowed and enthusiastic Christian, whose self-constituted and widely-supported object in life is the winning of Jews to Christ, apparently holding precisely the same views and moving in the same mental reaches as the Jewish preacher whose limited and facile outlook is at least to be understood, and may well be considered natural and pardonable. But Christian and Jew alike seem to know nothing of that only true worship which one would have thought to be the one's historic and the other's grace-given heritage'.<sup>46</sup> Instead of supporting

<sup>44</sup> Paul P. Levertoff, 'Editorial', *The Church and the Jews* 106 (1936), p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, pp. 99-101. The author hypothesizes that the Nazi persecution of the Jews might help purge them and ultimately bring them closer to the very Messiah they rejected. In a somewhat self-serving manner, Olga also notes that Hitler's criterion to determine the Jewish status of his victims led to the 'extraordinary concession' that 'a Christian Jew should be admitted as a Jew by his fellow Jews' (p. 101). On the role of Nazism as a catalyst to consolidate Jewish Christians as a social movement, see Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' pp. 104-105, and see *ibid.*, p. 109, where the author speaks about the 'Jewish Christian victims of Nazi-ism' and the 'prominent part' her father played 'in the defence of Jewry ... against the menace of Fascistic propaganda'.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Philip Levertoff, 'Worship,' *The Church and the Jews* 94 (1933), p. 11.

efforts to accommodate a 'lukewarm fraternity' made up of Jews and Christians, Levertoff emphasized the common source that binds the two communities, the 'true worship' of the 'mystery of faith,' which he explicated on the basis of zoharic passages, a liturgical rite, to his mind, comprehended and practiced by both 'Catholic saints and Jewish mystics'.<sup>47</sup>

This is a subtle point that needs to be elaborated: commitment to Hebrew Christianity did not justify aggressive forms of proselytizing or patronizing Jews on the part of Gentiles.<sup>48</sup> The Christian who compels the Jew to believe in the universal truth of Jesus is no better than the Jew who stubbornly rejects this truth by holding fast to the particular supremacy of Israel's election. Levertoff well understood that the intolerance of Nazi rhetoric was dangerously aligned with a missionizing tactic based on supersessionism. Tellingly, already in 1929, he reports that the 'large audiences of Jews' in Poland, Russia, Hungary, and other countries in Central Europe, who came to hear him preach Christianity did not consider him an 'apostate,' but a 'prophet'.<sup>49</sup> The implication of this seemingly arrogant distinction is made clear in Levertoff's further comment that his lecturing tours, as well as his Hebrew book on the life of Jesus, helped inspire Jews to accept the belief in Christ without joining

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 12. Compare Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, pp. 107-108: 'Can the pagan, the Jewish, or the nominally Christian response to a lukewarm, divided, and inactive Christianity, be anything but in its own turn lukewarm, divided and inactive? ... Assuredly we need a renewal of that vitally-realized, experience worshipfulness which we have found in the pages of the Zohar, and which is so piercingly expressed in the play of a modern Jewish dramatist, Franz Werfel ... when he makes St. Paul say: "The Christ is a tireless hunter"'. An English translation and analysis of Werfel's dramatic presentation of Paul appears in Paul P. Levertoff, *St. Paul in Jewish Thought*, London 1928, pp. 27-47. Compare Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> The point is reiterated in Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, p. 101. See also Davey, 'Adolf Schlatter,' p. ix: 'Paul Philip Levertoff was the Jew who, in accepting Christ, never ceased to be true to what he believed to be the true calling of his people, and who, in his vision of a Jewish Christian Church, showed what the fulfillment of St. Paul's prophetic words could mean—"If their fall is the riches of the world, and their loss the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?" ... his conversion led, on his side, to no estrangement from his People but rather, from the very first, to the study to which he devoted his whole life'. In support of his claim, the author quotes part of the passage from Olga Levertoff cited below at n. 70.

<sup>49</sup> Paul P. Levertoff, 'Editorial', *The Church and the Jews* 79 (1929), p. 5.

official churches or severing their connection with the synagogue.<sup>50</sup> Levertoff compared these Jewish groups to the 'early Jewish Christians,' who had 'their own gatherings' and were 'not ashamed, or afraid, to proclaim openly their faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified Messiah of the Jews'.<sup>51</sup> This comparison is meant to underline Levertoff's sensitivity to the fact that the crucial challenge was how to 'present the Christian faith to the Jewish people effectively,' since even Jews, who have seen the truth in Jesus and who have written sympathetically about the New Testament, 'abhor the conventional Missionary activities ... The hospitals, schools, and all the paraphernalia of the Mission societies are to the Jews an abomination'.<sup>52</sup>

In a manner that might strike the ear as odd for someone whose life was committed to missionizing, Levertoff went so far as to say that

proselytising, even with the best of intentions, is not in accordance with the mind of our Lord. ... Christians must realize, once for all, that the Jewish people is an entity which ... is held together not only by their traditional religious observances but by the whole atmosphere which they have created for themselves during the centuries. Any Jew who steps out, as it were, from this world is considered to be an apostate and an enemy of his people.<sup>53</sup>

The conversion process requires a transition from Synagogue to Church, but it need not take the form of a radical disjuncture, leaving 'one world to become a part of another'. The shift must be more subtle so that the convert senses that the 'old world has become more wonderful from being enriched—there should be a feeling of seeing the old familiar things transformed, glorified, filled with new meaning from being broadened and deepened by a fuller spiritual significance. ... In a word, the corporate witness to Christ of Jews who are already Christians, worshipping in a manner not unfamiliar to the Jews would make a much stronger appeal than Missionary Societies organized by Gentiles. This is what I mean by a Hebrew Christian Church'.<sup>54</sup> Levertoff's

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7. Continuing her father's approach, Olga writes in *The Wailing Wall*, p. 113: 'There is no need to send anyone "out" to the Jews, no possibility of doing so, in fact, since they are not "out". ... They are so well "in" that numbers of people apparently wish them out and away. ... Organized proselytising missions are a foolish proposition in regard to the Jews, for the Jews, unfortunately, see their Christian neighbours at very close range. ... Organized missionary activity is

understanding of conversion—beginning with his own and extending to other Jews—is based on the Ḥabad notion that the convert is an alienated Jew who returns to an original state;<sup>55</sup> conversion, accordingly, is a ‘new arousal’ of a Jewish soul trapped in a Gentile body rather than a Gentile soul becoming Jewish.<sup>56</sup> Reversing the Ḥabad ideology, Levertoff’s hybrid conception of Hebrew Christianity obtains its ideological gravitas from the presumption that Jews and Gentiles are ontically of the same pneumatic substance. The missionizing agenda needs to reflect this belief so that conversion is presented as a return, a turning-back, an act of repentance—the Hebrew word *teshuvah* is from a root that means return—a homecoming. Reiterating this theme in the pamphlet *The Possibility of a Hebrew-Christian Church* (1924), Levertoff urged Jews, who were not ‘ashamed’ of either the Gospel of Christ or of their Jewish origin, ‘to unite as a community ... institute Jewish Christian services of worship which would present our Faith in terms of the rich background of devotional and mystical Jewish traditions’.<sup>57</sup> Levertoff’s unique undertaking is clarified succinctly by his wife Beatrice: ‘At Holy Trinity we were eager from the outset to avoid being a ‘Mission’ in the sense accepted by the Jews. It was my husband’s ideal to use the Church for a form of worship which should be Jewish, and recognizable as such by the Jews, but with a distinct emphasis laid on the fact that the centre was Jesus the Messiah’.<sup>58</sup>

Elaborating her father’s position, Olga argued that the task for the Christian was not to ‘un-Jew the Jew and turn him into an inferior type of Gentile,’ but rather to ‘attempt to awaken in Jewry a renewal of understanding for its own spiritual treasures’.<sup>59</sup> The point is illustrated by an example from the kabbalah:

resented by the Jews because they are on an equal cultural level with the people who are attempting their conversion’.

<sup>55</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson*, New York 2009, pp. 229, 261-262.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 392 n. 179. Compare Levertoff’s own discussion in *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 44 (67), of the sinner who is ‘converted’.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Philip Levertoff, *The Possibility of a Hebrew-Christian Church*, Edinburgh 1924, p. 4, cited by Quiñónez, ‘Paul Phillip Levertoff’, p. 28. According to the Catalogue of the Libraries at Harvard University, the pamphlet was also published in London by the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland, sometime in the 1920’s.

<sup>58</sup> Levertoff, ‘Ten Years at Holy Trinity,’ p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, p. 114. Compare *ibid.*, p. 48: ‘The principle aim of the Church ... appears to the Jew to be to destroy Judaism by stealing away its essence and substituting for it an utterly alien background and a completely incomprehensible worship. That substitute complex is hard to eradicate. It is the



In Jewish mysticism the three principle attributes of God are sometimes as follows: in the centre is Love; at the right hand is Grace; on the left is Beauty, which also signifies Kingdom. Has anyone ever thought of formulating the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of Jewish mysticism such as these? The Trinity is a concept which, formulated in Hellenic terms, is confusing and peculiarly distasteful to a Jew. But the very shape of the Jewish definition is suitable for Christian use; it conforms to the shape of the blessing—‘The *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ and the *Love* of God and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit’. ... ‘Fellowship’ connects up well with ‘Kingdom’; the rest is identical.<sup>60</sup>

Olga’s presentation of the *sefirot* is a bit idiosyncratic, as she has placed love (*ahavah*) in the middle, grace (*hesed*) on the right, and beauty (*tif’eret*) and kingdom (*malkhut*) on the left. Be that as it may, her main point is clear enough: the resonance of the kabbalistic doctrine with the Christian Trinity allows for the expression of the latter in the guise of the former, and this is the way that Jews need to be approached by Christians. If the Jew is enticed to worship Jesus in a Jewish manner, then the prospect of conversion need not result in assimilation<sup>61</sup>: ‘Jewry must remember her own riches before she can incorporate them into the riches of Christ. And this can only come about if *Christian* Jews remember and re-learn them. ... It is my conviction that, were Jewry to find Christ, she would recover her long-lost vigour and discover a soul; would become a corporate entity once more, not by destroying all traces of the entity which once existed, but by transforming it. ... One feels and *knows*, somehow, that the acceptance of Christ by the Jewish people will usher in some new age. ... one knows too that they are indeed the key which should and will unlock the doors of the Kingdom’.<sup>62</sup> The daughter has faithfully articulated the worldview of her father that Christ can be worshipped in an

result of centuries of growing prejudice on the part of Jews and a lack of vision on the part of Christians, who have consistently tried to unjew the Jew, so that to-day “to become a Christian” means, for a Jew, a clean break with everything, a denial of all that has made him, the renunciation of his religious traditions if he has any, and, in addition, of all that he means, racially, socially, by “Judaism”.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 115 (emphasis in original). See *ibid.*, p. 129, where the ‘Zoharic mystics’ are invoked for having understood that the multifaceted ‘personality’ of God does not diminish the monotheistic belief.

<sup>61</sup> For a passionately negative assessment of the assimilationist trend in twentieth-century, post-traditional Jewry, see Levertoff, ‘The Changing Attitude,’ pp. 6-7.

<sup>62</sup> Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, pp. 115-118 (emphasis in original).

authentically Jewish way without compromising the 'racial heritage' of the Jewish believers.<sup>63</sup>

In the appendix to *St. Paul in Jewish Thought*, Levertoff offered a brief history of religions in which he situated the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. What distinguishes the Jew is the belief in one God, conceived 'not as an endless vacuum of a general substratum, but as an endless fullness of a Person who contains all life in Himself, communicating it to all'. Judaism is thus broadly a rejection of pantheism, the examples of the kabbalah and of Spinoza are the exceptions that prove the rule. 'Free from all limitations, the true God is not merely immanent in the world, but also transcendent, manifesting Himself as the perfect Personality, the absolute Ego. In harmony with this conception of the Divine Personality, religion cannot mean an absorption of human personality in the Deity; on the contrary, it is the expression of the personal, mutual activity between God and man'. In a manner reminiscent of the dialogical turn in the German-Jewish philosophers Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig, Levertoff emphasized that the covenantal relationship, which is at the center of Judaism's scriptural faith, is predicated on a reciprocity between 'co-equal personalities'.<sup>64</sup> This is precisely the point that marks Christianity's convergence with and divergence from Judaism:

Christianity begins with the personal relationship between God and man in the Old Covenant, and it culminates in the close personal union of God and man in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, in Whom both natures are inseparably one. These two Covenants are not two different religions, but two phases of one and the

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 129. Compare Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' p. 101. Olga writes that her father's appointment as director of the East London Fund for the Jews in 1923 'gave him the opportunity of putting into practice the aspirations of his youth, which, reinforced by years of research and experience and clarified by contact with the finest forms of corporate Christian life, were now to be crystallised in his appeal for a "Jewish Christian Church"—a group within the Church Catholic, expressing its Christian belief in Jewish forms of worship and reinterpreting the trends of Christian belief in terms which Jewry could understand, at the same time helping to educate Christian people in their duty towards Jewry, and in the Jewish cultured and religious heritage, so that on the one hand the Church might realize its *corporate missionary responsibility* for Jewry, and on the other that the walls of prejudice might be removed and Jewry be enabled to make a move in the direction of a re-evaluation of the claims of Jesus of Nazareth upon His people and upon the world' (emphasis in original).

