

The Paradigms of *Yesh* and *Ayin* in Hasidic Thought

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THE social manifestations of late hasidism—its successes as a popular movement, the new patterns of communal organization that it created, as well as the overtly messianic orientation adopted by some hasidic circles in recent times—have all distracted scholarly attention from the early conceptual foundation of the hasidic experience.

Hasidism is a complex phenomenon, marked by extraordinary literary diversity, a wide variety of social expressions, and a history which spans two and a half centuries. It does not lend itself to general characterization or definition. Nevertheless, certain shared conceptual patterns can be shown to have served as a premiss underlying diverse strands of hasidic thought.

The present discussion focuses on the final decades of the eighteenth century. This was a period of rapid expansion for hasidism, with hasidic leaders reaching out to a wider audience not least through the publication and dissemination of the earliest formulations of hasidic ideas in writing.

At the core of hasidic thought lies the idea of the dual nature of reality. The two contradictory aspects of all existence are bound to one another dialectically.¹ This duality applies to all dimensions of reality and mirrors the perception of the deity as a dialectic unity of oppositions.

The deity is perceived as a dialectic process of reversible and variable opposites. This unity of opposites is expressed in pairs of contradictory concepts: 'expansion and limitation', 'emanation and withdrawal', 'revelation and concealment', 'creation and annihilation', 'unity and differentiation', 'being and non-being', '*yesh* and *ayin*'.² All these concepts clearly derive from the kabbalistic heritage of hasidism.³ But while the kabbalistic interest in dialectic opposites relates only to the heavenly realm, the new

¹ The two aspects of reality are referred to by a variety of designations: *yesh* and *ayin*, *higpashetur* and *hishtaketur*, matter and form, the active and the passive, etc. See Dov Ber of Mezhirech, *Maggid devarav le Ya'akov*, critical edn. by R. Schatz-Uffenheimer (Jerusalem, 1976), 108. 'It is well known that everything has both matter and form', see also *ibid.* 150. See further Solomon of Lusk, *Divrei Shelomo* (Jerusalem, 1972), 60-3.

² S. B. Levine (ed.), *Igrot kedush Ahmor hazakim, Ahmor ha'emisai'i, Ahmor ha'Temah Tzedek* (Brooklyn, NY, 1980), 173: 'It is well known that every holy thing consists of both facets'; see also *Maggid devarav le Ya'akov*, s. 124.

³ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1964), 23, 217-24, 261-3.

hasidic concern encompasses all aspects of reality. The principles of *yesh* and *ayin* are thus projected in hasidism from the domain of the Godhead onto the domain of religious awareness and divine service.⁴

The concern with these dialectical processes has found diverse expression and emphasis in hasidism. The Maggid of Mezhirech, for example, was concerned primarily with the mutual transformations of the two poles.⁵ Bratislav hasidism expressed the tragic dimension of the paradox.⁶ Habad is more concerned with the dialectical movement between *yesh* and *ayin*.⁷ Polish hasidism has highlighted the embodiment of the opposites in the figure of the zaddik.⁸ Whether the emphasis was placed on the Cordoverian tension between revelation and concealment or on the Lurianic dichotomy of transcendence and immanence,⁹ many hasidic authors have grappled with the ambivalence of the divine dialectics, and most have had to address the complex contradiction between *yesh* and *ayin*.

The hasidic concern with these concepts was expressed in traditional kabbalistic terms. This is evident, for example, in R. Nahman of Bratslav's Lurianically inspired account of Creation:

When God, blessed be He, wanted to create the world, there was no space in which to create it, for everywhere there was infinite God. Therefore, God withdrew His light to the sides, and by means of this withdrawal, the empty space was created. . . . This *tsimsum* of the empty space cannot be understood or grasped until the messianic future, for two contradictory statements must be made about it—it is being (*yesh*) and it is non-being (*ayin*).¹⁰

In this and the many similar statements which occur throughout the literature of hasidism, the deity is presented as possessed of two opposite but interrelated aspects.

⁴ See H. Zeitlin, *B'gardes hakhasidim* (Tel Aviv, 1965), 11–25. Zeitlin noted the centrality of the concepts of *yesh* and *ayin* in hasidic thought. See also Menahem Mendel of Vitsebsk, *Peri ha arets* [Kopys, 1814] (Jerusalem, 1974), 57. See further A. Green, 'Neo-Hasidism and our Theological Struggle', *Rad'ayonot*, 4: 3 (1984), 13. 'This primal pair, the potential and the actual, or non-being and being, is the essential *yesh* of Hasidic Mysticism. The realization of their oneness, the realization that *yesh* is *ayin* and *ayin* is *yesh* is the essential goal of mystical awareness.'

⁵ See *Maggid devarav leYa'akov*, 19, 24, 38, 83–6, 91, 94, 124, 134, and the comments of R. Schatz-Uffenheimer ad loc. See also Meshullam Phoebus Heller of Zbarazh, *Yosher divrei emet* (New York, 1974), 144–154; Menahem Mendel of Vitsebsk, *Peri ha arets*, 51–2, 72.

⁶ See J. G. Weiss, *Melkharim hakhasidim Bratislav* (Jerusalem, 1974), 121–5.

⁷ See R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Tora'ot* or [Kopys, 1836; Zhitomir, 1862] (Brooklyn, NY, 1984), on 'Bereshit', 52, on 'Va'era', 57a, id., *Likutei amaran: Tanya* [Shavua, 1796; Vilna, 1900], bilingual edn., trans. N. Mindel, N. Mangel, Z. Posner, and J. I. Schochet (London, 1973), 'Shar ha'yinud', ch. 3, 78a; ch. 4, 79a–7; 'Ge'eret hakodesh', 129a–b. See also R. Elior, *Tora'at ha'elohi hador hasidim: shet hasidim Habad* (Jerusalem, 1982), 125–30, and also index entries on *ayin* and *yesh*, id., 'Habad: The Contemplative Ascent to God', in A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality, II: From the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present* (New York, 1987), 157–205.

