

Modes of Cleaving to the Letters in the Teachings of Israel Baal Shem Tov: A Sample Analysis

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Abstract The present study proposes to understand R. Israel Baal Shem Tov's approach to cleaving as dealing predominantly with the oral dimension of the letters, namely, with their sounds while they are articulated in recitation of prayer or Torah study. This approach implies a more active type of engagement with the letters than has been assumed in earlier hasidic scholarship, which emphasized cleaving to the visual aspect of the letters. Moreover, according to some teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, a variety of modes of cleaving to letters corresponds to the four cosmic worlds in Kabbalah.

Keywords Hasidism · Eastern Europe · Eighteenth Century · Baal Shem Tov · Mysticism · Religious Ecstasy

One of the hallmarks of Israel Baal Shem Tov's vision of the ideal religious life was his emphasis on mystical "cleaving to the letters," namely communing with the godhead encapsulated in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that make up the canonical texts of Judaism. This applied especially to prayer and Torah study—devotional activities that were traditionally performed vocally, and according to many hasidic sources, were to be performed loudly. It seems that the practice of vocalizing the texts of prayer and study as shaped by rabbinic Judaism was intensified in east European Hasidism, at least among some of its constituent groups. This oral dimension of both activities has been almost entirely overlooked by modern scholarship, notably in the work of the two most important scholars to have focused on the mystical aspects of prayer in early Hasidism—Gershom Scholem's students,

* The present paper is part of a larger project aiming to re-examine the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov on the basis of as many sources as possible. Parts of it, written during my Fellowship of the 2007–8 Hasidism group at the Hebrew University's Institute of Advanced Studies, appear in my two recent studies of the Besht's approach to prayer, "Tefilah, ekstazah, umahashavot zarot be'olamo hadati shel habesht," in *Yashan mipenei hadash: mehkarim betoledot yehudei mizrah eiropah uvetarbutam: shai le'imanu'el etkes*, ed. David Assaf and Ada Rapoport-Albert (Jerusalem, 2009), 1:66–71; and "Mystical Redemption and Messianism in R. Israel Baal Shem Tov's Teachings," *Kabbalah* 24 (2011), 7–121, which should be read in conjunction with my analysis of the sources of hasidic prayer in Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, 1995), 149–70.

Joseph Weiss and Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer.¹ To be sure, vocalization is not the only dimension of mystical cleaving to the letters, but the early hasidic masters refer to it repeatedly and emphatically, as we shall see below.

In general, mystical cleaving or *devekut*, as it is usually referred to in the Hebrew sources, was to accompany the performance of all the commandments and—according to some—every other human activity as well. Although it featured as an ideal throughout the long history of Jewish spirituality, it became more central than ever before to eighteenth-century Hasidism and its founder, Israel Baal Shem Tov, the Besht.² This did not escape the at-

¹In his discussion of some of the sources to be translated and analyzed below, Joseph Weiss consistently translated the Hebrew term *ot* literally as “letter (of the alphabet)”, thus focusing on the visual, to the exclusion of the sonorous, dimension of the Besht’s theory of mystical cleaving to God (*devekut*) via the letters. Phenomenologically speaking, the two dimensions are quite different. See Weiss’ otherwise important study, “The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism,” in his *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed., D. Goldstein (Oxford, 1997), 103–7 as well as 58–60, 61, 124–5 n. 60, 128–9, 133–6. For a similar approach, see Gershom Scholem, “*Devekut* or Communion with God,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), 203–27; Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Princeton and Jerusalem, 1993), e.g., p. 60: “man contemplates the words of the prayer by visualizing their letters,” as well as pp. 168–70, 221–3; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square, Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany, 1995), 23. Cf. Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham and Hanover, 2004), e.g., 148–9, where the importance of the vocal performance is highlighted. See also nn. 2, 19, and 21 below.

²See, e.g., Gershom Scholem, “*Devekut* or Communion with God,” 203–27, and cf. my comments in the Appendix to the Hebrew version of this paper in *Hashalav ha’aharon: mehkerei hahasidut shel gershom shalom*, ed. David Assaf and Esther Liebes (Jerusalem, 2008), 261–2. For an analysis of the history of *devekut* in Jewish thought up to 1270, see Adam Afterman, “Intimate Conjunction with God: The Concept of ‘Devekut’ in the Early Kabbalah” (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2008). For later developments in both Kabbalah and Hasidism, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), 35–73; id., *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 53–65, 86–9, 223–5; Eitan Fishbane, *As Light Before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Stanford, 2009), 272–82; Mordechai Pachter, “*Devekut* in Sixteenth-Century Safed,” in *Roots of Faith and Devekut: Studies in the History of Kabbalistic Ideas* (Los Angeles, 2004), 235–316; Weiss, *Studies*, especially 155–68 and passim; Ada Rapoport-Albert, “God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship,” *History of Religions* 18 (1979), 296–325, reprinted in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, ed. Gershon D. Hundert (New York, 1991), 299–329 (all subsequent references are to this edition); Etkes, *The Besht*, 114–24, 254–60; Haviva Pedaya, “Hahavayah hamistit vеха’olam hadati bahasidut,” *Daat* 55 (2005), 73–108; Miles Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth: Rabbi Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh and the Rise of Hasidism in Eastern Galicia* (Albany, 1999); Rachel Elior, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, trans. Shalom Carmy (Oxford and Portland, 2008); Tsippi Kauffman, *Bekhol derakheikha da’ehu: tefisat ha’elohut vеха’avodah begashmiyut bereshit hahasidut* (Ramat Gan, 2009), passim; Gedaliah Nigal, “Al mekorot hadevekut besifrut reshit hakabalah,” *Kiryat Sefer* 46 (1970/71), 343–8; Torsten Ysander, *Studien zum*

tention of scholars. In a seminal paper, Gershom Scholem observed that “this definition of *devekut* as man’s binding himself to the core (*penimiut*) of the letters, the Torah, and the commandments, instead of to their external aspects only, seems to be a new point made by the Baal Shem.”³ He further surmised that the Baal Shem Tov’s new understanding of *devekut* gained acceptance above all because it provided the means to attaining individual redemption, a personal experience that Scholem believed to have replaced, around the year 1750, the traditional expectation of collective messianic redemption.⁴ Moreover, Scholem argued, the Baal Shem Tov was the first to democratize the

B'eštschen Hasidismus (Uppsala, 1933), 199–208; Israel Koren, *Hamistorin shel ha'arets: mistikah vehasidut behaguto shel martin buber* (Haifa, 2005), 214–32; Jean Baumgarten, *La naissance du hassidisme: Mystique, rituel, société, XVIII^e–XIX^e siècle*, (Paris, 2005), 280–4; Norman Lamm (with contributions from Allan Brill and Shalom Carmy), *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* (New York, 1999), 133–72; Leah Orent, “Mystical Union in the Writings of the Hasidic Master, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady,” *Studies in Spirituality* 18 (2008), 61–92. For an interesting non-hasidic parallel to the hasidic emphasis on *devekut*, see Sharon Flatto, “*Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*: Not a World Apart,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 12 (2003), 110–1.