<sup>64</sup> Levertoff, 'St. Paul in Jewish Thought,' p. 50.

same religion—of God-manhood—or to use a more abstract expression, two moments of one and the same Divine-human process. This one, true, Divine-human, Jewish-Christian religion steps in majestically between two extreme perversions of Religion: Brahminism on the one hand, where human personality is absorbed in the Deity; and Greek and Roman mythology on the other hand, where the gods are mere reflections of men.<sup>65</sup>

The theoretical position staked by Levertoff regarding the rudimentary affiliation of Judaism and Christianity was instantiated practically in his composition and institution of the liturgical rite, which he called the 'order of service of the banquet of the Holy King' (*seder qiddush di-se'udata de-malka qaddisha*).<sup>66</sup> The title is derived from the expression 'banquet of the king' (*se'udata de-malka*) used in one zoharic passage to refer to the Sabbath meal, also designated as the 'banquet of the supernal faith' (*se'udata di-meheimanuta illa'ah*),<sup>67</sup> the textual basis for the introduction to the hymns composed by Isaac Luria for the three Sabbath feasts.<sup>68</sup> Although this ceremony was undoubtedly familiar to Levertoff from his ḥasidic upbringing, the prayer he composed is lacking in any specific kabbalistic allusions. Nevertheless, the overwhelmingly Jewish dimension is clear from both the language of the text and the instructions accompanying it: the priest administering the rite should be attired in a traditional Jewish prayer shawl (*tallit*), skullcap (*kippah*), and the vestments suitable to the Church festivals. Moreover, there should be two loaves of bread (*ḥallot*) placed on a platter, except on Passover when they are to be replaced by two unleavened wafers (*maṣṣot*).

The impact of Levertoff's rabbinic rearing is attested as well in his insistence that the Hebrew Christian Church should sponsor lectures 'on subjects likely to attract Jewish interest' offered by individuals 'highly trained' with a 'really sound knowledge of Judaism and Jewish literature'. He suggested establishing a special college or institute, or endowing chairs in the universities, to encourage such courses, for the most important thing in the

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51. Some of this material was repeated in Paul Philip Levertoff, 'Reflections on Judaism and Christianity,' *The Church and the Jews* 180 (1954), p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> See above, n. 38. The prayer is discussed and cited in Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, pp. 121-135. See also Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' pp. 102-103; Poljak, 'The Cross in the Star of David,' pp. 50-53.

<sup>67</sup> *Zohar* 2:88b. The zoharic background of the expression *se'udata de-malka qaddisha* is noted in Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, p. 123.

<sup>68</sup> Yehuda Liebes, 'The Poems for the Meals of Sabbath Composed by the Holy Ari,' *Molad* 4 (1972), pp. 540-555, esp. 541, 549, 553 [Hebrew].

missionizing gesture is that the Jew be 'taken seriously,' which involves fostering 'serious thought and study'.<sup>69</sup> Levertoff endeavored to establish and to maintain a church in which Jews and Christians could be persuaded of their mutual destiny. For the most part, the message was unheeded in his lifetime, but he never lost faith in the soundness and the exigency of the mission.

In the moving essay, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' Olga perspicaciously labeled her father a 'Jewish theological logician,' arguing that his principle tactic was to remove the 'Jewish terror of Christianity' by 'inducing a rational approach to the subject, in the light of the doctrines of universal brotherhood, liberty and equality ... Paul Levertoff has been following a consistent path—the way of reconciliation between Church and Synagogue, between Jew and Gentile, between the Christianity influenced by Hellenistic concepts and the "Jerusalem Church" from which it developed'.<sup>70</sup> Olga was not blind to the fact that the rapprochement between Judaism and Christianity sought by her father was not an easy matter. The Jews, she noted, displayed a 'mystical hatred for Christianity,' and the Christians are always prone to lapsing back into paganism, since they consider the Judaic underpinnings of the 'primitive gospel' too difficult.<sup>71</sup> The practical obstacles notwithstanding, Levertoff was consistently and indefatigably committed to the belief that there is no conflict between the spiritual comportment of the two faiths. 'Christianity is Judaism with its hopes fulfilled,' Olga reports her father saying, and, she added, 'in attempting to implement this slogan he quickly found himself in conflict with the conventional missionary methods of his co-workers'.<sup>72</sup> Accepting Jesus was the way to realize the messianic potential of Judaism to facilitate the 'knowledge of the inner being of God' that leads to the love of God, which eventuates in the 'actual vision,' the 'consummation' of which is not 'reached until the Messianic age'.<sup>73</sup> I will return to this topic below but here it is necessary only to stress that the eschatological ideal is a crucial element that binds Jew and Christian together. Levertoff's abiding interest in Paul indicates that this apostolic figure served as a model for the

<sup>69</sup> Levertoff, 'Editorial,' p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Levertoff, 'Paul Levertoff and the Jewish-Christian Problem,' pp. 94-95.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98. The point is repeated in Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, p. 113: 'Christianity is Judaism with its hopes fulfilled. The fact that the heritage of Israel is our heritage too, the fact that all our background is theirs, makes the task not easier but desperately difficult' (emphasis in original).

<sup>73</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 2 (32).

hybridity implied in his conception of Hebrew Christianity.<sup>74</sup> It is worth recalling the description of Levertoff offered by Denise: 'His religious faith was intense and unwavering—but it was not in order to be absorbed into a Gentile world that he had broken, in sorrow, with his father and mother, but to be, as he believed, the more fully a Jew. In taking, at baptism, the name of Paul, he had expressed his sense of affinity with the most passionately Jewish of Apostles; he was—and was to so refer to himself all his life—a *Jewish Christian*'.<sup>75</sup>

In his introduction to the Hebrew translation of Augustine's *Confessions*, Levertoff stated that his task was to make available to the Jews the 'speculative side' of this work, so that the aspects of Christianity that are ostensibly remote from 'Hebrew theology' will nevertheless resonate with the deepest spiritual aspirations known from the Jewish tradition.<sup>76</sup> Analogously, in the essay 'Worship' (1933), Levertoff commented on the statement of Vivian G. Simmons that 'the true spirit of Judaism *is* the true spirit of Christianity'<sup>77</sup> with the following words:

And perhaps if he and such as he knew more of that true Jewish spirit they would be better able genuinely to comprehend and to appreciate the riches of the correspondingly true spirit of Christianity—a reflection that prompts the additional notion that if Christians could but attain to a vision of the essence and core of their own faith of one thousandth the intensity wherewith those Zoharitic Rabbis plumbed the depths and scaled the heights of infinitude, they might become more worthy of their title, and even show to others a worthier, more thrilling, less man-exalting to more distant but O more glittering and lightful stars! How petty, how earth-bound, how much a clod the Zohar makes one feel! Undoubtedly, the vision and the ardour which crams its tantalizing pages hardly needs re-focusing, with Christ as its centre, to make it a very bible, not only of Jewish but of Christian and above all of Hebrew-Christian mystics—and what mystics ought not *they* to be!<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> See Levertoff, *St. Paul in Jewish Thought*, p. 5, and the analysis in Langton, *The Apostle Paul*, pp. 138-143.

<sup>75</sup> Levertov, *Tesseræ*, p. 11 (emphasis in original). Regarding this comment, see John Felstiner, "'O Taste and See": The Question of Content in American Jewish Poetry,' *Jewish Social Studies* 5 (1998), p. 117.

<sup>76</sup> *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, translated by Paul Levertoff, London 1908, p. ix.

<sup>77</sup> The statement of Simmons is cited in Levertoff, 'Worship', pp. 9 and 13 (emphasis in original).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13 (emphasis in original).

Levertoff eloquently extols the *Zohar* as the ‘very bible’ for Jewish, Christian, and especially Hebrew-Christian mystics, insofar as it is the great repository whose teachings bring to light not only the ‘true spirit’ of Judaism but also of Christianity.<sup>79</sup> I will elaborate in the next section on Levertoff’s insights regarding the zoharic composition, but suffice it here to emphasize that, in his view, the kabbalists hidden pseudepigraphically in the text—the ‘Zoharitic Rabbis’—placed Jesus at the center of their vision and hence they can serve as a pertinent model for Christians to emulate. Along similar lines, Levertoff commented on the ‘wealth of Christ-ward implication ... in the light of Messianic fulfillment’ that one could educe from a lengthy discourse in the *Zohar* on the theosophic intricacies of prayer.<sup>80</sup> To make such claims, of course, flies in the face of the literal meaning, since the name of Jesus is nowhere mentioned explicitly in the numerous homilies preserved in the text. This is not to deny implicit references, often polemical in nature,<sup>81</sup> and indeed, although Levertoff’s assertions obviously show evidence of his personal bias and existential circumstances, there is a grain of historical truth, inasmuch as the theosophic symbolism expressed in many of the zoharic homilies, not to mention other medieval kabbalistic sources, is informed by a delicate and complex relationship to Christological doctrines. This is especially evident in the area of gender construction: the Christian occupies the role of the castrated male, that is, the male who is emasculated because he is without a female

<sup>79</sup> Michael, ‘Love and the Messianic Age,’ p. 27, makes this very point when he remarks that Levertoff ‘recognized themes, ideas, and concepts in the Gospels that were common in Jewish mysticism and Chasidus. He wondered how anyone could hope to really grasp the message of the New Testament if unfamiliar with the Jewish background’.

<sup>80</sup> Levertoff, ‘Worship,’ p. 7. The passage to which Levertoff refers is *Zohar* 2:133a-b.

<sup>81</sup> Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, translated by Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, Penina Peli, Albany 1993, pp. 139-161; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*, New York 2005, pp. 255-260; idem, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism*, Oxford 2006, pp. 135-154; Daniel Abrams, ‘The Virgin Mary as the Moon that Lacks the Sun: A Zoharic Polemic Against the Veneration of Mary,’ *Kabbalah* 21 (2010), pp. 7-56; Ellen Haskell, ‘The Death of Rachel and the Kingdom of Heaven: Jewish Engagement with Christian Themes in *Sefer ha-Zohar*,’ *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 38 (2012), pp. 1-31.

counterpart, and the circumcised Jew, the role of the virulent male to whom the female is restored as a consequence of heterosexual coupling.<sup>82</sup>

Even though I would still insist that these clandestine references do not measure up to the view espoused by Levertoff that Jesus occupies the center of the zoharic vision, the veracity of the belief he espoused is, paradoxically enough, substantiated by the glaring absence of any images of Jesus. This conforms to the dynamic of Jewish esotericism—the secret is revealed by being concealed, for only in being concealed can the secret be revealed in its secrecy. Ironically, on this hermeneutical basis, the lack of explicit reference to Christ can be turned into the strongest proof that the esoteric import of the text is to be deciphered as reference to him. In an essay published many years ago, I argued that the most evocative factor in a given cultural context may be the one that is not mentioned overtly, the unspoken, which does not connote ‘the mere absence of speech due to the incommunicability of what is thought, but that which is withheld from speaking because it provides the ground for what is spoken’.<sup>83</sup> The same principle can be evoked here to explain how Levertoff read the zoharic text as a repository of spiritual insights that cast Judaism as fundamentally in sync with Christianity and Christianity with Judaism.

#### *Levertoff's Approach to the Zohar*

Levertoff's writings demonstrate a judicious understanding of the *Zohar*, which he designated the ‘Bible of the mystics’.<sup>84</sup> Not only do his comments reflect a shrewd grasp of the theological depth of this literary composition, as I have already noted, but several of his insights anticipated positions that have

<sup>82</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in the Zohar,’ *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John Efron, and David Myers, Hanover 1998, pp. 214-246, esp. 222-224, revised version in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings From Zoharic Literature*, London 2007, pp. 185-227, esp. 196-198; idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 309-312, 385-388, 567 n. 121, 596 n. 59; idem, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 94-96, 151-154. A similar view has been presented by Daniel Abrams, *Ten Psychoanalytic Aphorisms on the Kabbalah*, Los Angeles 2011, p. 33.