⁸ See R. Elior, 'Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*: The Doctrine of the Zaddik in the Works of Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin', in A. Rapoport-Albert and S. J. Zipporstein (eds.), *Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Chaim Abramsky* (London, 1988), 393–455.

⁹ On the question of the relationship between *kabbalah* and hasidism see A. Green, 'Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat', in P. Berger (ed.), *The Other Side of God: A Polarity in World Religions* (New York, 1981), 110–13. R. Elior, 'Hazikah shechein kabalah lahasidut: Reifusit u'emurah', *The Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1986), 107–14.

¹⁰ See Nahman of Bratslav, *Likutei Moharan* [2 vols.; Ostrog, 1808; Mogilev, 1811] (1 vol.; Jerusalem, 1969), part 1, *torah* 64, start of s. 1. This subject has been discussed extensively by a number of Bratislav scholars; see below, n. 24.

The first is limitless 'thought', boundless expansion or 'infinity', which is beyond human comprehension; it is the ultimate unity and formlessness of God, the expansive principle, usually referred to as *ayin*.¹¹ The second aspect is the divine principle of form and limit; it suggests differentiation, contraction, and withdrawal within the divinity. This includes material creation and is referred to as *yesh* or *simstam*.¹²

These two aspects precondition and complement each other: the perceptible attributes of the material *yesh* are rooted in the imperceptible divine *ayin* from which they derive their very existence and sustenance.¹³ Similarly, the divine *ayin* cannot manifest itself or be perceived without being limited or concealed in the material *yesh*.¹⁴ R. Levi Isaac of Berdichev expressed this idea as the principle whereby all things exist in two dimensions, one perceptible, within nature, and the other concealed, beyond nature. He stated: '*Ayin* is the way in which all things are maintained beyond nature, and *yesh* is the way that nature is . . . since the imperceptible is implied in *ayin* and the perceptible is implied in *yesh*.'¹⁵

These two dimensions, which are inherent in the nature of the divine, operate as a dynamic unity of opposites. On the one hand, the divine process unfolds through concealment and disguise from the state of unity, expansion, and abstraction towards differentiation, contraction, and the creation of the mundane; in other words, *ayin* is transformed through concealment into *yesh*. On the other hand, the process is reversed to convert *yesh* into *ayin*, to return to a state of unity and simplicity through the annihilation of differentiation and complexity, of material existence and mundane reality.¹⁶ In the words of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady: 'The purpose of the creation of the worlds from *ayin* into *yesh* is to reverse them from *yesh* into *ayin*.'¹⁷

The polarity of *yesh* and *ayin* is known from earlier kabbalistic sources, but only in hasidic thought is it deployed as a conceptual framework for the interpretation of every aspect of reality. This occurs in conjunction with the formulation of another principle, whereby every manifestation of reality which is finite and apparent is a concealment of that which is infinite and real. In other words, every apparent *yesh* contains a concealed *ayin*, and thus all things embody the two opposite poles of existence simultaneously. Consequently, all reality may be understood as an infinite divine essence enveloped within a finite, concrete 'garment'. In the words of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk: 'It is known to those who believe in the divine vitality and the holy sparks that all things

¹¹ For the historical context of the concept of *ayin* see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 25, 217, 221; see also D. C. Meir, 'Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Mystical Judaism', *Tikkun* 3: 3 (1988), 43-7; Y. Liebes, 'Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Use of the *Séfer Yesirah* and a Commentary on the Poem 'Love Thee' (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 6: 3-4 (1987), 80-4. On the concept of *ayin* in hasidic literature see R. Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidic kemistich* (Jerusalem, 1968), 22-31, 45; Elior, *Torat ha'elohim*, 48-51 and index entries on *ayin*.

¹² See Shneur Zalman, *Tanya*, 129a-130d; Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Pri ha'ariz*, on 'Vayigash', 31; on 'Tetsavah', 57; *Dvurai Shidmoo*, on 'Va'era', 63; R. Hayyim Hakel b. Samuel of Amdur, *Hajim zekhed* [Warsaw, 1891] (Jerusalem, 1975), 84, 88.

¹³ See *Maggid deavaiv leYa'akov*, 101. See also Shneur Zalman, *Tanya*, 26a; 'Sha'ar hayihud', 86a-8; Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Pri ha'ariz*, 44, 48.

¹⁴ Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Pri ha'ariz*, 54-5.

¹⁵ *Kedushat Levi* [Slavuta, 1798] (Jerusalem, 1958; Brooklyn, NY, 1978), 1.

¹⁶ See Elior, 'Habbad: The Contemplative Ascent', 168-9.

¹⁷ *Torat or*, on 'Vayese', 22b.

material and all thought, words, and expressions derive from God who dwells within them in reality . . . and without His presence, nothing can exist.¹⁸ The same idea is expressed in the common hasidic dictum: 'One should think at all times that all things of this world are filled with the divine expansion.'¹⁹

In hasidic thought there is no infinite, spiritual reality other than that which is concealed within a finite, concrete manifestation. Conversely, there is no finite, concrete reality other than that which is nurtured and sustained by the infinite, spiritual source of all existence.