³Scholem, *The Messianic Idea* (above, n. 1), 213. See also *ibid.*, 211–12, 215. The same position was adopted by Joseph Weiss. See “Torah Study in Early Hasidism,” in his *Studies* (above, n. 1), 56–61, 107. See also Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (New York, 1978), 75; Etkes, *The Besht* (above, n. 1), 114–5; Netanel Lederberg, *Sod hada'at: demuto haruhanit shel rabi yisra'el ba'al shem tov* (Jerusalem, 2007), 181–4. Cf., however, Mendel Piekarz, *Byme'i tsemihat hahasidut: megamat ra'ayoniyot besifrei derush umusar* (Jerusalem, 1978), 354–5, who quotes Isaiah Horowitz’s *Shenei luhot haberit* as a possible source, and Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Rituals and Techniques in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles, 2005), 58–9, where a passage by Elijah da Vidas’ *Reshit hokhmah* is identified as the probable source for the Besht, who was certainly acquainted with this work, as he refers to a story found only in it. See on this Idel, *Hasidism* (above, n. *), 161. For the recommendation by the thirteenth-century kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla to cleave to individual letters of the Tetragrammaton, which I believe was known to the Besht, see Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven and London, 2002), 378. It should be noted, however, that this early source does not appear to have been used by any of the Besht’s contemporaries who were active in his immediate vicinity in Podolia (despite a certain statement by Meir Harif Margoliot, which may suggest otherwise, and which will be addressed below). See the survey of views on this topic by the Besht’s contemporaries in Abraham J. Heschel, *The Circle of the Besht: Studies in Hasidism*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (Chicago and London, 1985). Admittedly, some of these contemporaries were indeed interested in contemplation of the letters making up the divine name (see, e.g., the tradition about Nahman of Kosov, translated in Lamm, *Religious Thought* [above, n. 2], 157–8), but these individuals scarcely contributed to the emergence of Hasidism as a popular movement. A similar view to the Besht’s, however, was expressed by one of his younger contemporaries. See Nathan Neta of Sieniawa, *Sefer olat tamid hashalem* (Premislany, 1895), 2, fols. 11a, 15a.

⁴See Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 259–60. See also *ibid.*, 194, 204.

ideal of *devekut*, making it accessible to everyone as the first step on the path to mystical communion rather than being the climax of the experience.⁵

Recent scholarship has identified much earlier sources for the novelty that Scholem had attributed to the Baal Shem Tov's notion of *devekut*. As a route to personal redemption, it is attested already during the thirteenth century in Jewish philosophical writings⁶ as well as in the ecstatic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia,⁷ while as the first step along the mystical path rather than the last, *devekut* occurs in at least one early fourteenth-century kabbalistic source.⁸ Be that as it may, most scholars agree that Hasidism ascribed a key role to the ideal of *devekut*,⁹ although the precise nature of this ideal, and the point at which it entered the Baal Shem Tov's religious worldview, are still far from clear. The multiple expressions, ramifications, and reverberations of his call to cleave to the letters of the alphabet are yet to be contextualized, both historically and systemically.¹⁰ Moreover, some of the traditions associated with his name deal not only with *devekut* as a state of consciousness but also with its effects on both God and the divine presence. His modes of cleaving, either to the written forms of the letters or to their sounds, should therefore be viewed within a much broader conceptual framework, and each mode would be better understood in terms of what—following Aron Gurevich—may be called its Gestalt-contexture.¹¹

⁵See *ibid.*, 180–202.

⁶See Moshe Idel, “Types of Redemptive Activity in the Middle Ages,” in *Meshihuyut ve’eskhatologyah: kovets ma’amarim*, ed. Zvi Baras (Jerusalem, 1983), 254–8; *id.*, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, 1998), 58–100, 212–47.

⁷See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1969), 140–1, and *cf.* Idel, “Types of Redemptive Activity,” 259–63; *id.*, *Messianic Mystics*, 58–100.

⁸See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (above, n. 2), 49–51. See also Rapoport-Albert, “God and the Zaddik” (above, n. 2), 307–8.

⁹The single notable exception is Mendel Piekarcz, who insists in many of his writings that the mystical ideals of Hasidism, including *devekut*, should not be taken at their face value since they are part of a hyperbolic rhetoric, which he considers to be characteristic of hasidic style. See, e.g., his “Hasidism as a Socio-Religious Movement on the Evidence of *Devekut*,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London and Portland, 1996), 225–48. See also Etkes’ response to Piekarcz in *The Besht* (above, n. 1), 117–8.

¹⁰See also my remarks in Scholem, *Hashalav ha’aharon* (above, n. 2), 265–7.

¹¹See Aron Gurevich, “Phenomenology of Perception: Perceptual Implications,” in *An Invitation to Phenomenology*, ed. James M. Edie (Chicago, 1965), 21; Idel, *Hasidism* (above, n. *), 49, 111, 203, 272 n. 15. For an analysis of *devekut* linked to other activities, see *id.*, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (above, n. 2), 51–8; Seth Brody, “‘Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights’: Contemplative Ascent and Theurgic Power in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics & Typology*, ed. R. A. Herrera (New York, 1992), 123–58. This more complex approach has been adopted—without reference to my methodological claims—in Pedaya, “Hahavayah hamistit” (above, n. 2), 81, and *ead.*, “Haba’al shem tov, r. ya’akov mipolna’ah vehamagid mimezeritsh: Kavei yesod legishah tipologit datit,” *Daat* 45 (2000), 71.