<sup>83</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Martyrdom, Eroticism, and Asceticism in Twelfth-Century Ashkenazi Piety,’ in *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Michael A. Signer and John Van Engen, Notre Dame 2001, p. 174.

<sup>84</sup> Levertoff, ‘Worship,’ p. 5; idem, ‘Some Aspects of Jewish Mysticism,’ *The Church and the Jews* 100 (1934), p. 23; Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, p. 52.

been espoused by more recent scholarship. I will cite in full Levertoff's most extensive characterization of zoharic literature:

In its present form, the Zohar first appeared in Spain in the thirteenth century, and while purporting to be but a commentary on the Pentateuch, it is in reality a thesaurus of mystic contemplations on the Divine Transcendence and Immanence, on Creation and Redemption, on God and Israel, on Israel and the world, on this world and the world to come, on holiness and the 'other side' —*i.e.* sin—on life and death, on Paradise and Hell. It is written in Aramaic, and is ascribed to the second century Galilean Rabbi, Simeon ben Yohai. In spite of its peculiar (and often bizarre) idiom and method the Zohar is as a jewel set very deep. It is bright, and gleams, but such radiance has to be sought. The masters of its mysteries did not desire knowledge of such mysteries to be widespread; rather, they veiled the glories of which they were cognizant, and guarded the hidden beauty with jealous secrecy. Its language is curt, pre-supposing intimate knowledge of all the sources mentioned in its obscure references: its phraseology is soaked in allusions, not only Biblical but—apparently—contemporaneous; allusions which fascinate by their elusiveness: such as 'The Book of Rabbi Hamnuna the Ancient,' which surely suggests all that is venerable in scholars and obscure in learning! But when the beauty is revealed and the incomprehensible made plain, what splendour remains! how the jewel glows and lightens in its dusty setting! what glories flash and beam within its strange radiant depths!<sup>85</sup>

From this passage it is obvious that Levertoff breaks with the traditional belief that ascribes the work uncritically to the second-century Palestinian rabbi Simeon ben Yohai. And yet, he is not willing to accept unqualifyingly the scholarly view regarding its medieval provenance. At best, he concedes that the zoharic anthology 'first appeared in Spain in the thirteenth century,' leaving open the possibility that older material—whether transmitted orally or in writing—has been incorporated into the text. Moreover, Levertoff resisted the view that there was a single author of the *Zohar*. Instead, he referred to it as a 'thesaurus of mystic contemplations,' and spoke of the fraternity responsible for its composition as 'masters of its mysteries'. In a second passage, he describes it as the 'testament and apologia' of 'unknown spiritual artists'.<sup>86</sup> Honoring the value attributed to anonymity in the religious-pietistic economy of traditional Judaism, Levertoff refers to the authors of the *Zohar* as 'distant'

<sup>85</sup> Levertoff, 'Some Aspects,' p. 20. Part of the passage is cited in the 'Preface' to *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 16.

<sup>86</sup> Levertoff, 'Worship,' p. 6; 'Some Aspects,' p. 24.



and 'unknown' Jews.<sup>87</sup> Following her father's lead, Olga remarked in *The Wailing Wall* that while the *Zohar* may have been 'discovered' by Moses de León, 'it is the work of many hands,' and she accepts the hypothesis that much of its material goes back to antiquity. Thus, echoing the perspective of her father, she concludes that 'its whole history is wrapped in the mists of obscurity. It is a literary curiosity, a historical enigma'.<sup>88</sup> Both the reference to the multiplicity and the obscurity of the zoharic authors have become more of the norm in current research.

It is significant that Levertoff depicted the anonymous kabbalists, whose opinions are preserved in the pages of the *Zohar*, as 'spiritual artists'. I do not think this is merely hyperbolic. On the contrary, it attests to his incisive grasp of the aesthetic dimension of the homilies assembled together in this text and, in particular, his keen sense for their visual and poetic nature apart from their theosophical or theological ramifications. In the essay 'Worship,' and repeated in 'Some Aspects of Jewish Mysticism' (1934), based on a paper read before the Victoria Institute, Levertoff refers to a zoharic passage on the 'essence of ideal worship' as 'a characteristically pictorial and luminous imagined scene'.<sup>89</sup> Here, too, we see evidence of his appreciation of the pictographic, one might even say cinematic, nature of zoharic kabbalah. In a related but somewhat different terminological register, in the lecture 'The Shekinah Motif in New Testament Literature,' delivered to the Society of the Study of Religions in 1951, Levertoff applied the epigram 'metaphysicians are poets run mad' to the kabbalists influenced by zoharic symbolism.<sup>90</sup> Invoking the quality of madness to portray the *ars poetica* of the zoharic kabbalists<sup>91</sup>—a manifestation of their prophetic vocation<sup>92</sup>—attests to Levertoff's sophisticated

<sup>87</sup> Levertoff, 'Worship,' p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Levertoff, *The Wailing Wall*, p. 36.

<sup>89</sup> Levertoff, 'Worship,' p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Levertoff, 'The Shechinah Motif,' p. 47.

<sup>91</sup> On the zoharic exegetical creativity as an *ars poetica*, see Yehuda Liebes, 'Zohar and Eros,' *Alpayyim* 9 (1994), pp. 67–115, esp. 70–80 [Hebrew].

<sup>92</sup> The nexus between prophecy and madness, well attested in many cultural contexts, was likely suggested by 2 Kings 9:1, Jeremiah 29:26, and Hosea 9:7. Compare especially the commentary of David Altschuler, *Mešudat David*, to 2 Kings 9:11, s.v. 'madman' (*ha-meshuga*): "Thus they called the prophet [by this name] because at the moment that he meditates on prophecy [*mitboded banevu'ah*] it appears to them that he has gone mad, since he is not turned then to matters of this world." See the discussion on prophecy and madness in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York 1962, pp. 395–396. On the prophetic status of the zoharic fraternity, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That*

and sensitive understanding of this material. The depiction of the intensity of religious ecstasy as a form of divine madness is a well-known theme in the history of religions,<sup>93</sup> and it seems to me a perfectly apt term to describe the creative process described in many passages in the *Zohar*.

I would surmise further that Levertoff's appreciation of the poetic sensibility helped nurture his attunement to the dynamic of esotericism at play in the zoharic texts. He alludes to this by asserting that the zoharic authors did not desire that the knowledge of the mysteries be widespread. In a truly

*Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton 1994, p. 276; idem, "Sage is Preferable to Prophet": Revisioning Midrashic Imagination,' in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, ed. Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber, Oxford 2008, pp. 186-210; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows From Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience on the Zohar*, translated by Nathan Wolski, Stanford 2009, pp. 333-334, 338-339, 362-363. See also Liebes, 'Zohar and Eros,' p. 74 and references cited in nn. 50-51; and R. Moses de Leon's *Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, critically edited and introduced by Charles Mopsik, with an introduction by Moshe Idel, Los Angeles 1996, pp. 6-7. For an exploration of madness and prophecy in later hasidic thought, see Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*, London 2009, pp. 1-5, 12, 18-19, 22, 42, 170-171, 183, 185, 192-195, 268-270, 277-278. For Nahman, there is a dual sense of madness: on the negative side it is closely associated with the spirit of foolishness (*ruah she'at*), which leads to transgression (Babylonian Talmud, Soṭah 3a), and on the positive side with the casting away of intellect (*sekhel*) or the rational mind (*da'at*), a precondition for living a life of piety and faith. See my own discussion of the theme of transforming impudent madness into sacred madness in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>93</sup> Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley 1951, pp. 64-101; Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens*, New Haven 1990, pp. 158-187; Josef Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness: On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston, New York 1964; idem, 'Divine Madness': Plato's Case against Secular Humanism, translated by Lothar Krauth, San Francisco 1995; Silke-Maria Weineck, *The Abyss Above: Philosophy and Poetic Madness in Plato, Hölderlin, and Nietzsche*, Albany 2002. For the influence of the Platonic idea on the Christian notion of the holy fool, see Guy G. Stroumsa, "Madness and Divinization in Early Christian Monasticism," *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, ed. David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa, Oxford 2002, pp. 73-88. On the related Socratic comparison of poetic inspiration to the rhapsodic possession by the divine spirit, see Grace M. Ledbetter, *Poetics before Plato: Interpretation and Authority in Early Greek Theories of Poetry*, Princeton 2003, pp. 88, 90-95.

perceptive manner, he observes that ‘they veiled the glories of which they were cognizant, and guarded the hidden beauty with jealous secrecy’. This corroborates the hermeneutic of esotericism that informed much of the medieval kabbalah—every exposure is a concealment, since there is no way for the concealed to be exposed unless it is concealed. The secret, therefore, is a phenomenon that hides itself in the very act of its being revealed. This dissimulation is especially prominent in the zoharic homilies. As I articulated the matter in a previous study, the authors responsible for these texts ‘consciously decided to conceal the intent of their words by not referring directly to the theosophic intent. In speaking by not-speaking, or speaking indirectly, the zoharic kabbalists were emulating what they believed to be the esoteric nature of Scripture, to hide the secrets in the cloak of the text — according to an oft-cited remark in the *Sabba de-Mishpatim* stratum,<sup>94</sup> the wise ones, who are “full of eyes”, can see the secret radiating through the garment of the letters, *mi-go levusha*, through the garment and not by removing the garment. If the secret can be seen only through the garment, this must imply that every disclosure is perforce a concealment’.<sup>95</sup> This dynamic sheds light on the comparison in the beginning of this literary unit between textual

<sup>94</sup> *Zohar* 2:98b. This section of the *Sabba de-Mishpatim* has been discussed by a number of scholars. See Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: *Peshat* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermeneutics,’ *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane, Albany 1993, pp. 155-203, reprinted with corrections in Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, pp. 56-110; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 384-388; idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 222-224; Liebes, ‘Zohar and Eros,’ pp. 94-98; Michal Oron, “‘Place Me As a Seal Upon Your Heart’: Reflections on the Poetics of the Author of the *Zohar* in the Section of *Sabba de-Mishpatim*,’ *Massu’ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 1-24 [Hebrew]; Pinchas Giller, ‘Love and Upheaval in the Zohar’s *Sabba de-Mishpatim*,’ *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1997), pp. 31-60; idem, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of Kabbalah*, Oxford 2001, pp. 35-68; Daniel Abrams, ‘Knowing the Maiden Without Eyes: Reading the Sexual Reconstruction of the Jewish Mystic in a Zoharic Parable,’ *Da’at* 50-52 (2003), pp. lix-lxxxiii; Oded Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets and the Secret of Interpretation: Midrashic and Hermeneutic Strategies in Sabba de-Mishpatim of the Zohar*, Los Angeles 2005, pp. 191-266 [Hebrew]; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows From Eden*, pp. 68-69, 160-162.

<sup>95</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets: New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle,’ *Kabbalah* 19 (2009), pp. 180-181.

interpretation and the dream,<sup>96</sup> a talmudic idea that appears in several zoharic homilies.<sup>97</sup> After stating categorically that the Torah does not consist of ‘words of a dream,’ whose meaning is determined by the mouth that interprets them, but which nonetheless must be interpreted in a manner that corresponds to the dream,<sup>98</sup> the zoharic author—through the voice of the elder—insists that with respect to scriptural words, the ‘delights of the holy king,’ it is even more imperative that they be rendered in concurrence with the ‘way of truth,’ even though each one embraces multiple ‘words of wisdom’. The contrast between the dream and the Torah only highlights the element that ties them together: just as a dream has both manifest and latent dimensions, so the literal word of Scripture comprises hidden meanings that must be extracted through skillful exegesis. Multivocality can be affirmed without presuming that there is no authorial intent that can be recovered philologically. The same hermeneutic applies to the zoharic text. That Levertoff well understood this point is attested in his assertion that the kabbalists responsible for this composition ‘veiled the glories of which they were cognizant’.