The perception of the infinite divine substance as being the vital force which sustains all finite reality, and the depiction of the mundane world as a veil which obscures the infinitely expanding vitality of the divine—these are the principles underlying the hasidic doctrine of immanence.²⁰ However, it should be noted that the doctrine of immanence itself is deduced from the principle of the dynamic unity of opposites within the Godhead, the world, and man. In hasidic thought everything simultaneously incorporates both *yesh* and *ayin*, *ratsv vashov*, ascent and descent, apparent limitation and infinite expansion in reality. Since there can be no revelation of the spiritual vitality of the divine except by means of concealment, the material cannot exist except inasmuch as it is being sustained and nurtured by its spiritual source.

These two poles of the divine force are equally valued, since both dictate the dialectic rhythm of the flow of divine energy. However, once projected onto human reality and religious experience, they are ascribed somewhat different values.

The substantial duality of the divine expressed in the dynamic polarity of expansion and withdrawal, annihilation and creation, *ratsv vashov*, is altered in human perception to become an apparently static polarity of 'inwardness' and 'outwardness', holiness and evil (*kedushah* and *keitivah*), spirituality and materiality, all of which amount to a reality perceived as devoid of divine presence alternating with an attainable reality, saturated with the divine presence. The 'inwardness' relates to immanence—the sense of immediate divine presence, while the 'outwardness' expresses the sense of transcendence—the withdrawal and unattainability of God.²¹

This paradox is articulated clearly in the introduction to R. Solomon of Lutsk's *Divrei Shelomo*: 'In all things there is divine vitality . . . However, it is . . . veiled and materialized within the husks of corporeality, and it is called *sitra ahra*.'²²

The conflict between the immanentist perception of divine omnipresence and the common human experience of a world devoid of God determines the paradoxical

¹⁸ *Peri ha'aratz*, 68. See also Solomon of Lutsk, *Divrei Shelomo*, 2, 47: 'Even those who appear utterly mundane . . . all are spirituality and the illumination of His divine light.' Concerning the ambivalence of appearance, see R. Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hahasidut kemisrah*, 156.

¹⁹ Solomon of Lutsk, *Divrei Shelomo*, part 2, p. 45. See also *Tsavot var haRishon* [n.p. (Ostrog?)], 1793; Zolkiew, 1795], ed. J. I. Schochet (Brooklyn, NY, 1975), 26, s. 84.

²⁰ On the hasidic theory of divine immanence see Solomon Schnecher, *Studies in Judaism* (3 vols.; Philadelphia, 1896–1924), I, 19–21; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 336–47; I. Tishby and J. Dan, 'Torat haHasidim vesifrutah', *Hebrew Encyclopaedia*, xvii (1965), 769–821 (repr. as a pamphlet by Academic Press, Jerusalem, and in A. Rubinstein (ed.), *Praktim beTorat haHasidim veteledoteichah* (Jerusalem, 1977), 230–312); Elior, *Hazkiah*, 108–10.

²¹ See Elior, 'HABAD: The Contemplative Ascent', 170.

²² *Divrei Shelomo*, on 'Leikh lekha', 4; on 'Mikets' 24. For the distinction between 'inwardness' and 'outwardness' see *Maggid devarav le'Yaakov*, 29, 45; *Torah Or*, 102a.

nature of the hasidic consciousness. Awareness of this conflict demands constant attention to the relationship between *yesh* and *ayin*, between the apparent withdrawal and actual flow of divine abundance, in defiance of the evidence of sensual experience.²³

R. Nahman of Bratslav states the problem succinctly in his discussion of the conflict between the 'empty space'—reality devoid of God—and the sense of divine omnipresence:

Now, without this empty space there could be no world, as there would be no room for creation at all. This *ismisum* of the empty space cannot be understood or grasped until the messianic future, for two contradictory statements must be made about it, it is being (*yesh*) and it is non-being (*ayin*). For the empty space comes about through *ismisum*, through God's withdrawal of Himself from there. There is, as it were, no God there. For if this were not so, there would be no *ismisum*, all would be infinite God and there would be no place for the creation of the world at all. But in truth, God must be there as well—for there is nothing at all without His life in it. And that is why the empty space will not be understood until the messianic future.²⁴

The ontological principles of expansion and withdrawal in kabbalah are turned in hasidic thought into the paradox of immanence and transcendence as the two conflicting modes of human perception. Immanence—reality saturated with divinity—is alien to human sensory perception; transcendence, understood as withdrawal and abandonment—reality devoid of God—is all that man can experience. Human experience is confined to the realm of the mundane *yesh*.²⁵

In confronting this paradox, the hasidic masters employed the concepts of 'inwardness' and 'outwardness' to express the dual nature of all existence. Outwardness—the *yesh*—refers to material reality and corresponds to sensory experience, also known as the 'Eyes of Flesh'. Inwardness—the *ayin*—refers to the absolute reality of the divine presence and corresponds to spiritual, contemplative, or mystical insight, also known as the 'Eyes of the Mind'.²⁶

To be a hasid is to confront these two dimensions of being and to understand that the contradiction between them is only apparent. Since the principles of *yesh* and *ayin* are reversible in the divine realm, inasmuch as *ayin* becomes *yesh* and *yesh* becomes *ayin*, human consciousness should follow the same course and convert the apparent 'outwardness'—reality devoid of divinity—into 'inwardness'—a world saturated with the flow of divine abundance.²⁷ 'Inwardness' is the object of contemplation, mystical communion, and spiritual exaltation,²⁸ while 'outwardness' is addressed with equanimity, through the

²³ Meshulam Phcebus Heller of Zbarazh, *Yosher divrei emet*, 19, end of s. 23: 'For this person, the whole world is filled with His glory . . . for those who do not fall into this category, God forbid, the world is seen as being empty and devoid of His divine presence.'