In what follows I shall try to demonstrate that the Baal Shem Tov proposed a variety of modes of cleaving to the letters, and that at times, while drawing on earlier sources, he combined them in an original way, especially in relation to Torah study and prayer—traditional practices that his approach had modified significantly. Failure to observe the links between each mode and its immediate sequel in what often constitutes a chain of interconnected phases or steps, inevitably masks the originality of the method, and results in a distortion of the Baal Shem Tov's teaching on *devekut*.¹² Moreover, in order to capture the full scope and complexity of this teaching, it is important to inspect every one of the diverse sources on cleaving to the letters that are extant in the Baal Shem Tov's name. Admittedly, these sources do not all agree with one another, even though they often share a common denominator. This is hardly surprising, given that the teachings of the Besht were recorded at different times and places by several of his associates and disciples. Far from casting doubt on the reliability of these sources, their very divergence reflects the centrality and originality of the Besht's notion of cleaving to the letters,¹³ a practice which he invested—apparently early on in his career—with the capacity to empower the mystic in a variety of ways.

My endeavor to assemble these diverse sources, to discern in them a range of distinct outlooks and nuances, to organize their most stable elements and frequently recurrent themes into meaningful patterns—which I refer to as models—and to locate each model within the overall structure of the Baal Shem Tov's thought is a departure from previous approaches to Beshtian Hasidism, such as Martin Buber's and Gershom Scholem's, who each attempted to formulate it as a unified and unequivocal religious worldview, or Joseph Weiss' and Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer's, who presented the "via passiva" or "quietism" as a defining characteristic of hasidic mysticism. My own approach, taking into account a variety of hitherto unexplored sources, associates the Baal Shem Tov's mode of cleaving to the letters with the activist model of magical praxis, thereby highlighting the empowering quality

¹²See, e.g., Scholem, "Demuto hahistorit shel r. isra'el ba'al shem tov," in *Hashalav ha'aharon* (above, n. 2), 127–8, where he presents the emphasis on *devekut* as a phenomenological alternative to magic. He does, however, rightly observe that the Besht never desisted from the practice of magic.

¹³See Moshe Idel, "Me'or ganuz' le'or torah': perek bafenomenologyah shel hamistikah hayehudit," in *Migvan de'ot beyisra'el* 11 (2002), 46–56; id., "'Erets yisra'el hu hayut mehabore b'h': al mekomah shel erets yisra'el bahasidut," in *Erets Yisra'el bahagut hayehudit ba'et hahadashah*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem, 1998), 256–75; Ron Wacks, *Besod hayihud: hayihudim bahaguto hakabalit-hasidit shel r. hayim ben shelomoh tiner m'ishernovits* (Los Angeles, 2006), 13, 14, 123, 126.

of cleaving rather than placing it within the domain of quietist, contemplative mysticism.¹⁴

So far, only a small proportion of the teachings reported in the name of the Besht have been addressed by scholars. I propose to incorporate in my analysis a much wider range of such sources, all focusing on engagement with what in Hebrew is referred to as *ot* (singular) or *otiyot* (plural), meaning both the image of the letter on the page and its sound when it is vocalized.¹⁵ This double meaning is especially evident in *Sefer yetsirah*—the book that contributed most to the tradition of linguistic speculation in Jewish mysticism—and subsequently in Elijah da Vidas' sixteenth-century kabbalistic work, *Reshit hokhmah*. The tendency to overlook the vocal dimension of the term *ot*, a dimension that, as will be shown below, points to an activist mode of cleaving to the letters, is not just a problem of translation but springs from the undue scholarly emphasis on the passive elements of hasidic mysticism.

To restore what I believe to be the correct balance of interpretation, I propose to shift the center of gravity to the sonorous, active dimension of cleaving to the letters, which is just as crucial for understanding the religious orientation (and probable practice) of the Besht.¹⁶ The hasidic as well as the

¹⁴For a consideration of this issue, see the very original phenomenological observations in Pedaya, "Haba'al shem tov" (above, n. 11), where she classifies the structure of the Besht's thought as belonging exclusively to the religious model of the "seer" (pp. 27–8) while rejecting the possibility that his practice of cleaving to the letters might belong to the magical model, whereby his cleaving enables the practitioner to draw the divine influx into the letters (pp. 54–5, 58, 63, 71). She does, however, acknowledge the presence of this magical model in the teachings attributed to the Besht by some of his disciples, as well as in some of the hagiographical traditions about him. My own contention, which I have stated elsewhere in relation to Hasidism in general and in the generations following the Besht (see Idel, *Hasidism* [above, n. *], 103–27), is that, relatively early in his career, the Besht embraced a view that conjugated the ideal of cleaving to the inner essence of the letters, incorporating in it the assumption that particular modes of cleaving had the capacity to empower the mystic. For my view specifically of the empowerment entailed in the vocal articulation of the letters, see Idel, "Mystical Redemption and Messianism in R. Israel Baal Shem Tov's Teachings" (above, n. *). See also n. 15 directly below.

¹⁵In some of my earlier discussions of the topic, emphasising the vocal dimension of cleaving to the letters (see Idel, *Hasidism* [above, n. *], 161–3, 311–2 n. 49), I translated the Hebrew term *otiyot* as "pronounced letters." In the present paper I propose to highlight the visual/vocal ambiguity of the term by rendering it "letters/sounds."

¹⁶For discussions focusing on vocality in the Jewish mystical tradition, see Moshe Idel, "Die laut gelesene Tora, Stimmengemeinschaft in der jüdischen Mystik," in *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung, Zur Kultur und Mediengeschichte der Stimme*, ed. Friedrich Kittler, Thomas Macho, and Sigrid Weigel (Berlin, 2002), 19–53; id., "The Voiced Text of the Torah," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 68 (1994), 145–66; id., *Enchanted Chains* (above, n. 3), 205–12, 221–3. See also Ron Wacks, "Yihud bedibur etsel habesht umamshikhei darko," *Daat* 57–9 (2006), 143–63.

kabbalistic sources do, of course, contain instructions to engage with the written shapes of the letters or to cleave to them by way of contemplative mental exercises,¹⁷ but this is by no means the only type of cleaving to feature in the religious economy of early Hasidism, especially not in the teachings I consider to be emanating from the Besht.