Finally, I would note that in spite of his recognition of multiple authors, Levertoff confidently spoke of a unifying vision. The discretion exemplified in the willingness not to dichotomize the unity of vision and the multiplicity of voices stands in sharp contrast to some contemporary scholars who think that assuming the *Zohar* is a *polygraph*—a collectively written volume that champions diverse views<sup>99</sup>—and the consequent rejection of the search for an Urtext challenges the possibility of speaking intelligibly about a singular phenomenon classified as the ‘zoharic kabbalah’ or the ‘zoharic authorship’.<sup>100</sup> In my judgment, extending the boundaries of the text over several centuries

<sup>96</sup> *Zohar* 2:95a. See Liebes, ‘Zohar and Eros,’ pp. 87-88; Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets*, pp. 255-259.

<sup>97</sup> See Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination*, New York 2011, pp. 143-177, especially 162-171. Regrettably, in that monograph, I neglected to mention the passage from *Sabba de-Mishpaḥim* cited in the previous note.

<sup>98</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 55b.

<sup>99</sup> My use of the term ‘polygraph’ is indebted to the comments of the editors, referred to as the ‘cowherds,’ in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth to Buddhist Philosophy*, Oxford 2011, p. v.

<sup>100</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, New Haven 2005, p. 82, and my rejoinder in Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and Discontinuity in Kabbalistic Tradition,’ *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6 (2007), pp. 155-156.

does not preclude positing a principle of anthologizing that would unify the array of compositional and redactional layers that were eventually organized into a relatively stable text. Recognition of plurivocality does not undermine the soundness of positing a uniform stance; heterogeneity may itself be demonstrative of homogeneity, and repetition the impetus for difference.<sup>101</sup>

This surely fits in with the strategy of reading deployed by Levertoff. To cite his own words, ‘the final aim and all-pervading theme of the whole Zohar, and the reason at the back of the whole order of its philosophy’ is ‘the desire to effect and complete the unity of all things in one volume of glory and perfection—union of the different aspects of the Divine Personality; union of the two ultimate aspects of the universe, Justice and Mercy; union of the celestial and terrestrial spheres; union of God and Man’.<sup>102</sup> In the continuation, Levertoff notes that ‘in the minds of the unknown spiritual artists whose testament and apologia the Zohar is, even the mystical ideal of fusion with the Divine is subject to and but a part of the yet higher aim of glorifying ever more perfectly the Divine itself. Thus Man becomes at once more humble and more noble—an instrument only, but actually an instrument with power to exalt and aid the splendour of the majesty of the Most High!’<sup>103</sup> To translate these words into the lingo that has become central to contemporary scholarship: the mystical dimension of the human uniting with the divine serves as the means to realize the higher theurgic task of unifying the two aspects of God, masculine grace and feminine judgment. Rather than bifurcating the mystical and the theurgical, Levertoff perceptively noted their intrinsic connection. He formulates the anthropological ideal in zoharic kabbalah in terms of several key ḥasidic doctrines, to wit, *hitlahavut*, the enflamed rapture and intimate enthusiasm,<sup>104</sup> *hitbodedut*, seclusion from social interaction and the meditative

<sup>101</sup> I am here responding to the critique of textual idealism in the approach to zoharic literature offered by Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, pp. 464-469, 526-534. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Zoharic Literature and Midrashic Temporality,’ to appear in *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg, London 2013.

<sup>102</sup> Levertoff, ‘Worship,’ p. 6.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> See Paul Philip Levertoff, ‘Aus der kabbalistisch chassidischen Gedankenwelt,’ *Saat auf Hoffnung* 51 (1914), p. 81. A still useful phenomenological account of *hitlahavut* in Ḥasidism is found in Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, translated by Maurice Friedman, New York 1955, pp. 17-23, and see especially p. 40, where he refers to this notion as the ‘basic principle of Hasidic life’. See also

concentration on a single point—most frequently identified as the Tetragrammaton—to attain a state of mental equanimity,<sup>105</sup> and *hitpa'alut*, the ecstatic realization of the self actualized in its dissolution (*bitul*) and absorption (*hitkallelut*) in the infinite. As Levertoff described the peak mystical experience, 'everything glows and burns with the bright steady flame of self-forgetful ecstasy, of will concentrated fiercely on one point and to one end, of heart subdued by the discipline of the spirit until the point is reached where the suppliant becomes the giver, the co-operator, the partaker of delight, one with the celestial life of praise, his heaven begun while yet on earth, this world being but a prefiguring of what is above, man but a lesser copy of angels'.<sup>106</sup> Most telling is the reversal of roles that Levertoff associates with the core experience, the 'suppliant becomes the giver,' a reversal that is linked, especially in Ḥabad teaching, to the messianic era wherein the feminine recipient is transposed into the masculine donor.<sup>107</sup>

### *Jesus, Shekhinah, and the Veiled Glory*

The most provocative aspect of the intersection of Christianity and Ḥasidism imparted by Levertoff is his portrayal of the incarnate Jesus in terms of the rabbinic idea of the indwelling of the divine Presence, especially as that theme is embellished in kabbalistic and ḥasidic sources. Lev Gillet did not exaggerate when he wrote that the question of the *Shekhinah* and its relationship with Christology occupied the center of Levertoff's theological preoccupations.<sup>108</sup> For this reason, Gillet opined that the most important book of Levertoff's life would have been the work on *Christ and the Shekhinah*. As far as we know, Levertoff never completed such a monograph, but the main lines of his argument are laid out in the lecture 'The Shekinah Motif in the New Testament Literature'<sup>109</sup> as well as in some other writings.

The focus of the lecture was 'the attitude of the first generation of Christians, all Jews, to the Person of Jesus of Nazareth'.<sup>110</sup> But what Levertoff,

Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, edited and translated by Maurice Friedman, New York 1960, p. 236, and compare the analysis in Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik*, Chicago 2008, pp. 125-130.

<sup>105</sup> Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, Albany 1995, p. 282 n. 110.

<sup>106</sup> Levertoff, 'Worship,' p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 149, 204-209.

<sup>108</sup> Lev Gillet, 'Questions concernant la Chekinah,' *Judaism and Christianity*, p. 33.

<sup>109</sup> See above, n. 20.

<sup>110</sup> Levertoff, 'The Shechinah Motif,' p. 45.

in fact, set out to do was to assess the central creed of Christianity, the divinity of Jesus, in light of previously held Jewish beliefs. Towards this end, he begins by noting that the notion of a suffering Messiah is attested in rabbinic sources. The 'Mystery of the Cross,' therefore, may be something of a stumbling-block, in Paul's infamous language, but it 'is not an entirely foreign idea to a Rabbinical Jew'.<sup>111</sup> Prima facie, a far more serious quandary for the rabbinic mindset is the Johannine doctrine of the incarnate Logos, the mystery of the Word made flesh, the divine becoming human in the person of Christ, a tenet of faith that 'always seemed to Jews to be an infringement upon the belief in the absolute unity of God'.<sup>112</sup> Posing the problem this way is something of a rhetorical ruse as it affords Levertoff the opportunity to articulate the Jewish-Christian supposition that the ancient Israelite belief in the epiphany of the divine glory is the textual premise for an incarnational theology. The first disciples of Jesus saw in him 'a visible manifestation of God, a soul in which the Divinity dwells, Jewishly expressed, "the *Shekinah*"'. He goes on to explain this rudimentary rabbinic idea, and most interestingly, he remarks that the term *shekhinah* was 'used in the first century rabbinic literature as one of the many substitutes for the Tetragrammaton'. Levertoff thus forges an inherent connection between the indwelling of the divine and the name, a theme that is crucial to kabbalistic theosophy. Gesturing towards this doctrinal point, Levertoff noted that the idea of the *Shekhinah* became 'the matrix of later Jewish theology, expressing the immanent aspect of the Deity. In Kabbalistic literature based on the Zohar, a whole metaphysical system was developed. The Shechinah concept permeates the whole strained attempt of the Jewish mystics to describe what Walter Pater<sup>113</sup> calls "the sensuous love of the unseen"'.<sup>114</sup>

Levertoff contends that he is not interested in the later kabbalistic development but only in the early rabbinic concept, since the latter is contemporary with Jesus. To the rabbis of the first century, the *Shekhinah* 'was not merely the visible splendor that shone in the holy of holies, but (one could say) the alter ego of God. It is the vestment of God, and God is one with his

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. On the rabbinic portrayal of messianic suffering, see Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*, Cambridge, MA 1988, pp. 73-85. See also Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Divine Suffering and the Hermeneutics of Reading: Philosophical Reflections on Lurianic Mythology,' in *Suffering Religion*, ed. Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson, London 2002, pp. 101-107.

<sup>112</sup> Levertoff, 'The Shechinah Motif,' p. 46.

<sup>113</sup> Walter H. Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, London 1910, p. 143.

<sup>114</sup> Levertoff, 'The Shechinah Motif,' p. 47.

manifestation'.<sup>115</sup> Despite his explicit disavowal, Levertoff's characterization of the rabbinic perspective is colored by the kabbalistic and especially the ḥasidic sources wherein the divine Presence is portrayed as the garment (*malbush*) of God, one of the most prevalent expressions used in Jewish esoteric literature to signify the manifestation of the divine.<sup>116</sup> Levertoff proceeds to adduce several rabbinic passages describing various aspects of the *Shekhinah*, for example, its exile with the Jewish people and its redemption in the messianic age, with the intent of showing that they are congruent with the descriptions of Jesus in the New Testament. For example, he draws a parallel between the logion attributed to Jesus in Matthew 18:20, 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them' to the dictum transmitted in the name of Ḥananya ben Teradyon in *Pirquei Avot* 3:2, 'When two sit together and they exchange words of Torah, the *Shekhinah* is between them'.<sup>117</sup> Levertoff anecdotically relates that he once quoted to a ḥasidic Jew Paul's statement 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6), but he changed the last words to 'in the face of the *Shechinah*'. The ḥasid, we are told, thought that Levertoff was citing 'an ancient rabbinic source,' and with good reason, since the glory (*doxa*) to which Paul referred is indeed 'a Shechinah concept. He beheld the Shechinah manifested in the "face of Jesus," alluding to his experience of the vision of the exalted Christ on the way to Damascus'.<sup>118</sup>

Levertoff elaborated his interpretation of 2 Corinthians 4:6 in a brief note, 'The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus,' published in 1936:

[T]he words 'hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' allude to the apostle's experience on the way to Damascus ... There he beheld the veiled glory, the *kabod*, of God, the Shekinah, manifested in the 'face of Jesus Christ'. [...] Christ, then, was to him the Shekinah, the luminous glory of the ineffable, invisible God of Israel which abode above the Cherubim in the holiest place of the Tabernacle and the Temple, and which at certain moments made itself more widely manifest. These manifestations

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, 'The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides,' *Da'at* 24 (1990), pp. xxv-lxix (English section); idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 252.

<sup>117</sup> Levertoff, 'The Shechinah Motif,' p. 48. The rabbinic reference is incorrectly given as Avot 2:3; the mistake also occurs in the typescript of the lecture, and I assume the modern editor just repeated the original error.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 48.



of the Shekinah in the old Covenant were a sort of foretaste of the Incarnation, when, veiled in our flesh, the All-great revealed Himself as the All-loving in Christ [...] And when He withdrew from earth into the unveiled glory of God, still He is manifested, and His life and action are perpetuated, on earth by His Spirit dwelling in the Church, which is His body. Christ is the Lord of glory, He participates in God's glory (I Cor. ii, 8; II Cor. iv, 4).<sup>119</sup>

The characterization of Paul's vision of Christ as beholding the veiled glory, the *kavod* or the *Shekhinah*, the somatic manifestation of the unveiled glory, reflects a basic structure of the kabbalistic symbolism with which Levertoff was intimately familiar: the Presence is the image through which the invisible is manifest but in such a way that the invisibility remains in tact.

The Jewish mystical dimension of Levertoff's representation of Jesus is enhanced in the continuation where he remarks that the hymn preserved in Philippians 2:6-11 'is permeated by Shekinah motifs'.<sup>120</sup> Of particular interest are the last three verses, 'Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and in earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'. The name, Levertoff contends, refers to YHWH, the most sacred of divine names in the Jewish tradition.<sup>121</sup> In an intriguing, if somewhat simplified manner, Levertoff distinguishes the interpretation of this name according to Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews: the former maintained that it signifies 'the idea of God's eternity and immutability and His entering into a historical relation with Israel,'<sup>122</sup> whereas the latter proffered that it signifies 'the abstract metaphysical concept of His absolute nature (already in the LXX, ὁ ὢν)'.<sup>123</sup> The common denominator of the historical and philosophical approaches is that the four-letter name is decoded as a compound of *hayah*, *howeh*, and *yihyeh*, the three tenses of the verb *hwh*, which corresponds to the description of God in Revelation 1:4 as the 'one who is and who was and who is to come'.