²⁴ *Likutei Moharan*, part 1, *torah* 64, s. 1. For an analysis of this passage see Weiss, *Mekharim*, 123–4; A. Green, *Tornitzed Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University of Alabama Press, 1979), app. A, A. Rapoport-Albert, 'God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship', *History of Religions*, 18: 4 (1979), 323–5.

²⁵ See Weiss, *Mekharim*, 123–7; Tishby and Dan, 'Hasidut', 779; Ellior, 'Hazikah', 112.

²⁶ See *Maggid decurav le Ya'akov*, 124. On the 'Eyes of the Flesh' see Levine, *Igrat kodesh*, 229; Shneur Zalman, *Tanya*, part 2, ch. 3.

²⁷ Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha'arits*, 45; *Maggid decurav le Ya'akov*, 124; cf. Hayyim Haikel of Andur, *Hayim uhased*, 17.

²⁸ For these concepts in hasidic thought see M. Buber, *Begfares habasidai* (Tel Aviv, 1945); Tishby and Dan, 'Hasidut', 803; Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hahassidut kemistibah*, index, s.v. *hibonenuti, devekuti, hitlahavuti*; Ellior, *Torai ha'elohai*, index, s.v. *hibonenuti* and *hasagah*.

annihilation of material existence, the nullification of the *yesh*.²⁹ The hasidic attitude to 'outwardness' has been stated in unequivocal terms: 'One must pay no attention to corporeality but only to "inwardness"'.³⁰ 'One should not observe worldly matters or consider them at all in order to separate oneself from profane worldliness.'³¹ 'One should consider oneself as not being, meaning that one should think oneself not of this world.'³² The relationship to 'inwardness' or *ayin* has been stated equally clearly: 'It should always be maintained in thought and emotion, and truly grasped by the mind, that one's eyes are perceiving nothing other than the revelation of the deity.'³³ 'The purpose of Torah, wisdom, thought, speech, and action is to attain *ayin* and non-being, to achieve self-abnegation.'³⁴

Hasidic writings are replete with statements of this kind negating human sensory experience and denying the reality of independent existence outside God. Corporeality must be perceived as a manifestation of divine substance or it is said to lack autonomous existence and is considered an illusion, a misrepresentation of reality, a lie, defilement, or void. R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady argued: 'Even if we perceive the world as "being", it is an absolute lie.'³⁵

Hasidic literature severely rebukes all those who take the world to be a one-dimensional, independent material entity. It invites them to focus their attention on the hidden divine dimension of material reality, the expansion which exists beyond withdrawal, and to transform *yesh* into *ayin*.³⁶

The transformative principles which govern the divine processes are thus applied to human thought: the material may be transformed into the spiritual, the evil 'husks' into holiness, and the energy of the *sitra ahra* into divine vitality, since all these contradictory possibilities are inherent in their nature.³⁷ The Maggid of Mezhrach claims: 'The purpose of creating man is for him to elevate the worlds to their roof, that is, he restores them to a state of non-being (*ayin*).'³⁸

And R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk states: 'The sole purpose of human existence and the aim of man's creation is to elevate all things from down below upward, to subject outwardness to inwardness, to discover His divinity, blessed be He, in all things, and there is no place devoid of Him.'³⁹

Hasidic endeavour is directed to this end: the conscious passage from an inherently

²⁹ For the concept of *hishlutavut* see below, n. 43; for *hivul hayesh* see J. Weiss, 'Yea Passiva in Early Hasidism', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, ii (1960), 137–55; repr. in id., *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford, 1985), 69–94; Eilior, *Torat ha'elohim*, 178–243.

³⁰ Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha'arits*, Letters, p. 6.

³¹ Hayyim Hakel of Amdur, *Hayyim vakhosed*, 60, s. 122; cf. *Taruv'at haRibash*, 2, s. 5.

³² *Taruv'at haRibash*, 9, s. 53.

³³ Shneur Zalman, *Torah or*, on 'Mishpatim', 79a.

³⁴ Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha'arits*, letter of Abraham Hacothen of Kalisk (seventh letter, unpaginated).

³⁵ Shneur Zalman, *Torah or*, on 'Ki Tisa', 86b; Solomon of Lursk, *Divrei Shelomo*, on 'Vayishlah', 20; Dov Ber of Mezhrach, *Maggid devarav leY'akov*, 80. See also Hayyim Hakel of Amdur, *Hayyim vakhosed*, 21: 'Because this world is lie, extremely loathsome, and it is as nothing.'

³⁶ See Green, 'Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat', 114; cf. Dov Ber of Mezhrach, *Maggid devarav leY'akov*, 153, end of s. 87; Hayyim Hakel of Amdur, *Hayyim vakhosed*, 63, 138.

³⁷ See Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha'arits*, on Korah', 92; Solomon of Lursk, *Divrei Shelomo*, on 'Shemot', 54. ³⁸ *Maggid devarav leY'akov*, 109, s. 66. ³⁹ *Peri ha'arits*, on 'Vayigash', 35.

limited experience of the *yesh* into the ultimate realization of *ayin*. Hasidic worship is a call to unveil the spiritual root of all concrete things and to engage in the transformative process that unites the finite and the infinite. Thus, 'inwardness' is to be sought within 'outwardness', the divine soul beyond the animal soul, *ayin*—the unlimited flow of divine spirit—beyond *ani*—the sense of self or the restrictive material configuration of *ayin*, expansion beyond withdrawal, and the divine beyond the human.⁴⁰ This is also the main object of hasidic contemplation, which seeks to penetrate through apparent reality into its true essence, to attain the spiritual consciousness that 'the *ayin* is the essence and the *yesh* is inferior'.⁴¹