Many early hasidic sources reflect a common understanding of Torah and prayer as the vocal articulation of the letters that constitute both types of text. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye [Połonne], for example, reports in the name of the Besht:

As I have heard from my teacher . . . there are *yihudim* [(“unifications”) that are performed] by means of speech, whether speech [uttered in the course] of Torah [study] and prayer or speech [uttered during idle conversation] with one’s fellowman in the marketplace, whereby one is able to unite with and elevate each individual according to his level: some by means of holy speech and some by means of profane speech, since it [too] contains the twenty-two letters/sounds etc.¹⁸

¹⁷The contemplative elements are evident, for example, in a certain passage adduced by Moshe Shoham of Dolina, which I intend to analyze elsewhere, while also being particularly prominent in Habad-Lubavitch Hasidism.

¹⁸*Sefer tsafnat pa’aneah*, ed. Gedaliah Nigal (Jerusalem, 1989), 260. On p. 83 in the same book, the Besht is quoted again as saying that one should distinguish between three types of speech. His comments are reminiscent of those quoted above, but he adds to them an important dimension: each type of speech effects a particular form of sexual union in the divine world. In both cases it is expressly the spoken performance and not the contemplation of letters on the page that is presented as the quintessential mystical act. On speech performed during Torah study and prayer, see also *id.*, *Sefer ketonet pasim*, ed. Gedaliah Nigal (Jerusalem, 1985), 247. For the wider context of these practices, see Lederberg, *Sod hada’at* (above, n. 3), 186–7. A similar view was expressed by the Besht’s grandson, Moshe Hayim Efrayim of Sudilkov [Sudyłkóv], as an interpretation of his grandfather’s view: “By their presence in the world, whether they utter the letters/sounds of prayer and Torah with awe and love, or [whether they utter] words concerning materiality or [mere] stories . . . the righteous elevate the letters/sounds.” See his *Degel mahaneh efrayim* (Jerusalem, 1995), 123. See also *ibid.*, 164, and Kauffman, *Bekhol derakheikha da’ehu* (above, n. 2), 511–2. A similar distinction between three forms of speech, presented as distinct modes of worship, occurs in a lengthy discussion by Aharon of Zhitomir [Zytomierz] in *Sefer toledot aharon* (Berditchev, 1817), fol. 118a–b. Cf. also the short but seminal instruction preserved in both *Tsava’at harivash* (printed in *Likutim yekarim*, Jerusalem, 1981), fol. 113b §70, and Aharon of Apta’s *Keter shem tov* (Brooklyn, 1987), 7b §44 (and again *ibid.*, 24c §192): “When one prolongs [the pronunciation of] the word, this is *devekut*, for one does not want to separate oneself from that word.” See also *id.*, *Or haganuz latsadikim* (Warsaw, 1877), fol. 6b, and Gedaliah of Lunitz, *Teshu’ot hen* (Berditchev, 1816), fol. 39a. Cf., however, Weiss’ interpretation, referred to in note 1 above. It should be pointed out that the understanding of *otiyot* as letters rather than sounds has in some cases resulted in the infiltration of concepts that are not actually present

As this example, and many others like it, suggest, the transformative power of the letters that make up the texts of both Torah and prayer, by which it is possible to “unite with and elevate” each of one’s fellowmen, is located specifically in the sound that is emitted when the letters are vocalized as speech. Consequently, the *otiyot* to which one is cleaving are to be understood as the sounds much more than the written forms of the letters. The issue is not only how to vocalize them in such a way as to allow the sounds to become the locus of the encounter with the divine dwelling in speech, but also how to draw down the divine influx and channel it into the vocal performance of any act of speech, either holy or profane. Far from betraying mystical passivity, this practice amounts to an intensification of human activity through both emitting and cleaving to the sounds. It may be viewed as an outgrowth not only of the conventional practice of prayer—a predominantly vocal performance, but also of the traditional rabbinic methodology of Torah study, which similarly entails the sonorous vocalization of the texts being studied. This dimension of the engagement with the texts was magnified in Beshtian Hasidism, not least as a result of the incorporation in “Torah” of the sermons delivered orally by the hasidic masters.

The most comprehensive model I have discerned in the Baal Shem Tov’s approach to engagement with the letters provides a variety of modes of cleaving, each on a particular level of operation corresponding to one of the theosophical “gradations” or “worlds” in which the letters exist. In this context, Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye preserves the following tradition in the name of his teacher, the Besht:

If a person finds himself in the [spiritually diminished] state of “smallness” [*katenut*], unable to perform the kabbalistic medita-

in the original sources. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, for example, translated the phrase *yits’ak belahash*, namely “let him cry out in a whisper,” as if it meant “let him cry out in silence,” which she took to be an instance of “quietistic” mental prayer, and on which she proceeded to base a whole set of false speculations. See Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (above, n. 1), 178, 185–6; ead., “Contemplative Prayer in Hasidism,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, ed. E. E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Ch. Wirszubski (Jerusalem, 1967), 223–5, and cf. Idel, *Hasidism* (above, n. *), 164–5, 349 n. 119. The propensity to translate *belahash* as “in silence” rather than “in a whisper,” which is wrong both philologically and on the grounds that it does not accord with traditional Jewish practice, is surprisingly shared by Jacob Immanuel Schochet, the editor and English translator of *Tsava’at harivash*. See, e.g., *Testament of the Besht* (New York, 1998), 26 §33. For an emphasis on “seeing” rather than performing both texts and letters in speech, see the phenomenology of the Besht’s experience in Pedaya, “Haba’al shem tov” (above, n. 11), 27–30, 55–67. While I do not deny that there are references to silent mental prayer in early Hasidism, including some teachings transmitted in the name of the Besht, this interpretation should not be forced on texts that convey a different message, nor should the presence of such texts be overlooked.