<sup>119</sup> Paul Philip Levertoff, 'The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus,' *The Church and the Jews* 106 (1936), p. 6.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7 (emphasis in original).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> The reference that Levertoff gives, *ibid.*, p. 8, is the explanation of the name *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14) in Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 9b: 'The holy One, blessed be he, said to Moses, Go and say to the Israelites, I was with you in this servitude and I shall be with you in the servitude of the kingdoms [of Babylonia and Rome]'

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Applying this esoteric doctrine to the hymn in Philippians, the name that God bestowed on Jesus is identified as the Tetragrammaton, the ‘name that is above every name,’ and hence he is the appropriate object of liturgical veneration—everyone should bow down to him and every tongue confess that he is the divine glory. Insofar as Jesus bears the name of YHWH, it follows that whenever his name is mentioned, he ‘is present as the Shekinah, in His saving and life-giving power. ... St. Paul is casting upon all creation and redemption the steadfast and unwavering light of the Divine Presence, the Shekinah’.<sup>124</sup>

The influence of Jewish mysticism on Levertoff’s identification of Jesus as the *Shekhinah* becomes even more conspicuous in the concluding section of the aforementioned lecture. Levertoff emphasizes that God is not a *deus absconditus*, but rather the ‘ever-present Shechinah in “exile,” in the corrupt world of sin, undertaking the task of redeeming and regenerating creation’.<sup>125</sup> The rabbinic topos of the Presence in exile is translated from a primarily historical-nationalistic sense to a cosmological-universalistic one, that is, Levertoff applies this idea to the general condition of the immanence of Jesus in the material world, which is corrupted by human transgression, an interpretative strategy attested in ḥasidic literature, including Ḥabad sources. To illustrate the point I will cite two of many examples from Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The first passage is from *Liqqutei Amarim*: ‘This is the aspect of the lower repentance to elevate the lower *he*, to raise her from her fall into the outer forces, which is the secret of the exile of the *Shekhinah*, following the dictum of the rabbis, blessed be their memory,<sup>126</sup> “When [Israel] were exiled to Edom, the *Shekhinah* was with them,” that is, when a person performs an act befitting Edom [*ma’aseh edom*], he lowers and draws down to there a spark of divinity’.<sup>127</sup> The second text, which expounds the same theme, is from the collection of Shneur Zalman’s homilies, *Liqqutei Torah*: ‘The soul of every person [*nefesh kol adam*] is desirous but the love is in exile and it is hidden, as [in the dictum] “when they were exiled to Edom, the *Shekhinah* was with them,” that is, even though they perform an act befitting Edom, the *Shekhinah*

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Levertoff, ‘The Shechinah Motif,’ p. 49. Compare idem, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 26 (51).

<sup>126</sup> *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. Ḥayyim S. Horovitz and Israel A. Rabin, Jerusalem 1970, p. 52.

<sup>127</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Amarim: Tanya*, Brooklyn 2010, pt. 1, ch. 17, 23a. See ibid., pt. 3, ch. 6, 96a.

is nevertheless with them, and the heart of a person is enthused to be abrogated vis-à-vis the blessed One'.<sup>128</sup>

As may be deduced from these texts, the exile of the divine Presence is no longer restricted to a displacement from a particular geographical locality. On the contrary, it has been translated into a literary trope to name the imprisonment of God's presence in the corporeal realm of imperfection. Levertoff utilizes this elocution to explain the incarnation of Jesus: the hidden God assumes a manifest form to redeem creation, a conceptualization that reverberates deeply with the well-known Jewish mystical conception of *tiqqun ha-olam*. Paraphrasing a theme often enunciated in Ḥabad literature, Levertoff notes that in the time of the Messiah, to whom is attributed a state of perfection higher than Adam, 'everything in Nature—even evil itself—will be absorbed in God'.<sup>129</sup> The absorption of all things into God does not signify the annihilation of the world but the discernment that it lacks any ontic independence from divinity. The point is made clear in Levertoff's explanation of the eschatological expression 'Sabbath of the soul': although God rested on the 'first Sabbath of Creation,' he continues to work through history 'preparing Creation for the appearance of His Kingdom in the Messianic Times. ... But the perfect Sabbath of God will only begin when He actually *settles* in His Kingdom in order to rule'.<sup>130</sup> The language utilized by Levertoff unquestionably reflects the mystical symbol of *malkhut*, and especially the messianic tenor assigned to it in the Ḥabad lexicon. The approach of Ḥabad is also attested by the fact that the cosmic Sabbath does not herald the cessation of the world of particularity but rather the unmasking of God's residing therein, just as one does not rest in a house until the process of building is completely finished.

Restating the point in a second passage in an idiom that resonates even more precisely with the Ḥabad perspective, Levertoff writes: 'The aim of all Creation is "Bittul hayesh," that is, ceasing from being something apart from God; *to die, in order to be raised to life again*'.<sup>131</sup> Levertoff has rightly understood that the Ḥabad doctrine of the 'abnegation of being' does not entail the nihilistic destruction of existence but rather the cosmological perspective that I have dubbed *acosmic naturalism* or *apophatic panentheism*, that is, the perception of the nothingness disincarnate in the incarnation of the infinite

<sup>128</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Brooklyn 1996, Bemidbar, 88b.

<sup>129</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 11 (38-39).

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11 (39).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33 (56), emphasis in original.

light in the multiple forms of existence that constitute the world.<sup>132</sup> For the Ḥabad-Lubavitch masters, as I put it elsewhere, ‘the world is not thought to be an illusion vis-à-vis the hidden essence as much as it is conceived to be a veil through which the illusion can be apprehended and thereby unveiled for the illusion it appears to be, an unveiling in which the hidden essentiality is (un)veiled. Nature, accordingly, is not denied real existence, as if it was the “veil of Maya,” but rather it is the veil that reveals the unveiling of the veil. The one who acquires this gnosis perceives that the world is suffused with divine reality, that there is, paraphrasing the zoharic language favored by many ḥasidic masters,<sup>133</sup> ‘no place devoid of the divine’.<sup>134</sup>

The nullification, therefore, is an alternate way of expressing, in Levertoff’s words, the ‘longing’ of all contingent beings ‘for the Messianic redemption, through which God’s immanence will be fully realized’.<sup>135</sup> Inasmuch as creation is brought forth *by an act of self-limitation* on the part of God—the kabbalistic notion of *šimšum*, which Levertoff depicts as ‘God’s condescending love’<sup>136</sup>—it follows that the ‘actual sight of God’<sup>137</sup> to be attained in the time of the Messiah would consist of seeing the concatenation of the worlds divulged as the façade through which the light of infinity is manifestly hidden and hiddenly manifest.<sup>138</sup> To be sure, Levertoff appeals to ‘Hasidic theology’ to support his distinction between the two kinds of knowledge of the divine, the ‘static’ or the ‘rational’ knowledge, which results from ‘studying Creation,’ and the ‘dynamic’ or the ‘mystic’ knowledge, which relates to the ‘inner being of God,’ the knowledge that leads to the all-consuming love and the ‘beatific vision’ to be ‘achieved under the Messianic dispensation’. Levertoff is adamant

<sup>132</sup> Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 66-129, esp. 87-103.

<sup>133</sup> I am here alluding to the statement in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, ed. Reuven Margalioṭ, Jerusalem 1978, sec. 70, 122b, *leit atar panuy minneih*, ‘there is no place devoid of him’. Regarding this passage, see my comments in *Open Secret*, p. 341 n. 172 (I would like to correct my inadvertent mistake in rendering both *minneih* and *minnah* by the second person pronoun instead of the obviously correct third person).

<sup>134</sup> Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 96. For discussion of previous scholars who have compared the Ḥabad perspective, usually labeled as ‘acosmism,’ with the Vedāntic principle of *Māyā*, see *ibid.*, p. 341 n. 141. Unfortunately, I neglected to mention the interesting discussion in Joseph P. Schultz, *Judaism and the Gentile Faiths: Comparative Studies in Religion*, Rutherford 1981, pp. 92-94.

<sup>135</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 12 (40).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7 (35-36).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2 (32).

<sup>138</sup> Wolfson *Open Secret*, pp. 25-27, 52, 83-85, 87, 96, 98.

that since the material creation is ‘merely’ God’s ‘picture,’ we best know God in his transcendent holiness and wisdom.<sup>139</sup> However, the Ḥabad sources utilized by Levertoff offer a different perspective, and on occasion Levertoff’s own thinking seems to challenge his binary distinction: the knowledge of God’s inner being is acquired through contemplating creation, for it is only by means of the latter that one can perceive the footprints of the invisible. With respect to this issue the correspondence between the ḥasidic and the Christological, particularly as may be elicited from the Johannine gospel<sup>140</sup>—the book that Levertoff suggests is probably the ‘most “Hasidic” writing in the New Testament’<sup>141</sup>—is transparent: just as the Father kenotically gives of himself through Jesus, the ‘organ of God’s love’<sup>142</sup> that reveals itself as the ‘Light of the World,’<sup>143</sup> the bestowal of the spirit of the bridegroom that establishes the messiahship of the bride,<sup>144</sup> so from the Ḥabad vantage point, the essence of infinity, the limitlessness that is above nature, discloses itself through an act of withdrawal that results in the spectacle of nature, not as a distinct suprasensible presence but as the metaphysical nihility delimited within the confines of the physical. In *Die religiöse Denkweise der Chassidim*, Levertoff characterized the kabbalistic idea of *šimšum* as an expression of God’s love in the form of ‘self-limitation’ (*Selbstbeschränkung*) and of ‘becoming concrete’ (*Konkret-werden*).<sup>145</sup> Moreover, Levertoff points out the

<sup>139</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, pp. 2-3 (32-33).

<sup>140</sup> Significantly, the epilogue to *Love and the Messianic Age* is a discussion of ‘Love in the Fourth Gospel.’ See *ibid.*, pp. 50-60 (73-80).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51 (74).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51 (74).

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55 (76-77).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53 (75). The language of the bride and the bridegroom is based on John 3:29, which is cited by Levertoff.

<sup>145</sup> Levertoff, *Die religiöse Denkweise*, p. 10. Levertoff’s presentation of the Lurianic concept of *šimšum* resembles the interpretation offered by Shneur Zalman of Liadi and his disciples. The assertion that *šimšum* should not be interpreted literally means that from the perspective of infinity there cannot be any withdrawal, but from the perspective of the finite there is nothing but withdrawal, since every manifestation of the infinite light is an occlusion. The immanent presence of divinity in the world is thus proportionate to the absence of God from the world. This is the intent of the wordplay of *ha-olam*, ‘the world,’ and *he’lem*, ‘concealment,’ which appears frequently in Ḥabad literature. see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 26–27, 52, 93, 103–114, 128–29, 132, 215, 218. On the Ḥabad interpretation of *šimšum*, see Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Ḥabad Hasidism*, translated by Jeffrey M. Green,

congruence between the ideal of fellowship (*koinonia*) in the life of the early Church and the ideal of unity (*ahdut*) in Ḥasidism: both movements rest on a social cohesiveness that draws its inspiration from and emulates the portrayal of the Messiah as the 'personification of Divine Love'.<sup>146</sup> Although that love finds its greatest instantiation only in the messianic age when the soul-sparks of all human beings will be restored to primordial Adam, in a way that replicates the integration of the faithful into the body of Christ,<sup>147</sup> the gift of light and life is what presently sustains the world and makes possible the communion of the human with God. Through Jesus the sanctification of the name (*qiddush ha-shem*) and the glorification of the divine on earth (John 17:4) is enacted.<sup>148</sup>

In the current exilic state, human transgression has severed the inherent connection between nature and divinity, and hence the cosmos itself longs for redemption—Levertoff corroborates the ḥasidic teaching by citing the statement of Paul that 'the whole creation groans' (Romans 8:22)—and that longing inspires human beings to 'unite everything that is seemingly separated from, and independent of, God, with Him, and so co-operate with Him in His redemptive activities and prepare the way for the Messiah'.<sup>149</sup> Clearly influenced by kabbalistic symbolism, and especially as it is inflected in Ḥabad teaching, Levertoff links this idea to the notion of searching for and liberating the divine sparks 'scattered in this world, in man and Nature,' so that they may be brought 'back to their source'.<sup>150</sup> The human being is thus invested with the task to 'finish what God has deliberately left unfinished'. At first recoiling from the insinuation that God would need the help of his creatures, Levertoff goes so far as to say, in language reminiscent of Heschel, that God 'does need men, in order to exercise His kingship,' the disclosure of the *Shekhinah* in the world, the heightened messianic realization of immanence, is necessitated by

Albany 1993, pp. 79-91, esp. 88-89; Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 84, and reference to select primary and secondary sources on p. 336 n. 112, to which one might add Schultz, *Judaism and the Gentile Faiths*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>146</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 50 (73).