This transformation of human awareness is known as *bitul hayesh*, *hafshtat hagashmiyut*, *berur*, *hibonenut*, *ha'atakeh*, or *hazzazah*, and it requires a conscious rejection of material reality.⁴² Thus, the hasidic ethos is based on indifference to mundane existence and earthly concerns, a state which conditions the conversion of sensory perception into the illuminated consciousness of the *ayin*.⁴³ R. Solomon of Lutsck describes this process as follows:

As a person acquires illuminated consciousness and comes to possess 'Eyes of the Mind', even if the visible spark which is perceived through the 'Eyes of Flesh' is very small, when one strips the spark of its enveloping corporeality one must imagine that it is nothing other than divine vitality drawn from its supernal root; then, surely, its light and vitality are infinitely magnified since, by virtue of its spirituality and vital force, one cleaves to the source and beholds the divine root and origin of all things.⁴⁴

Materiality and empirical reality are viewed as devoid of all validity, lacking substance and meaning, since the unattainable *ayin* has become the only meaningful dimension of being. This reversal of the laws governing human perception is the core of the matter. However, ecstatic transformation or illuminated perception is not easily achieved, and the great difficulties which it presents are often recounted in hasidic writings.

The hasidic masters were fully aware of the disparity between their perception of the universe as God-filled and the human experience of God's transcendence and inaccessibility.⁴⁵ They explained this disparity as arising from the fact that the human

⁴⁰ See Elior, *Torat ha'elohim*, 121–243; Weiss, *Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, 47–83, 142–54.

⁴¹ Shneur Zalman, *Torah or*, on 'Vayehi', 102a.

⁴² For a hasidic formulation of this idea, see S. B. Levine (ed.), *Igrot kedosh: Kuntrus miluim* (Brooklyn, NY, 1981), 11 ff.: 'The essence of divine worship is to divert oneself of human sensual perception in order to perceive the true and unconcealed reality. . . . Believe me, in truth, since this is the beginning of all worship, to be removed and to transcend one's place. . . . the essence is contemplation. . . . the main thing is to nullify one's place.' Cf. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha'ariz*, 9: 'When one becomes accustomed to contemplating God in such a manner, one may transcend nature'; cf. pp. 75–6; Meshulam Phoebus Heller, *Yosher divrei emet*, 1, 12; Dov Ber of Mezhritch, *Maggid denarov le'Ya'akov*, 186; Shneur Zalman, *Tanya*, ch. 33, 41b; ch. 59, 70b.

⁴³ On 'indifference' or 'equanimity' (*hishtavut*) see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 96–7, 372; Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hahaskidai kemistibah*, 104; Mart, 'Ayin', 46–7; cf. Hayyim Hakkel of Andur, *Hayyim va'itsed*, 2, 96–7; *Tava'at ha'Rivash*, ss. 2, 4, 9, 10.

⁴⁴ *Maggid denarov le'Ya'akov*, introd. p. 6.

⁴⁵ Menahem Mendel, *Peri ha'ariz*, Letters, 9; on 'V'ayeseh', 21; cf. Shneur Zalman, *Tanya*, ch. 17, 22b: 'With the above in mind, one can understand the scriptural text, "But the thing is very high unto thee." At first glance, the statement that "the thing is very high unto thee. . . . in thy heart" seems to be contrary to our experience. For it is not a "very high thing" to change one's heart from mundane desires to a sincere love of God.' Cf. the references cited above in n. 24.

senses can perceive only the material reality of *yesh* but cannot respond to the challenge of detecting its hidden divinity in *ayin*. Therefore, the thrust of all their endeavours was to clarify and define the true relationship between *yesh* and *ayin*.

Many hasidic works are concerned with the denial of sensual experience, the renunciation of any consciousness of autonomous existence, and the invalidation of corporeality in order to acquire the 'Eyes of the Mind' with which to grasp the dual nature of reality.

An anonymous letter of Habad provenance reflects an acute awareness of the disparity between, on the one hand, the hasidic axiom whereby a spiritual truth lies beyond every sensory 'illusion', and, on the other hand, the reality of the material world as it is encountered in daily life:

Truly, the essence of perception is in the knowledge which unites the mind and the heart within the sense of *ayin* . . . since truly all things are but naught and nothing . . . But on account of our worldly habit of seeing only coarse materiality, and our inability to observe anything other than the material aspect of those things which conceal and disguise and deny the truth, on account of the encasement of the divine we imagine [the material aspect] to have substance. . . .

The essence of divine worship is to divest oneself of human sensual perception in order to perceive the true, unconcealed reality . . . that is, to accustom oneself to the contemplation of the enlivening spirituality . . . And the main attainment is [to grasp] that all reality and its diverse manifestations is *ayin*. This is the starting point of divine worship, but alas, what can I do on your behalf? I cannot show you how to perceive the *ayin* . . . and believe me, the starting point of divine worship is to be removed from and to transcend one's place. But alas, what can I do? You are not accustomed to beholding the heavens but only the earth below . . . while the main point is to abnegate the self.⁴⁶

It is evident that the author of the letter was fully aware of the difficulty of teaching his followers how to see with the 'Eyes of the Mind': 'Truly you are *not* accustomed to this kind of perception but only to human perception which grasps by means of the profane material senses.'⁴⁷

The hasidic leadership encountered great difficulties in its attempt to transmit to a wider public this peculiar understanding of the relationship between *ayin* and *yesh* as developed by the early founders of hasidism who were, after all, endowed with special spiritual insight.⁴⁸ One cannot compare the ecstatic atmosphere which marks the circle of the Baal Shem Tov or the profound mystical orientation of the school of the Maggid with the popular spirituality of the masses who would later affiliate themselves with the flourishing hasidic community.⁴⁹ The new recruits were neither mystics nor pneumatics. They were perplexed by the notion of divine omnipresence and the requirement to perceive the *ayin* through the *yesh*.