tions [*kavvanot*] in prayer because alien thoughts are overpowering him, he should pray like a day-old child, who reads out of the [plain] written text [*ketav*],¹⁹ as my teacher testified about himself, that when he sojourned in a foreign land, and was in that state [of *katenut*], deprived of the above-mentioned [power to pray with *kavanot*], he cleaved to the letters etc., and he said: “When one prays from the [plain] written text while cleaving to the letters, one elevates the aspect of Action [Asiyah],²⁰ because the word *ketav* [in its consonantal form *k-t-v*] is [to be read as] an acronym of Keter [which is the name of the highest sefirotic level, signified here by its initial Hebrew letter *kaf*] within Malkhut, which is [the lowest sefirotic level, traditionally signified by the same letter *kaf* while also, as here, by the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet] *tav*, through to [the letter] *vet* [in its alternative, “strong” form *bet*, which stands for the higher sefirotic level of] Binah.” And he [the Besht] commanded a certain individual to do so until he returned to his high level, etc.²¹

¹⁹See also *Tsava'at harivash*, (above, n. 18), fol. 5a §27: “When a person is on a lower rank, it is better to pray from the prayerbook, since by virtue of seeing the letters of [the text of] the prayer, he prays with greater *kavanah*.” This is an important example of the affinities between certain parts of *Tsava'at harivash* and Beshtian material which is independent of the circle of the Great Maggid. On the nexus between the printed text of the prayerbook and worship while in the state of *katenut*, see also Aharon of Apta, *Or haganuz latsadikim* (above, n. 18), fol. 29c.

²⁰This refers to the lowest of the four worlds or cosmic planes of existence according to the classical Kabbalah, a concept which became particularly widespread under the influence of the Lurianic school.

²¹Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, *Ketonet pasim*, (above, n. 18), 298. On this passage, see also Moshe Idel, “‘*Adonay Sefatay Tiftah*’: Models of Understanding Prayer in Early Hasidism,” *Kabbalah* 18 (2008), 63–4. The elevation, by means of prayer, of the lower worlds or of the fallen “sparks” that are scattered among the evil husks (*kelipot*), is again mentioned in the name of the Besht in Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye’s *Toledot ya'akov yosef* (Koretz, 1780), fol. 59b. Cf. *Likutim yekarim* (above, n. 18), fol. 5a §27; *Tsava'at harivash* (above, n. 18), fol. 3a §16, a treatise edited in the school of the Great Maggid; Aharon of Apta, *Ner mitsvah* (Pietrkov, 1881), fol. 7b. For a translation and analysis of the fuller context of this passage, see Weiss, *Studies* (above, n. 1), 103–4, where, however, he resorts to the terms “letters” and “text” as the objects of contemplation. See also Rapoport-Albert, “God and Zaddik” (above, n. 2), 310–1. For a recommendation, reported in the name of the Besht, to cleave during prayer and Torah study to both the written forms of the letters and to their sounds, see Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, *Ben porat yosef* (Korets, 1781), fol. 12c. An important instance of the advice to cleave to the written forms of the letters alone occurs in id., *Toledot ya'akov yosef*, fol. 131b, where it features as part of the erotic union between the student and his object of study, the Torah. On this passage, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square* (above, n. 1), 23. Notably, however, this advice does not appear to have been attributed to the Besht himself, though I assume that it may well stem from one of his teachings.

The episode to which the Baal Shem Tov refers seems to have occurred during his stay in Istanbul, where he was apparently involved in a distressing experience.²² This is interpreted in this passage as his descent to the state of diminished consciousness designated *katenut*.²³ While in this state, he cleaved to the printed letters of the prayerbook, and even recommended the practice to an unnamed individual who managed thereby to return to a higher state of consciousness. This type of cleaving, which entails gazing at the printed forms of the letters, is depicted expressly as a low level of operation, appropriate for when one is unable to focus one's thoughts and engage in meditative prayer. According to the Besht, this mode of operation, which corresponds to "the aspect of Asiyah"—the lowest of the four worlds or cosmic planes of existence in kabbalistic parlance—is capable of elevating Asiyah to the level of Binah, signified by its initial letter *bet*. It is not impossible that in addition to the explicit reference to the *sefirah* Binah, the initial letter *bet* implicitly signifies also the aspect or cosmic level of Beri'ah [Creation]—the second down in the hierarchical sequence of worlds, of which Asiyah is the fourth.

It should be emphasized that the passage quoted above is formulated vaguely and somewhat enigmatically, perhaps as a result of its apparent fragmentary nature, as there is evidence of truncation in the tantalizing use of "etc." in the middle of the quotation from the Besht. Yaakov Yosef Polonnoye may well have had in his possession a longer and fuller version

²²See *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov [Sivhei ha-Besht]*, trans. and ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington, 1970), 237–8. As the Yiddish version of this hagiographical work makes clear, the Besht visited Istanbul during his abortive journey to the Holy Land. See the editorial note *ibid.*, 238. For the legends related to the Besht's stay in Istanbul, see Gedaliah Nigal, *Habesht: agadot, apologetikah umetsi'ut* (Jerusalem, 2007), 122–8. See also Yehoshua Mondshine, *Shivehei habesht: Faksimil miketav hayad hayehidi hanoda lanu veshinuyei nusahav le'umat nusah hadefus* (Jerusalem, 1982), 276–7; Aharon of Apta, *Keter shem tov* (above, n. 18), fol. 20c §156.

²³The term originates in the Lurianic Kabbalah, but the hasidic masters were particularly preoccupied with the state of mind they described as *katenut*. For an analysis of the kabbalistic sources on the subject, see Pachter, "Smallness and Greatness" in *Roots of Faith* (above, n. 2), 185–233; Yehuda Liebes, "Trein 'orzalin de'oraita'—derashato hasodit shel ha'ari lifenei moto," in *Kabalat ha'ari: divrei hakenes habeinle'umi harevi'i leheker toledot hamistikah hayehudit lezekher gershom shalom*, ed. Rachel Elior and Yehuda Liebes (Jerusalem, 1994), 113–26; Mark Verman, "Aliyah and Yeridah: The Journey of the Besht and R. Nachman to Israel," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3 (Atlanta, 1988), 159–171; Zvi Mark, *Mistikah veshigayon biytsirat r. nahman mibraslav* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, 2003), 294–329; Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea* (above, n. 1), 218–22; Ada Rapoport-Albert, "'Katenut,' 'peshitut' ve'eini yode'a' shel r. nahman mibraslav," in *Studies in Religious and Intellectual History Presented to A. Altmann*, ed. Sigfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (Alabama, 1979), 7–33 [Hebrew section]; Kauffman, *Bekhol derakheikha da'ehu* (above, n. 2), 351; Lamm, *The Religious Thought* (above, n. 2), 403–8.