<sup>147</sup> Levertoff's position has been affirmed more recently by Byron L. Sherwin, 'Corpus Domini: Traces of the New Testament in East European Hasidism?' *Heythrop Journal* 35 (1994), pp. 267-280. See below, n. 219.

<sup>148</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, pp. 51-52 (73). See *ibid.*, p. 59 (80).

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13 (40).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14 (41). Interestingly, on p. 14 n. 24 (41 n. 47), Levertoff theorizes that the divine sparks 'play the same role in the Jewish mystical terminology as in Plotinus'.

the principle 'there is no king without a nation' (*ein melekh be-lo am*).<sup>151</sup> The theurgical inference is drawn explicitly by Levertoff: 'A king needs a people that accepts his rule *voluntarily*. God, by virtue of His character, needs a being to whom He can reveal Himself, whom He can love, and through whom He can shed abroad His light and life. The ultimate issues of this truth are of the most vital and cosmic significance, *for God Himself is affected by our life*. ... There is a reciprocal giving and receiving'.<sup>152</sup>

The upshot of Levertoff's identification of Jesus and the *Shekhinah* is his assumption that the doctrine of incarnation is typologically foretold in the verses from the Hebrew bible that describe the manifestation of the divine. In the appendix to *St. Paul in Jewish Thought*, Levertoff elaborated on this theme. Turning a stereotypical polemical trope on its head, Levertoff argues that the materialistic aspect of 'Jewish this-worldliness' is expressive of an 'impatient longing to see the Divine realized on earth'.<sup>153</sup> The 'Jewish materialism,' therefore, is a form of religious 'realism,' which demands that every ideal construct has a 'visible and touchable materialization'. Quintessentially, the Jew 'believes in the invisible' but at the same time 'desires that this invisible should become visible and reveal its power; that it should permeate everything material, and use the material as a medium and an instrument'. This desire is expressed not only in the wish to build the Tabernacle or the Temple, but in viewing all of nature as the 'dwelling place of the Divine-human spirit'. The criticism of carnal Israel, focusing on the letter or the body, becomes in the hands of Levertoff the 'materialization of the spiritual' that is the foundation for the Johannine idea of the 'Word becoming Flesh,' and hence 'the Jewish people formed the genuine environment for the Incarnation of the Divine Logos, for which not only a holy, virginal soul was necessary, but also a holy, pure body'.<sup>154</sup>

Levertoff's depiction of Judaism in relation to the dogma of Christianity reflects, in my opinion, the idea of *dirah ba-tahtonim* in Ḥabad philosophy. The midrashic source whence this expression is derived relates more specifically to the indwelling of the glory in the sacred place of the

<sup>151</sup> See, for example, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Torah Or*, Brooklyn 1991, 6b. This source is referred to by Levertoff, *Love and Marriage*, p. 12 n. 23 (40 n. 46), albeit for a slightly different emphasis. And compare Levertoff, *Die religiöse Denkweise*, p. 10.

<sup>152</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, pp. 14-15 (41), emphasis in original.

<sup>153</sup> Levertoff, *St. Paul in Jewish Thought*, p. 52.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Tabernacle,<sup>155</sup> but for the Ḥabad masters, the idea is extended to encompass the whole of the cosmos, that is, the material world in its entirety is a place of habitation for the divine. The task of spiritualizing the material—not by negating the corporeal but by transfiguring it<sup>156</sup>—is assigned singularly to the Jews, since of all ethnicities they are consubstantial with the essence (*ašmut*). The Jews, accordingly, have the capacity to transform the ‘created something’ (*yesh ha-nivra*) into the ‘real something’ (*yesh ha-amitti*), which is, in truth, nothing, a process that emulates the act of innovation (*hitḥaddeshut*) or the creation of something out of nothing,<sup>157</sup> the origination of materiality (*gashmiyyut*) from spirituality (*ruḥaniyyut*), an event that cannot be explained by the logical sequence of cause and effect (*illah we-alul*).<sup>158</sup> Levertoff has appropriated this doctrine, albeit stripped of its theosophical complexity and ethnocentric specificity, and applied it to the allegedly more universalistic Christological incarnation: that the Word became flesh is the logical outcome of this Jewish desire for the tangible materialization of the spirit and the concrete visualization of the invisible. It is in light of this desire that ‘the Jews became the people of the Messiah’. Levertoff is aware of the chasm between the two liturgical communities that must be bridged to establish a ‘spiritual and universal Theocracy’. For the Jews the danger consists that the ‘national self-consciousness’ will be ‘torn from its Divine element,’ and then it becomes ‘mere Chauvinism,’ and the ‘realism of the Jewish spirit is then perverted into mere Mammonism, which hides the features of genuine Judaism from foreign, prejudiced eyes’. For the Christians the hazard is that the alignment of ‘world-redemption’ with an ideal of ‘universal brotherhood,’ which is anchored in the person of Jesus, is both too ‘abstract’ and too ‘narrow’ for the Jew. In the final analysis, Jews can be convinced of the truth of Christianity only through action that affects individuals in the socio-political arena.<sup>159</sup> Thus, Levertoff declares

<sup>155</sup> The key rabbinic passage cited by the Ḥabad-Lubavitch masters is *Midrash Tanhuma*, Jerusalem 1972, Naso, 16, p. 688: ‘R. Samuel bar Naḥman said, When the holy One, blessed be he, created the world, he desired that he would have a habitation with the beings below just as he had with the beings above’.

<sup>156</sup> See my discussion in *Open Secret*, pp. 130-160. The fundamental doctrine of Ḥabad centered around the transfiguration of the corporeal, connected especially to the spiritual value of eating to redeem the soul-sparks and to restore them to the divine, is mentioned by Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 42 (66) with some of the relevant sources noted.

<sup>157</sup> Menahem Mendel Schneerson, *Liqqutei Siḥot*, Brooklyn 1999, 12:74-75.

<sup>158</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Torah Or*, 92b.

<sup>159</sup> Levertoff, *St. Paul in Jewish Thought*, p. 54.



that the 'compassion of Jesus for human suffering and need' is not a 'mere emotion, but is always translated into action' that reveals the 'will of the Father,' a sign intended to manifest the divine glory and to awaken people's faith in the Messiah.<sup>160</sup> In vocabulary distinctive to Ḥabad, Levertoff asserts that through the agency of the love of Jesus the heart of the believer is transformed into a 'habitation' for the holy spirit, and in facilitating this 'new birth,' the 'highest expectation of the Messianic Age is fully realised'.<sup>161</sup> The spiritual phenomenon of conversion is also branded the 'circumcision of the heart,' which is identified (as it is in Ḥabad lore<sup>162</sup>) as the act of repentance that frees the *Shekhinah* from her exile.<sup>163</sup>

The conceptual framework of the sixth chapter of *Love and the Messianic Age*, "Repentance and Love," is based entirely on the Ḥabad notion of repentance as the mode of worship that issues from the 'depth of the heart' (*umqa de-libba*), the 'abundant love' (*ahavah rabbah*), and the 'desire' (*hashiqah*) of the 'parched soul' (*nefesh shoqeqah*) to be conjoined to God,<sup>164</sup> a mode of worship that exceeds the parameters of the law, insofar as the repentant has the capacity to transmute acts of premeditated malice into meritorious acts, according to the talmudic dictum attributed by Reish Laqish,<sup>165</sup> which is cited frequently in Ḥabad sources to portray repentance as the hypernomian excess that is concomitantly the very foundation of the law.<sup>166</sup> This hypernomian element is the meaning that the Ḥabad masters impute to the statement attributed to Rav,<sup>167</sup> 'All the predestined times [for redemption] have passed and the matter is dependent on repentance and good deeds,' epitomized in the saying of the Friediker Rebbe, Yosef Yiṣḥaq Schneersohn, 'forthwith to repentance, forthwith to redemption' (*le'altar li-teshuvah le'altar li-ge'ullah*),<sup>168</sup> that is, repentance is the form of pious devotion that surpasses the law to the extent that it is expressive of the coincidence of opposites whereby

<sup>160</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 54 (76).

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60 (80).

<sup>162</sup> Compare Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Amarim: Tanya*, pt. 4, ch. 4, 105b. The passage is cited and translated in Levertoff, *Die religiöse Denkweise*, pp. 160-163. On the nexus between circumcision and repentance in Ḥabad, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>163</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 41 (65).

<sup>164</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Amarim: Tanya*, pt. 1, ch. 7, 12a.

<sup>165</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86b.

<sup>166</sup> Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 56, 181, 323 n. 135, 366 n. 88.

<sup>167</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97b.

<sup>168</sup> Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 3, 20, 278, 280-281, 304-305 n. 18.

the distinction between innocence and guilt is surmounted.<sup>169</sup> Simply put, repentance engenders divine forgiveness, which is capable of transposing intentional wrongdoing into merit, so that the opposition between virtue and vice—an antagonism that undergirds the nomian axiology—is transcended. In the act of forbearing, the criterion of reward and punishment sanctioned by the strictures of law have to be overturned and, in this respect, it is a prolepsis of the messianic state.

Levertoff's understanding of Christian messianism is beholden to the Ḥabad view that the power of repentance reaches the source that is 'above the Torah and the commandments' (*lema'lah mi-torah u-miṣwot*), which is the 'matter of the Messiah'.<sup>170</sup> The insight is conveyed in more technical kabbalistic jargon that Levertoff derived from Ḥabad compositions:

The love of man to God which comes from the keeping of the Law is a love which proceeds from the 'outer side' of the heart but the love which the repentant sinner feels for God comes from within the heart. The 'sin-forgiving love' of God is said to come from the 'will of all wills,' that is, from the innermost sphere of God's heart, which is above His will that is revealed in the Law. This 'will of all wills' will be perfectly manifested in Messianic times.<sup>171</sup>

Building on the rabbinic sentiment that the sinner who repents stands in a higher position than the one who is completely righteous, Levertoff notes that the love that is correlated with obedience to the law is a lower form located in the exterior heart, whereas the love that is associated with forgiveness occasioned by repentance but 'independent of man's piety and good works'<sup>172</sup> is the higher form located in the interior heart, which is identified as the 'will of all wills,' a translation of the locution used in the *Idra Zuta* stratum of the

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 3, 167, 169, 171, 181, 182, 191, 200-201, 263, 274, 279-280, 284.

<sup>170</sup> Dov Baer Schneerson, *Sha'arei Orah*, Brooklyn 1997, 40a. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 55 and reference given on p. 322 n. 130. The hypernomian character of repentance is underscored in the observation of Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menaḥem: Hitwwa'aduyyot 5717*, Brooklyn 2001, 1:209, that even though repentance is 'above the Torah,' it is still 'elicited from the Torah'. A similar point is made in the passage from Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menaḥem: Hitwwa'aduyyot 5714*, Brooklyn 1999, 3:180-181, translated in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 180, and see analysis on p. 182.

<sup>171</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 44 (67-68). The passage is repeated verbatim in Paul Philip Levertoff, 'Jewish Mystical Thoughts on Repentance and Forgiveness,' *The Church and the Jews* 77 (1928), p. 9.