⁴⁶ The letter was published from manuscript in Levine, *Igrot kodesh, Kunteres mitum*, 10-12, and ascribed to R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady on the basis of a number of manuscript traditions. However, the same letter is ascribed to R. Aaron Halevi of Starosielce in *Avodat halevi* [2 vols.; Lambert, 1848-62 (1); 1866 (II)] (Jerusalem, 1972), part 3, 97b. Cf. *He'arot urc urim*, 1 (Brooklyn, NY, 1983), on 'Bo', 21, s. 6.

⁴⁷ Levine, *Igrot kodesh, Kunteres mitum*, 10.

⁴⁸ This is evident from such deliberations as are introduced by phrases like: 'And if you ask what is the way by which to attain the *ayin* . . .?' (e.g. Levine, *Igrot kodesh*, 11).

⁴⁹ On the profound mystical orientation of the school of the Maggid see the description in Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon*, trans. J. Clark Murray (London, 1954), 166-79.

Hasidic works dating from this period of expansion contain many expressions of doubt as to the feasibility of transmitting the denial of sensory experience in favour of a mystical, contemplative spiritualization of reality.⁵⁰ The pastoral letters of the leaders to their newly formed communities, the introductions to their books, and other literary sources all testify to these doubts regarding the spiritual capabilities of the masses.⁵¹ It seems that neither by correspondence nor by direct instruction, neither by literary tracts and treatises nor by extensive discussion in homiletic works setting out the demands of hasidic worship, could the hasidic leaders allay these doubts or resolve the difficulties experienced by those who sought the *ayin* and encountered only the *yesh*.

The only solution to the problem so tragically expressed by the exclamation 'what can I do on your behalf? I cannot show you how to perceive the *ayin*' was to present the zaddik himself as proof that the divine is present in material reality.⁵² The zaddik embodies the duality which underlies the whole of hasidic thought: he expresses the unity of *yesh* and *ayin* and mirrors the divine unity of opposites.⁵³

R. Solomon of Lusk defined the zaddik as follows:

He is known as zaddik, through whom the divine bounty and vitality are drawn down, and he concentrates the glory of God, blessed be He, in this world; through him, God's divinity will be revealed in this world. In other words, through the zaddik, it becomes known that God is immanent throughout the world . . . In principle, the zaddik must know and reveal all this, namely that God animates and creates all things so that His kingdom and dominion will be revealed in this world.⁵⁴

The ability to reveal God's immanence despite the veils of corporeality and the limitation of sensory perception, to demonstrate the divine presence by means of signs

⁵⁰ On stages in the process of communicating these hasidic ideals see T. Loewenthal, 'Early Hasidic Teachings: Esoteric Mysticism or a Medium of Communal Leadership?', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 37 (1986), 58–66; I. Etkes, 'Dario shel R. Shine'ur Zalman mil'adi kema'ning shel hasidim', *Zion*, 50 (1985), 321–2, 332–3. For an acknowledgement of the difficulties see Levine, *Ifrat kedush*, 116–262, 263; cf. Meshullam Pincobus Heller, *Yaher divrei emet*, 20: 'the divestment of corporeality . . . is not clearly understood by everybody.'

⁵¹ A number of letters as well as the introductions to the *Tract on Estuary* and the *Tract on Contemplation* by Dov Ber, the Mitzeler Rebbe, attest to this confusion. See R. Elior, 'Hama'halaket al moreshet Habad', *Tarbiz*, 49 (1980), 166–86; the literature of the Habad circle is replete with discussions of this topic, but there is little doubt that the problem was shared by all the hasidic circles that attempted to transmit the mystical ideals of hasidism to a large following.

⁵² The literature on the concept of the zaddik is extensive. See Scholten, *Major Trends*, 337–47; id., 'Hassidat', in *Pirkei yeshot be'khamot hakabalat usmalei'iah* (Jerusalem, 1976), 213–58, pub. in Eng. as 'The Righteous One', in id., *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York, 1991), 88–139; S. Dresner, *The Zaddik* (New York, 1960), 113–222; J. Weiss, 'Reshit seemhatah shel haderekh hakasidit', *Zion*, 16 (1951), 365–78, repr. in Rubinstein (ed.), *Pirkeim be'orot hakasidut*, 122–81; Rapoport-Albert, 'God and the Zaddik', 206–325; A. Green, 'The Zaddik as *Arts Mundi* in Later Judaism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 45 (1977), 327–47; Tishby and Dan, 'Hasidut', 779–83; S. Ettlinger, 'The Hasidic Movement: Reality and Ideals', in H. H. Ben-Sasson and S. Ettlinger (eds.), *Jewish Society through the Ages* (New York, 1971), 251–66, orig. pub. in *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale: Journal of World History*, 11: 1–2 (1968), 251–66, repr. in G. D. Hundert (ed.), *Essential Papers on Hasidism* (New York, 1991), 226–43; Elior, 'Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*'.

⁵³ See the interesting statement by R. Hayyim Haikel of Amdur: 'It should be well known to you that the zaddik is beyond the nature of the world' (*Hayyim va'hesed*, 16); cf. Elior, 'Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*', 414–24.

⁵⁴ See *Divrei Shelomo*, 'Mikets', 33; cf. *Pari ha'aritz*, on 'Le'et le'kha', 4; *Hayyim va'hesed*, 'Vayeshvev', 25.

and miracles, defies all the conflicting evidence to the effect that reality is seemingly devoid of God.⁵⁵ As the introduction to *Maggid devarav leYa'akov* states explicitly: 'I wrote all this in order that all should know that even in this bitter exile, in this defiled country, God has not abandoned us!'⁵⁶

Similar ideas can be found in other hasidic books which emphasize the proximity of God and His immediate presence in defiance of mundane experience and the contrasting argument for His transcendence.⁵⁷ Countering the overwhelming sense of abandonment, of the 'empty space' and the 'withdrawal' of God from a world perceived as irredeemably material, the zaddik affirms while at the same time embodying the principle of God's omnipresence. He thereby opens up the possibility of perceiving *ayin* through *yesh*.