of his master's teaching on the subject, which is no longer extant. We may, however, shed additional light on the subject matter of the passage if we consider it alongside what seems to me to be its conceptual sequel. It appears in Aharon of Apta's [Opatów] famous compilation of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings, *Keter shem tov* (first published in 1794):

During prayer one should draw all one's power into the acts of speech [*diburim*, utterances], and proceed in this way from one letter/sound to another to the point of losing awareness of corporeality and thinking that the letters/sounds combine and become linked to one another [of their own accord],²⁴ which is a great delight.²⁵ And if it is a great delight in [the realm of] corporeality, how much more so is it a great delight in [the realm of] spirituality,²⁶ which is the world of Formation [Yetsirah]. Afterwards one reaches the letters of thought [*otiyot hamahshavah*],²⁷ where one no longer hears what one is saying, and this means that one has reached the world of Creation [Berī'ah]. After this, one arrives at the attribute of Naught [Ayin], since all one's corporeal powers

²⁴See the comparable reference, in the Besht's "Holy Epistle," published at the very end of Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye's *Ben porat yosef* (above, n. 21), to the effect that the letters/sounds link themselves to each other and become united.

²⁵For the concept of delight in Hasidism, with special emphasis on the views of the Besht, see Moshe Idel, "Ta'anug: Erotic Delights from Kabbalah to Hasidism" in *Hidden Intercourses: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden and Boston, 2009), 131–51.

²⁶For the parallel suggestion, reported in the name of the Besht, that one can learn about the nature of spiritual delight from the experience of corporeal delight, see Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, *Toledot ya'akov yosef* (above, n. 21), fol. 16c. For the possible source of this type of argumentation, cited by the Besht (*ibid.*, fol. 45b), which originates in Isaac of Acre, but was preserved in the form in which the Besht quotes it only in Elijah da Vidas's *Reshit hokhmah*, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven, 2005), 155–77, 298 n. 58.

²⁷On the concept of "letters of thought," which emanate from Hokhmah, as it features in the Great Maggid's exposition of the primordial mind (*kademut hasekhel*), see Scholem, *Hashalav ha'aharon* (above, n. 2), 271, 273–4; Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (above, n. 1), 211–2. The practice described here is reminiscent of the Great Maggid's recommendation to "pronounce the Torah" in a state of loss of self-awareness (reported by Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir in *Or hame'ir*, and translated and analyzed by Weiss in his *Studies* [above, n. 1], 79). This suggests a certain correspondence between vocal articulation as an advanced phase of prayer and the manner in which Torah is to be "pronounced." In both cases the practitioner does not cease to be active, although his awareness of his activity is dissipating. This is why I cannot accept Weiss' interpretation of the practice (*ibid.*) as evidence of hasidic quietism.

have been obliterated,²⁸ and this is the world of Emanation [Atsilut], [which corresponds to] the attribute of Hokhmah.²⁹

I attribute this passage to the Besht not only because it appears in *Keter shem tov* as part of a tradition introduced by the opening line “From the Besht, of blessed memory.” This alone would be insufficient ground for including it in the Beshtian corpus while maintaining a critical approach that distinguishes the views of the Besht from those of his students. Rather, I base my attribution on the affinity between this passage and others transmitted in the Besht’s name, including the fragment, cited above, from Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye’s *Ketonet pasim*,³⁰ to which the *Keter shem tov* provides an elucidating supplement, as will be shown below.

²⁸For the obliteration of the physical senses at the level of Hokhmah see the view of the Besht as quoted by his grandson, Efrayim of Sudilkov, in *Degel mahaneh efrayim* (above, n. 17), 202. Though rare, this view is not quite as exceptional in the Beshtian tradition as Scholem assumed when he attributed it chiefly to the Maggid, who did indeed develop it (see Scholem, *The Messianic Idea* [above, n. 1], 214). Thus the distinction between the Besht and the Maggid on this score is less significant than it seemed to Scholem and, following him, also to Pedaya (“Haba‘al shem tov,” above, n. 11). Moreover, the Besht should be seen as the source of the Great Maggid’s concept of Naught (Ayin). See Idel, *Hasidism* (above, n. *), 113–4, 311 n. 46. For the Cordoverian sources on the experience of Ayin, see *ibid.*, 109–11.

²⁹*Keter shem tov* (above, n. 18), fol. 56a–b §387, and the anonymous formulation in *Magid devarav leya‘akov*, ed. R. Schatz Uffenheimer (Jerusalem, 1976), 85–6 §57. A shorter parallel occurs, without indication of the source of the tradition, in Aharon of Apta’s later book, *Or haganuz latsadikim* (above, n. 18), fol. 6d. On this passage, see Idel, *Hasidism* (above, n. *), 306 n. 9, 347 n. 103; Etkes, *The Besht* (above, n. 1), 149–50, 307 n. 111; Dan Merkur, “The Induction of Mystical Unions: Two Hasidic Teachings,” *Studia Mystica* 14, no. 4 (1991), 71–2. For the possible source of the nexus between speech and the world of Yetsirah, see Elijah da Vidas, “The matter of the Torah is by means of speech and speech is from Yetsirah,” chap. 4 of *Reshit hokhmah*, “The Gate of Holiness.” Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye (*Tsafnat pa‘aneah* [above, n. 18], 83) describes three distinct types of union between aspects of the godhead, which may be induced by three distinct modes of human speech. One mode of speech is employed in commercial negotiations, and it operates in the world of Asiyah; another is employed in discussions about spiritual matters, and it operates in the world of Yetsirah; while the third and most elevated mode of speech is the articulation of prayer and Torah texts with awe and love, which in all probability (though this is not stated explicitly in the passage), operates in the world of Atsilut. It should be pointed out, however, that in contrast to the Beshtian tradition in the passage cited above, according to the Great Maggid, the state of divestment of materiality precedes the act of prayer. See Kauffman, *Bekhol derakheikha da‘ehu* (above, n. 2), 458 n. 89. See the Great Maggid’s *Or ha‘emet*, fol. 41b for the transition from speech to thought and then to Nothing, which provides a close parallel to the teaching I attribute here to the Besht. If divestment of corporeality is indeed related to passivity, as Weiss and Schatz Uffenheimer claim, then the position of the Besht, who assumes that this state can be achieved only at the end of the ascent from world to world during the process of prayer, does not allow for passivity. See also Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* (above, n. 2), 217 n. 8; Aharon ha-Levi of Zhitomir (in the name of the Besht), *Toledot aharon* (above, n. 18), fol. 130a.