<sup>172</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 45 (68).

zoharic compilation, *ra'awa de-khol ra'awin*,<sup>173</sup> to name the dimension of the will positioned in the forehead of *Attiqa Qaddisha*, the highest configuration (*parşuf*) of the divine. It lies beyond the scope of this essay to enter into a lengthy discussion of the dense symbolism deployed in this section of the *Zohar*, but what is most relevant to our discussion is that the 'will of all wills' is an anthropomorphic designation of the unmitigated mercy of the Godhead, a mercy that is beyond the duality of pure and impure, which is essential to the constitution of the law. In Ḥabad sources, going back to Shneur Zalman of Liadi, this supernal aspect of the primordial will, that is, the pure willfulness as such (*raşon le-raşon*),<sup>174</sup> the 'elevation in thought' that there should be a 'will to create the worlds,' the 'disclosure of the aspect of the kingship of infinity' (*gilluy beḥinat malkhut de-ein sof*),<sup>175</sup> is identified variously as *Attiq*,<sup>176</sup> the 'incomposite will' (*raşon pashuṭ*) that is the 'interiority of Keter,'<sup>177</sup> and the 'essence of the infinite light' (*aşmut or ein sof*).<sup>178</sup> This 'source of all wills' (*maqor kol ha-reşonot*)<sup>179</sup> is higher than the 613 commandments, which are located in the skull of *Ze'eir Anpin*, a lower configuration—one can imagine this figuratively as the relation of the son to his father—for the supernal will is beyond the partition into left and right<sup>180</sup> and the dichotomy of good and evil (marked by the phrase *zeh le'ummat zeh* from Ecclesiastes 7:14), the division that is essential to the demeanor of the divine will as it expressed in the Torah,<sup>181</sup> and thus it has the power to transpose sinful acts into merit.<sup>182</sup> It follows that the efficacious way to draw the efflux from the higher manifestation is not through ritual performance but through the quietistic nullification of one's will (*biṭṭul raşon*) that is brought to fruition by

<sup>173</sup> *Zohar* 3:288b (Idra Zuta). The related expression *ra'awa de-ra'awin* occurs several times in the zoharic anthology: *Zohar* 2:88b, 176b (*Sifra di-Şeni'uta*), 253b; 3:129a, 137b (Idra Rabba), 288b, 290a (Idra Zuta).

<sup>174</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Torah Or*, 84a, 92b; idem, *Liqqutei Torah*, Devarim, 99c.

<sup>175</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Torah Or*, 92b.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 84a.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 106a.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 121a.

<sup>179</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Wayyiqra, 20d-21a.

<sup>180</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Shir ha-Shirim, 23c.

<sup>181</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Devarim, 22a. On the depiction of the Torah emerging from the 'supernal will,' the 'will of all wills,' see *ibid.*, Shir ha-Shirim, 23d.

<sup>182</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Ma'amerei Admor ha-Zaqen 5566*, Brooklyn 2005, 2:672.

repentance.<sup>183</sup> The inclination to repent is a ‘mysterious matter’ (*devar pele*) that arises from the illumination of *yeḥidah*, the highest facet of the soul allocated uniquely to the Jew, the ‘point of the heart’ (*nequddat ha-lev*), which is ‘above knowledge,’<sup>184</sup> the ‘source of every will, which is called the will for the will’.<sup>185</sup> Inasmuch as the Messiah is rooted in *yeḥidah*,<sup>186</sup> the essential and simple will above reason and intellect, the unity beyond all division and partition, it follows that repentance is the mode of worship best equipped to bring about the consciousness apposite to messianic enlightenment.<sup>187</sup> Liturgically, the most propitious moment (*et raṣon*) for the supernal will to be activated is on Sabbath at the time of the afternoon prayer (*minḥah*)<sup>188</sup> or on Yom Kippur at the time of *Ne’ilah*,<sup>189</sup> but these are portents of the future when the self-sacrifice (*mesirat nefesh*) of the superior form of repentance (*teshuvah illa’ah*) will trigger the complete and perfect salvation, and the ‘will of all wills,’ the aspect of *Keter* that is within *Keter*, the ‘concealed of all the

<sup>183</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Torah Or*, 35d.

<sup>184</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Devarim, 43d. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 48-49, 232, 292.

<sup>185</sup> Dov Baer Schneerson, *Sha’arei Teshuvah*, Brooklyn 1995, 29d. Compare the passage from Shneur Zalman of Liadi translated and analyzed in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>186</sup> For the earlier sources where the correlation between the Messiah and *yeḥidah* is made, see Ḥayyim Viṭal, *Sefer ha-Gilgulim*, Przemyśl 1875, ch. 60, 82b; *Liqqutei Torah*, Jerusalem 1995, p. 33 (ad Genesis 5:24); *Liqqutei ha-Shas me-ha-Ari z”l*, edited, with preface and notes, by Betsalel Senior, Jerusalem 2010, p. 66; Moses Zacuto, *Perush ha-ReMeZ la-Zohar ha-Qadosh: Sefer Devarim*, Jerusalem 2005, pp. 9-10.

<sup>187</sup> Wolfson *Open Secret*, pp. 8, 129, 183-184, 275, 367 n. 96. I have revisited this topic, substantiated by citation of some additional texts, in my ‘Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,’ *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 35 (2011), pp. 401-418, an abbreviated version of the much longer study ‘Revealing and Re/veiling Menahem Mendel’s Messianic Secret,’ *Kabbalah* 26 (2012), pp. 27-96.

<sup>188</sup> *Zohar* 2:88b, 3:129a (Idra Rabba), 288b (Idra Zuta). Regarding this zoharic tradition, see *Sod ha-Shabbat (The Mystery of the Sabbath) from the Tola’at Ya’aqov of R. Meir ibn Gabbai*, translated and with a critical commentary by Elliot K. Ginsburg, Albany 1989, p. 186 n. 449. The theme is repeated often in Ḥabad literature. For example, see Schneerson, *Sha’arei Teshuvah*, 130a; idem, *Torat Ḥayyim: Shemot*, Brooklyn 2003, 359b, 360c; Menahem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menahem: Hitwwa’aduyot 5717*, Brooklyn 2001, 2:108.

<sup>189</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Derushim le-Yom ha-Kippurim, 70b; idem, *Ma’amerei Admor ha-Zaqen 5566*, 2:672, 708.

concealed' (*setima de-khol setimin*),<sup>190</sup> which is outside the demarcation of space and time,<sup>191</sup> will be exposed in its essential hiddenness (*ha-he'lem ha-ašmi*). Levertoff alludes to this intricate Ḥabad teaching when he writes that repentance is a 'gift from God which proceeds from "the light of the upper countenance."' <sup>192</sup> Just as the Ḥabad masters juxtapose two talmudic traditions—redemption is dependent on repentance<sup>193</sup> and the Messiah is one of three things that will arrive serendipitously (*be-hessaḥ ha-da'at*)<sup>194</sup>—so Levertoff writes that repentance awakens spontaneously in the sinner like the Messiah who appears unexpectedly,<sup>195</sup> in a moment that cannot be measured chronoscopically, a moment that is inside time by being outside time.

*Messianic Torah, Hypernomian Transvaluation, and the Vision of God*

Levertoff begins the second chapter of *Love and the Messianic Age*, 'The Law and Love,' with the assertion, 'To the Hasid Scripture is full of spiritual truth'.<sup>196</sup> To substantiate the point, he refers to the Ḥabad depiction of the Hebrew letters of the holy writ as 'vehicles which bring to the upper and lower worlds life from the Divine centre'. The objective, then, is to become a 'living Tora,' for the 'keeping of the Law is ... only a means to an end—union with God'. Basing himself primarily on passages in Shneur Zalman of Liadi's *Liqqutei Torah*, which are freely paraphrased rather than literally cited, Levertoff argues that this end will only be effectuated in the messianic age 'when the divine mysteries hidden in the Law will be fully unfolded'.<sup>197</sup> The Torah is the 'revelation of God's will,' but the Ḥabad teaching that the *innermost secret* is known by God's *intimate friends*, the *true representatives of Israel*, is indicative of the fact that within the spectrum of 'Jewish traditional piety' one can find evidence for a 'more excellent way' (1 Corinthians 12:31)

<sup>190</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Torah Or*, 84b; see also 121a; idem, *Ma'amerei Admor ha-Zaqen 5566*, Brooklyn 2004, 1:424; Schneerson, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, 130c. In some passages, the variant expression *setimu de-khol setimin* (*Zohar* 2:161a) is used; see Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Derushim le-Ro'sh ha-Shanah, 56c.

<sup>191</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Bemidbar, 13b.

<sup>192</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 45 (68).

<sup>193</sup> See above, n. 167.

<sup>194</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a.

<sup>195</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 45 (68).

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17 (43).

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

than pure legalism.<sup>198</sup> The divine wisdom, which is ‘above human understanding’ and in which the vitality of God is ‘*enwrapped and hidden*,’<sup>199</sup> is identified as this ‘innermost secret,’ the ‘Law of Love’ that is ‘derived from the love of God’. Even though most Jews can attain this ‘high spiritual experience’ only ‘by unceasing effort and unquestioning obedience to the Law,’ the fact of the matter is that the wholehearted love of God is a state that is beyond the nomian compliance to the commandments, and hence those who experience it ‘*live in harmony with the Divine Will, independent of the Law*’.<sup>200</sup> The mandate to love God translates into the love for the divine essence that is in each human being, and this is valued more than the *outward keeping of the whole Law*, for while the function of the external law is to circumscribe boundaries by keeping the permissible and the forbidden separate, the telos of the internal law is the implementation of the limitless love that effaces these very boundaries.<sup>201</sup> Toward the end of the chapter, Levertoff takes it a step further by arguing that ‘the Messianic Age will bring not merely a revelation of the hidden meaning of the *old Law*, but a *new Revelation*’.<sup>202</sup> The phrase ‘new Revelation’ is plausibly Levertoff’s way of translating the Ḥabad notion of the ‘new teaching’ (*torah ḥadashah*) to be revealed by the Messiah.<sup>203</sup> The Mosaic and Messianic revelations are distinguished in the following parabolic way: the union achieved by the former is like that between the bride and bridegroom, whereas the union achieved by the latter is the more perfect union between husband and wife. Alternatively expressed, the Sinaitic revelation manifested the ‘outer side of the divine will,’ but in the days of the Messiah the ‘inner nature of God’ will be disclosed and humanity will be perfected.<sup>204</sup> Utilizing the formulation of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Levertoff concludes that we rejoice in the Law because it is the ‘revelation of God,’ but we experience delight<sup>205</sup>

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 19 (44-45).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 36 (60).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 20 (45), emphasis in original. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>201</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 21 (46).

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 22 (47).

<sup>203</sup> On the expression *torah ḥadashah*, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 171-172, 193-194, 370-371 n. 144.

<sup>204</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 23 (47-48).

<sup>205</sup> Levertoff’s use of the term ‘delight’ reflects the expression *ta’amug* in Ḥabad texts, the spiritual pleasure that is rooted in the boundless will of the infinite essence. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 94-95, 178, 340 n. 160, 375 n. 41, to which many more sources could be added. For discussion of *ta’amug* in Ḥasidism, see Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 133-140, 234-235; idem,

when the ‘deepest spiritual meaning,’ the ‘Divine mysteries of the Law,’ will be ‘unfolded by the Messiah, and we shall see God face to face’.<sup>206</sup>

The crucial thing to note is that there is no categorical rejection of the law here, but only an insistence on its deeper spiritual meaning and a warning of the danger that for some the fulfillment of the law becomes the end in itself rather than the means to an end. Indeed, Levertoff adopts another central idea of Ḥabad religious philosophy, first expressed by Shneur Zalman, although its roots are much older in the Jewish esoteric tradition: insofar as the Torah is one with God, it follows that the commandments, which reveal God’s will and wisdom, are the proper channel through which one can be united with the divine.<sup>207</sup> It is thus ‘not an exaggeration to speak of this conception of the Law, as the Jewish doctrine of the “real Presence”’.<sup>208</sup> By identifying the Torah as the Presence, the paths of Christianity and Ḥasidism crisscross. The extent to which the Law is not rejected is underscored by Levertoff’s explanation that the cloud that surrounded Moses, which sustained him for the forty days and nights that he was on Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, ‘is symbolical of the Law. It also emanates from God Himself and becomes Israel’s spiritual food, and, if they duly receive it, God’s will embodies itself in their thoughts, words, and deeds’.<sup>209</sup> The ‘innermost secret’ of the Torah exceeds the nomian prohibitions and obligations, but it does so not by negating them. Hasidism does promote a ‘more excellent way’<sup>210</sup> of ‘Jewish traditional piety’ than ‘Legalism,’<sup>211</sup> but the spiritual experience of love beyond the law—in the Ḥabad terminology used by Levertoff, the ‘Grace of Truth’ (*ḥesed di-qeshof*)<sup>212</sup>—is attained by obedience to the law and not by its abrogation. The

*Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 228–229; idem, ‘Ta’anug: Erotic Delights From Kabbalah to Hasidism,’ in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal, Leiden 2008, pp. 131–145.

<sup>206</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 34 (58). Compare Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 118–120.

<sup>207</sup> Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 59, 74–75, 145.

<sup>208</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 18 (44).

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19 (44).

<sup>210</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:31.

<sup>211</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 19 (45).