The zaddik demonstrates the immediacy of the divine presence by working miracles and by similar displays of divine inspiration.⁵⁸ By these means he transforms the transcendent divinity into an immanent one, attesting through his own existence to the existence of a divine reality beyond the experience of the senses.⁵⁹

The zaddik is thus described as *mishtakan ha'edut*—the 'abode' or 'tabernacle' of testimony: 'The Abode of Testimony also means that God abides amongst us, and because of this one may perform miracles and wonders for the sake of Israel. This is a testimony to the inspiration of the divine presence dwelling within us, that He is responding to our summons.'⁶⁰

Clearly, the argument for divine immanence is not readily acceptable. The assimilation into one's inner consciousness of the principle of divine immanence is very difficult, since it cannot be facilitated by the sensual experience of the 'Eyes of the Flesh', nor is it capable of being immediately perceived by the 'Eyes of the Mind'. The validity of this perception requires demonstration. The zaddik fulfils this requirement by his very being. He is a living testimony of the immediate presence and inspiration of the divine, challenging the validity of any other view of reality.⁶¹

However, this is but one aspect of the zaddik's complex task of reflecting the polarity of the twofold divine process. In contrast to the two distinct modes of divine being,

⁵⁵ It is this sensibility that underlies the sharp attack on those who interpret the idea of 'withdrawal' literally (*ismisum kishlulo*), such as that expressed by R. Shneur Zalman in *Tanya*: 'In the light of what has been said above, it is possible to understand the error of some, scholars in their own eyes, may God forgive them, who erred and misinterpreted in the course of their studies of the writings of the Ari . . . and understood the doctrine of *ismisum* which is mentioned therein, literally, that the Holy One, blessed be He, removed Himself and His essence, God forbid, from this world.' *Tanya*, 'Sha ar hayihud veha'emanut', 83a. Cf. Elior, *Torat ha'elohai*, 62–5.

⁵⁷ Note the introd. to *Shivhei haBesh* by Dov Ber of Limits (Luninets), who explained the need to tell the 'praises' of the zaddikim by the need to demonstrate the immanence of God. See Dov Ber b. Shmuel, *Shivhei haBesh* [Kopyts, 1814], pub. in Eng. as *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, trans. D. Ben-Amos and J. R. Mintz (Bloomington, Ind., 1970) 3–6.

⁵⁸ See Jacob Isaac of Lublin, *Zikaron zoi* [Warsaw, 1866] (Munkacz, 1942), 150: 'And the miracles and wonders are only from Him, blessed be He, without magic or sorcery.' See also *ibid.* 46, 139; cf. *id.*, *Zoi Zikaron* [Lemberg, 1891] (Munkacz, 1942), 192; Elior, 'Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*', 408–14.

⁵⁹ See Hayyim Hakelel, *Hayim vohesed*, on 'Va'teni', 34: 'When God sends us miracles and wonders, we can by this power overcome nature, in order that we should know that God is the ruler of everything in the world.' Cf. Jacob Isaac of Lublin, *Zikaron zoi*, on 'Pekudei', 73, 139; *Zoi zikaron*, 192.

⁶⁰ *Zikaron zoi*, on 'Pekudei', 73; cf. Elior, 'Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*' 412–4.

⁶¹ See n. 58 above.

expansion and withdrawal, the zaddik embodies simultaneously both withdrawal from and expansion into the world.⁶² These opposite states mirror his own transcendent as well as immanent aspects. For the zaddik yearns to ascend to the upper worlds while at the same time seeking to plunge into the corporeal world below in order to release the divine influx which sustains it. The dialectic of withdrawal to a state of transcendence and return to a state of immanence is transformed in the zaddik into the abandonment of worldly concerns in order to cleave to the upper worlds, and the expansion into material reality in order to release the flow of divine bounty to the world.

Hasidic literature defines the transcendent aspect of the zaddik in such formulas as: 'One who is not of this world', or 'the zaddik is he whose principal abode is on your Holy Mountain', and he is likened to a 'castle floating in the clouds, like one who has abandoned corporeal and material existence'.⁶³ The immanence of the zaddik is expressed in such terms as: 'He is obliged to draw into this world the bounty of children, health, and sustenance', or 'he must be actively involved in material reality, within the congregation and the community'.⁶⁴

The zaddik manifests the paradoxical unity of spiritual 'elevation' and corporeal 'descent'; he embodies the ambivalence of *yesh* and *ayin* as two reversible points on a continuum of both earthly and heavenly realities. In the zaddik, the opposite states of *yesh* and *ayin* in the divine are transformed into ambivalent states which are prerequisites for each other: *ayin*, the source of all substance in the divine, acquires the additional meanings of abnegation, humility and self-annihilation in its human manifestation in the zaddik; *yesh*, the emanated substance and vitality of the divine, acquires also the meanings of material bounty, corporeality, and worldliness when applied to the zaddik.⁶⁵

The zaddik thus embodies all four aspects of *ayin* and *yesh* and the constant movement between them. The human *ayin*, nothingness, is expressed as his self-annihilation, submissiveness, and humility,⁶⁶ while the divine *ayin* is expressed as his spiritual elevation or mystical contemplation in a state of communion with the omnipresent divine being.⁶⁷ Likewise, the material *yesh* is expressed in terms of his concern for 'children, health, and sustenance'—the material well-being of the community⁶⁸—while the divine *yesh* is expressed when he attracts the heavenly flow and performs miracles.⁶⁹

⁶² On the zaddik as both a heavenly and an earthly being see Green, 'The Zaddiq', 341-2.