³⁰See above, at n. 20.

From the passage in *Keter shem tov* it appears, then, that while at the beginning of the process of prayer, cleaving to the letters amounts to their vocalization in an emphatic manner that necessitates the injection of all of one's powers into the act of speech, by the end of the process one is closer to what may be described as an ecstatic state, in which all of one's physical powers have been obliterated. From the controlled investment of power in the vocal recitation of the text, one proceeds through stages of spiritual ascent, in which one's physical powers diminish gradually, to the point of finally transcending all awareness of one's physical self. This procedure is very different from the quietist anticipation of divine intervention, which alone can trigger the experience of the mystic, and it is incompatible with Weiss' claim that early Hasidism was marked by a "fundamental feature of mystical passivity,"³¹ a quality that is hardly discernible either at the beginning or at the end of the process described in the passage quoted above. Rather, the passage reflects what I call the ergetic attitude, which emphasizes action—here amounting to the vocal performance of the text, whether or not this performance retains something of the semantic dimension of speech. The individual engaged in such intense recitation is able to transcend his corporeality. He attains a spiritual state of consciousness referred to as the world of Formation (Yetsirah)—the third of the four worlds according to Lurianic cosmology, which in this passage seems to correspond to vocal activity. From this world one proceeds up to the level of "letters of thought," corresponding to the second world in the sequence, the world of Creation (Berī'ah). Although the letters of thought are clearly a rarefied concept, there is no indication that actual sounds are no longer being emitted at this level. Rather, the individual who has reached

³¹Weiss, *Studies* (above, n. 1), 74. See also, e.g., *Tsava'at harivash* (above, n. 18), fol. 6a §§38–9, printed also in *Likutim yekarim* (above, n. 18), fol. 5a §§24–7, where the insistence on the loss of physical strength is obvious. Similarly, the Besht's instruction that one should fortify oneself before prayer points in a more activist direction. See the passages adduced by Weiss himself (*Studies*, 109), where he deals with the topic of *kavanot* in prayer. Although it is possible to discern a few quietist strands in early Hasidism, it seems to me that Weiss, and following him also Schatz Uffenheimer in her *Hasidism as Mysticism*, gave undue weight to the philosopher Solomon Maimon's report on his brief sojourn at the Great Maggid's court, on which he reports in a way that lends itself to an interpretation of Hasidism as marked by a quietistic tendency. Writing his autobiography for a Christian readership, Maimon resorted to Christian mystical categories, and his account, moreover, may have been tinged by his later idealistic philosophical leanings, as Weiss himself pointed out (see his *Studies*, 70–1). For the stress, by contrast, on power in the context of vocalization in Jewish mysticism in general, see Jonathan Garb, "Powers of Language in Kabbalah: Comparative Reflections," in *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign*, ed. S. La Porta and D. Shulman (Leiden, 2007), 239–40. For an interesting example of the investment of physical power in recitation, see Aharon of Zhitomir, *Toledot aharon* (above, n. 18), fol. 118b, where one's entire body is described as participating and "entering" one's utterances.

it simply ceases to hear the sounds he is emitting. The next level up is the world of Atsilut, the first and highest of the four worlds, at which all human capacities are obliterated. It is therefore described as Ayin, the divine Nihil, which corresponds to the sefirotic attribute of Hokhmah. Interestingly enough, even here, the Besht does not mention, at least not explicitly, either silence or mental prayer; all he speaks of is the cessation of physical powers.

This suggests that we are dealing with an ascent though the four worlds by means of engagement at each level with a different notion of “letters.” What is less clear, however, is the precise nature of this four-fold process: is each word of the prayer text involved in this process throughout, or does it develop stage by stage, with the experience of consecutive sections of the text building up to a crescendo?

Be that as it may, when the two passages quoted above are brought together and recognized as being complementary to each other, it becomes clear that between them they cover the entire realm of the four worlds—Atsilut, Beri’ah, Yetsirah, and Asiyah, which can be experienced by means of four modes of engagement with the letters at prayer. Each of the two passages contributes some elements that the other has omitted. In the first, excerpted from *Ketonet pasim*, the lowest form of prayer features in the context of Asiyah, the lowest of the four worlds, while in the second passage, from *Keter shem tov*, three other stages of prayer correspond to the next three worlds up—Yetsirah, Beri’ah, and Atsilut. In the first passage, prayer consists of gazing at the written letters on the page, while in the second there is progression from the sounds of the vocalized letters to the category of “mental letters” and finally to a transcendental state of consciousness, where the letters effectively cease to exist. This fourth stage presumably corresponds to what has been described in Kabbalah and in many hasidic texts as “divestment of corporeality” (*hitpashetut hagashmiyut*), which in turn corresponds to the ontological level of Ayin.³² The Besht capitalizes here on a medieval distinction between three categories of letters: the written, the spoken, and those that exist “in thought,” to which he adds a fourth, corresponding to

³²For Ayin in hasidic mysticism, see Daniel Matt, “Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Pure Consciousness*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York, 1990), 139–45. The nexus between prayer and divestment of corporeality is known already in the fourteenth century. See Idel, “Models of Understanding Prayer in Early Hasidism” (above, n. 21), 16, 73–4. The probable existence of this nexus in a certain teaching of the Besht, where it features as a para-mental experience described as some form of trance, as well as the attribution to the Besht of instructions in the same vein (on which see Idel, *Hasidism* [above, n. *], 113–4), problematize Pedaya’s description of the Besht’s mystical experience as, in contrast to the Great Maggid’s experience, being exclusively extrovert. See Pedaya, “Ha-ba’al shem tov” (above, n. 11), 79–82, and cf. Kauffman, *Bekhol derakheikha da’ehu* (above, n. 2), 106 n. 56.

a state of mind that transcends the multiplicity of letters and sounds altogether.³³ Finally, in the first passage, the world of Creation (Berī'ah) corresponds to the *sefirah* of Binah, while in the second passage the higher world of Emanation (Atsilut) corresponds to the higher *sefirah* of Hokhmah.