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23 (48), based on Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah*, Bemidbar, 51a-b.

messianic ideal, therefore, should be classified as hypernomian as opposed to antinomian.<sup>213</sup>

The knowledge that ensues from this love beyond the law is the vision of God, a knowledge that was accorded in the past exclusively to Moses, the first redeemer, but which serves as the potential to be accomplished by everyone in the future through the Messiah, the final redeemer.<sup>214</sup> For Levertoff the vision marks the essence of Jewish piety endorsed equally by Philo of Alexandria in Late Antiquity<sup>215</sup> and by the Ḥasidim in modern times: 'It is manifest that the knowledge of God which the Hasid thus seeks to cultivate is strictly speaking the knowledge of Him which belongs to the Messianic world to be<sup>216</sup>.... Then the knowledge of God will no longer be merely intellectual apprehension, but actual realisation in experience'.<sup>217</sup> Once again, we take note that Levertoff demonstrates an astute grasp of a salient feature of Ḥabad eschatology: the experience of seeing God is attained in the end, but the 'business' of the Ḥasid is 'to live for the realisation of this Messianic age' in the present.<sup>218</sup> On this score, ḥasidic piety is cast essentially in a soteriological light, but one that is more inward-spiritual than outward-political in its orientation.<sup>219</sup> Christianity

<sup>213</sup> On the hypernomian transvaluation of the Torah in Ḥabad messianism, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 55-56, 161-199.

<sup>214</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 3 (33). On the identification of Moses as the 'first redeemer' and the Messiah as the 'last redeemer,' see *ibid.*, p. 54 (76). For the importance of this topic in Ḥabad, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 17 and 311 n. 93, to which many more sources could have been added.

<sup>215</sup> See Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 3 n. 1 (32 n. 21), where the view of Richard Reitzenstein that Philo's term 'men of vision' (*oratikois andrasin*), which is applied to the allegorists, is borrowed from the ancient mystery cults is challenged. Philo, it will be recalled, famously rendered the etymology of Israel as the 'one who sees God,' which in Hebrew translates into *ish ra'ah el*, an apparently older play on words that is attested implicitly in some Gnostic texts from Late Antiquity and explicitly in at least one later midrashic compilation, *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah*. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 50, and references to primary and secondary sources cited there in nn. 158-162.

<sup>216</sup> In the more recent edition of the text (see following note for reference), the 'world to be' is changed to the more familiar expression 'world to come.'

<sup>217</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 4 (33-34).

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3 (32).

<sup>219</sup> Levertoff's interpretation of ḥasidic messianism as primarily spiritual as opposed to political is in accord with the position taken by a number of scholars, some of whom have even noted the resemblance of Ḥasidism and Christianity on this point. Particularly relevant is the debate between Scholem and Taubes. See Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, New Haven 1998, pp. 212-247, esp. 240-241, and my



and Ḥasidism join hands, so to speak, inasmuch as both seek to advance a 'Messianic consciousness' that engenders an inner transmutation of the spirit, an awakening of faith, and an obliteration of the will such that the giving of life culminates in death, which is the true life, for both master and disciple.<sup>220</sup>

own interventions in Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Immanuel Frommann's Commentary on Luke and the Christianizing of Kabbalah: Some Sabbatean and Hasidic Affinities,' in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe*, ed. Glenn Dynner, Detroit 2011, pp. 188-202. For reference to a number of other scholars who have weighed in on the issue of messianism in early Ḥasidism, see *ibid.*, pp. 213-215 nn. 128-131. Since the time of writing that essay, Idel has published several other studies on this topic of which I will mention two: 'Multiple Forms of Redemption in Kabbalah and Hasidism,' *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2011): 27-70, esp. 58-64, and 'Mystical Redemption and Messianism in R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov's Teachings,' *Kabbalah* 24 (2011), pp. 7-121. In the second study, a wide-ranging analysis, the matter of Christianity is mentioned in passing (for example, pp. 106, 115-116), but there is no sustained analysis of the relationship of messianism in Christianity and Ḥasidism.

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Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 56 (77-78). See *ibid.*, p. 52 n. 15 (75 n. 155), where Levertoff comments that the 'self-denial' in John 12:25, 'He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life,' applies 'not only to the disciples but also to the Master'. The leveling out of the difference between the two is also emblematic of Ḥabad teaching. See Yosef Yiṣḥaq Yosef Schneerson, *Liqqutei Dibburim*, vols. 1-2, Brooklyn 1990, pp. 69-70, where four types of relationship between master and disciple are delineated: (1) the master bestows (*mashpi'a*) and the disciple receives (*meqabbel*); (2) the state of bonding (*hitqashsherut*) and conjunction (*devequt*) resulting in the complete unity (*hitaḥadut*) of master and disciple by means of Torah and worship; (3) the master is likened to a father and the disciple to a son; and (4) the degree of bonding and unity, whereby one perfects the other, is compared to the relation of illumination (*ma'or*) and light (*or*). See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 293-294: 'The ultimate purpose of the study of the inner secrets of the Torah, in contrast to the study of the external meaning, is to bridge the chasm separating master and disciple, for the one who studies esoteric matters abrogates his own being and is bound thereby to the teacher's essence, even to the point that they become one entity'. See *ibid.*, p. 295: 'The charge of each Jew—men, women, and children are all included—is twofold, to bestow and to receive, and even in the matter of learning Torah the highest level of perfection is for the master (*rav*) to teach the disciple (*talmid*) to receive and to bestow, but this can only be accomplished if the master receives from the disciple even as he gives, since it is the nature of the master to transmit in the effort to diffuse the teaching and in the nature of the disciple to become as nothing in relation to the master so that the teaching will be transmitted'. On the undoing of the master-disciple hierarchy as part of the messianic agenda, see *ibid.*, pp. 297, 401-402 n. 136.

As I have noted previously, Levertoff's characterization of the parousia as a time when the visual knowledge, an experiential gnosis that results in the union of the soul and God, will proliferate also suggests a strong Ḥabad influence. Much like Shneur Zalman of Liadi and the other six masters of the Ḥabad-Lubavitch dynasty, Levertoff depicts the 'Messianic revelation' as 'more perfect than that of Sinai' because in the future instead of seeing through a 'mirrored reflection,' we will see reality as it is, and thus we will be privy to the 'knowledge of God's inner essence,' which 'is not attained by processes of rational thinking, but the cultivation of immediate fellowship with God under discipline to His Spirit'.<sup>221</sup> The knowledge of God's 'inner being'<sup>222</sup> is the love through which the self is assimilated into the divine unity, and thus Levertoff, making use of another overtly Ḥabad turn of phrase, remarks that the 'mystic marriage-joy' belongs to the 'Messianic times'.<sup>223</sup> The culminating moment, the envisioning of God without any intermediary, summons the reunification with the divine through the ingathering of the scattered sparks.<sup>224</sup> This restoration does not entail the eradication of the physical but its transfiguration, a metamorphosis that is formulated in ocular terms as a seeing clearly and without any obstruction. Levertoff found in the passages in Ḥabad literature that speak of the messianic vision an exact analogue to the language of Paul, 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12).<sup>225</sup> Perhaps even more germane to comprehending Levertoff's

<sup>221</sup> Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, p. 5 (34-35).

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6 (35).

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54 (76).

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42 (66).

<sup>225</sup> It is noteworthy that Levertoff ends *Love and the Messianic Age* by citing the entirety of 1 Corinthians 13, which he calls 'St. Paul's Hymn of Love.' As a number of scholars have noted, the distinction made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12 between seeing dimly and seeing face to face should be compared to the rabbinic tradition in Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 49b, where Moses is said to have had his vision through a translucent mirror and the other prophets through an opaque mirror. See also *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, ed. Mordecai Margulies, New York and Jerusalem 1993, 1:14, pp. 30-31, where two opinions are offered to explain the difference between Moses and the other prophets: according to R. Judah bar Ilai, all the prophets saw through nine mirrors and Moses saw through one mirror; according to the Rabbis, all the prophets saw through a tainted mirror and Moses saw through a polished mirror. On the connection between the Pauline and rabbinic sources, see Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, Munich 1926, vol. 3, p. 453; Brad H. Young, 'The Ascension Motif of 2 Corinthians 12 in Jewish, Christian, and

Christological reframing of Ḥabad eschatology is the verse where Paul speaks of those of the ‘unveiled face,’ who will behold the glory of the Lord (*tēn doxan kyriou*), and as a consequence, be transformed ‘into his image [*tēn autēn eikona*]’ (2 Corinthians 3:18). In contrast to Moses ‘who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor’ (ibid., 13)—a somewhat convoluted midrashic exposition of Exodus 34:33<sup>226</sup>—Christ helps the believer to lift the veil, so that the ‘old covenant’ will no longer be read through a barrier covering one’s mind (ibid., 14-15). Understandably, this chapter in the Pauline corpus has commanded much attention. Particular emphasis has been placed on the question of whether or not it portends the letter-spirit dichotomy that would ultimately evolve into an acrimonious oratory that divided Jewish and Christian exegetes.<sup>227</sup> This topic cannot be dealt with adequately in this study, but it is reasonable to conclude that Levertoff read these passages in such a way that Paul pit the hermeneutics centered on the literal against the hermeneutics that removes the veil of the letter so that the spirit—the eternal things that are unseen (2 Corinthians 4:18)—can be envisioned. To move from opacity to transparency there must a discarding of the veil. I note, however, that even in this context Paul speaks of beholding the glory as seeing an image in the mirror (*katoptrizomenoi*),<sup>228</sup> which we can assume means seeing the glory of Christ,<sup>229</sup> who is described

Gnostic Texts,’ *Grace Theological Journal* 9 (1988), pp. 84-85 n. 32; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 26 n. 69.

<sup>226</sup> See Morna D. Hooker, ‘Beyond the Things That Are Written? St. Paul’s Use of Scripture,’ *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981), p. 301; Jerome Murphy-O’Connor OP, *Paul: A Critical Life*, Oxford 1996, pp. 310-311; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Grand Rapids 1998, pp. 421-422; Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley 1994, pp. 101-103; Mehrdad Fatehi, *The Spirit’s Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul*, Tübingen 2000, pp. 275-308, esp. 289-302.

<sup>227</sup> Of the many studies that deal with this chapter in Paul, I offer a modest sampling: Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, pp. 147-150; Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, pp. 97-105; Karl Kertelge, ‘Letter and Spirit in 2 Corinthians,’ in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, Grand Rapids 2001, pp. 117-130; Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study*, Peabody 2007, pp. 174-185; Volker Rabens, *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life*, Tübingen 2010, pp. 174-203.

<sup>228</sup> See the detailed philological analysis in Rabens, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 178-182.

<sup>229</sup> John Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle*, New Haven 2000, pp. 136-137. For a comprehensive study of the Christophanic dimension of Pauline thought, see

unequivocally in the next chapter of 2 Corinthians as the 'icon of God' (4:4), an identification that informed the depiction of Jesus in Colossians 1:15 as the 'image of the invisible God [*eikōn tou theou tou aoratou*], the first-born of all creation' (1:15). On this reading, to behold the glory in the mirror signifies that the image of the invisible is apprehended through the speculum of the text, which further implies that, for those who have eyes to see, Scripture adumbrates the coming of the eschatological transformation.<sup>230</sup> Paul's exegesis is reminiscent of the rabbinic tradition that Moses saw God through a translucent mirror as opposed to all other prophets, who saw through an opaque mirror<sup>231</sup>—Moses, too, can only see the glory through a mirror; there is no direct vision. The unveiling of the veil, therefore, is a seeing of the veil through the veil, that is, seeing that there is no way to see but through a veil; even—indeed especially—matters unseen must be seen in a mirror/veil. Translated gnoseologically, the messianic vision bespeaks the discernment that the reality of the world is not separate from the divine, that nature is the embodiment of what is beyond nature. For Levertoff, the Word made flesh is the truest execution of the ḥasidic directive to materialize the spiritual by spiritualizing the material, to render the invisible visible by rendering the visible invisible.

Carey C. Newman, *Paul's Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric*, Leiden 1992.

<sup>230</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture*, Grand Rapids 2005, p. 120.

<sup>231</sup> See above, n. 225. The possible connection of Paul's discourse in 2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6 to visions of the glory in Jewish mysticism was noted by Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*, New Haven 1990, pp. 59-60, but he did not mention the talmudic tradition to which I have referred. See also Christopher Rowland, 'Things Into Which Angels Long to Look: Approaching Mysticism From the Perspective of the New Testament and the Jewish Apocalypses,' Christopher Rowland and Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament*, Leiden 2009, pp. 148-151.