⁶³ Jacob Isaac of Lublin, *Zikaron zoi*, on 'Eleh lekha', 9; cf. Hayyim Haikel, *Hayyim vafessed*, 97.

⁶⁴ Jacob Isaac of Lublin, *Zikaron zoi*, on 'Eleh lekha', 9; cf. 13, 39, 104, 190; id., *Zot zikaron*, 191, 203-4. For the significance of the activity of the zaddik in the community see Ertinger, 'The Hasidic Movement'.

⁶⁵ On the mystical and ethical dimensions of *ayin* see Scholem, 'Harsadik', 252-3, and 133-4 of 'The Righteous One'; cf. Tishby and Dan, 'Hasidur', 808. On the two aspects of *yesh* see Elior, *Torat ha elohim*, 43-51, index s.v. *yesh*.

⁶⁶ See Dov Ber of Mezhritch, *Maggid denarav le Ya'akov*, 85; cf. Jacob Isaac of Lublin, *Zot zikaron*, 6, and see below, n. 74.

⁶⁷ Cf. the common hasidic saying: 'It is well known that God emanated the worlds and created *yesh* out of *ayin* (something out of nothing) in order that the zaddik should transform the *yesh* to *ayin*' (Mehaneh Mendel of Vitebsk, *Peri ha arav*, 156).

⁶⁸ Cf. Elior, 'Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*', 425-41.

⁶⁹ Thus e.g. R. Solomon of Lunsk: 'The zaddik always yearns to cleave to God, and by his cleaving, God's divinity and His vitality are drawn down to all the worlds and especially to the nation of Israel' (*Divrei Shelomo*, on 'Shemot', 54); cf. *Zot zikaron*, 181.

R. Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin, states in this connection: 'The principal trait of the zaddik is that he is submissive in his mind and acknowledges his deficiencies. Through his own humility, he stirs the world of *ayin* to sustain the world [by way of] *yesh* out of *ayin*, as in the beginning, when the world was created [by way of] *yesh* out of *ayin*.'⁷⁰

Meekness, humility, and submissiveness are the outward manifestations of the process of transforming the *ani* (self) into *ayin* (nothingness).⁷¹ Similarly, ecstatic illumination, divine revelation (*torah min hashamayim*), miracles, and wonders are the outward manifestations of the transformation of the divine nothingness into *yesh*.⁷²

The zaddik must negate his earthly existence for the sake of his union with the divine *ayin*. Only by means of his self-abnegation may he attain the consciousness of divine omnipresence which preconditions his access to the divine vitality of *ayin*.⁷³ As R. Ephraim of Sudylkow states in his *Degel mahaneh Efrayim*: 'By means of the attribute of humility which the zaddik must possess, he causes the holy presence to rest upon him, as it is said in Isaiah (57: 15) 'I dwell . . . with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.'⁷⁴ Or in the words of the Seer of Lublin: 'He who perceives himself as naught is able to draw down things which are dependent upon the divine flow, [namely] children, health, and sustenance.'⁷⁵

The alteration of the material *yesh* into *ayin* within the consciousness of the zaddik is a prerequisite for the transformation of the divine *ayin* into material *yesh*. This manifests itself as the flow of material bounty to the world whenever the divine presence rests upon the zaddik. The zaddik who has abnegated his earthly self and who has achieved the 'divestment of corporeality' by turning his *ani* (self) into *ayin* (nothingness) has become a receptacle for the divine *ayin*, the bounty which flows through him to the entire world.⁷⁶ By these means he accomplishes the twofold task which begins with the transformation of his material being into divine nothingness and is completed with the conversion of the divine *ayin* into material *yesh*. Alongside the commitment to divest himself of corporeality, the discharge of material bounty becomes the religious duty of the zaddik. He alone must unite the opposites of *yesh* and *ayin*.

In conclusion it may be said that the elaboration of the kabbalistic concepts of *yesh* and *ayin* in hasidic thought reflects a distinctly hasidic world-view and provides a key to the understanding and general characterization of the hasidic phenomenon.

The close relations between the dialectic of *yesh* and *ayin* in hasidic doctrine and its novel expression in the concrete reality of hasidic worship, as well as in the emergence of the social institution of the zaddik who embodies it, exemplify the way in which theological paradigms can provide the framework for social action.

⁷⁰ Jacob Isaac of Lublin, *Divrei emet* (Munkacz, 1942), 16; cf. id., *Zor zikaron*, 44: 'For the one who is contrite in his own eyes, the divine flow always comes'; cf. Meshullam Phoebus Heller, *Yosher divrei emet*, 20; Dov Ber of Mezhirech, *Maggid devarav leYa'akov*, 230.

⁷¹ See Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hahasidai kemistikah*, 22-31, 113-14.

⁷² See Elion, 'Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*', 411-14.

⁷³ See Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hahasidai kemistikah*, 81.

⁷⁴ *Degel mahaneh Efrayim* [1808] (Jerusalem, 1963), 'Noah', 10; cf. Tishby and Dan, 'Hasidut', 808.

⁷⁵ *Zor zikaron*, 167; cf. *Zikaron zot*, 9, and Dov Ber of Mezhirech, *Maggid devarav leYa'akov*, 85.

⁷⁶ See Scholem, 'Harsadik', 252-3, and 133-4 of 'The Righteous One'; cf. Weiss, 'Via Passiva', 69-94. On the function of this perception in hasidism see Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hahasidai kemistikah*, 111-13.