Putting the two passages together enables us to reconstruct a more comprehensive Beshtian theory that may be formulated as follows. There are four modes of prayer. The first entails reading from a written prayer-book; the second is the vocalized recitation of prayer that entails the intense emission of sounds into which one draws all one's physical powers; the third is mental prayer, referred to by the phrase "letters of thought," which does not, however, seem to entail renunciation of sound; and the fourth is para-mental—prayer which altogether transcends the letters, but in which some form of vocalization may still be entailed. These modes of prayer relate, in the first instance, to the shapes of the letters, and in the second to their sounds. They correspond to three of the four cosmological worlds and also to the sefirotic realm, which is represented in the two passages combined by the two sefirot that are mentioned in them explicitly, Binah and Hokhmah, as well as the lowest *sefirah* of Malkhut, which is referred to implicitly qua the lowest world, Asiyah.³⁴ Although the subject matter of both passages is the ascent through the hierarchy of ontologically distinct worlds, they refer also to correspondingly distinct states of consciousness or awareness during prayer. In addition, we may assume that, when taken together, the two passages reflect

³³For the medieval tripartite division of the letters, see Paul Kraus, *Jabir: Memoires de l'Institute d'Egypt*, 45 (1943), part ii, 259, 268; Georges Vajda, "Les lettres et les sons dans la langue arabe d'après Abu-Hatim al-Razi," *Arabica* 8 (1961), 129 n. 1; Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1989), 5–6, 139; id., *The Mystical Experience of Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1988), 30–2; id., *Hasidism* (above, n. *), 164. For the origin of the Besht's fourfold division, similarly situated in the context of cleaving, see, for the time being, Abraham Abulafia's reference to the four levels on which the letters exist, in the passage adduced from one of his epistles in Idel, *Hasidism* (above, no. *), 230–31. See also Weiss, *Studies* (above, n. 1), 72, who argues that in some of his statements, the Great Maggid omits the first of the three levels, the World of Action, on the grounds of its incompatibility with his passive, quietist approach, which allegedly characterizes all mysticism as such! It seems to me that at least insofar as the Besht is concerned, this first level is present, albeit as a low, first rung on the ladder of mystical ascent, as is illustrated by the fact that in prayer, only children and the unlearned have to resort to the graphic images of the letters on the page (corresponding to the level of Action), while educated and more refined adults would know it by heart and be free to engage with the letters on the higher levels of "Speech" and "Thought."

³⁴The elevation of Malkhut—here referred to as Asiyah—to the level of the *sefirah* Binah is a *leitmotif* in the teachings transmitted in the name of the Besht. See, e.g., Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, *Ketonet pasim* (above, n. 18), 22, 294; id., *Ben porat yosef*, (above, n. 21), fol. 99d; *Keter shem tov* (above, n. 18), fol. 9b §67. Sometimes this elevation has to do with the "sweetening of stern judgments," namely, some form of transformation of evil into good, on high and below.

two basic and heuristically complementary modes of worship: in the first passage, the mode of worship that is appropriate for the spiritually diminished state of *katenut*, and in the second passage, three stages of worship that are specific to the expanded state of *gadelut*.

Notably, the instruction to “cleave to the letters” is explicit only in the first of the two passages, while the second refers to acts of speech, letter/sounds, and letters of thought without explicitly defining the engagement with them in terms of cleaving. Nevertheless, the notion of injecting all of one’s powers into the “acts of speech” is in my opinion equivalent to the notion of cleaving (*devekut*). This interpretation is reinforced by another passage from Aharon of Apta’s *Keter shem tov*, which deals, albeit not necessarily in the context of prayer, with the relation between cleaving and the ascent via all four worlds, from Asiyah to Atsilut:

When a person cleaves, he should go first to the world of Asiyah. Next he should soar higher and higher, and then even higher, to the world of angels and Ofanim. After that, to the world of Beri’ah, to the point of sensing in his mind that his thoughts have soared very high, to the world of Atsilut . . . Just like one who wanders from chamber to chamber [in his house], so should his thought wander in the supernal worlds.³⁵

It is not clear from this passage, which employs the term “cleaving” without specifying its object, precisely what it is that one is presumed to be cleaving to. The context may suggest that we are dealing with a purely mental operation, taking place within one’s thought without reference to any external object to cleave to. It is not impossible that attainment of the worlds beneath Beri’ah, representing the more preliminary stages of the process, took other forms and might have utilized, as in the earlier passage from *Keter shem tov*, the letters and their sounds as external objects of cleaving, while the passage directly above might be referring to the final phase of the experience, in which one contemplates internally the supernal worlds themselves.

³⁵ *Keter shem tov* (above, n. 18), 28a, §216. This teaching should be compared with *Tsava’at harivash*, (above, n. 18), fol. 11a §55, where an ascent through four modes of prayer—albeit without reference to their correspondence to the four worlds—is described: by body, by soul, by thought or mental prayer, and finally in a state of total oblivion of one’s corporeal existence, namely in the state of divestment of corporeality. The correspondence between three parts of the daily prayer and three of the four cosmic worlds, Beri’ah, Yetsirah, and Asiyah (but without reference to Atsilut) does, however, feature elsewhere in the same work. See also the two passages translated in Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* (above, n. 2), 154–7. For the assumption that by enunciating the text, the person engaged in prayer is transported from one world to another, in reference to all four worlds, see Yaakov Yosef ben Yehudah, *Sefer rav yeivi* (Ostrog, 1806), fol. 83c.

My claim that according to the Besht, cleaving or *devekut* is a multifaceted experience entailing both speech and thought is corroborated by Meir Harif Margoliot in one of the earliest and most reliable testimonies about the Besht in his youth:

I was warned by my great teachers of Torah and piety, among them my friend, the rabbi and pietist, paragon of the generation, our master and teacher Israel Besht . . . that the desirable intention when studying [Torah] for its own sake is to cleave, while in [a state of] holiness and purity, to the letters/sounds *in potentia* and *in actu*, in speech and in thought, [so as] to link part of one's *n-r-n-h-y* [the standard acronym for the five parts of the soul—*nefesh*, *ru'ah*, *neshamah*, *hayah* and *yehidah*] to the holiness of “the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light” [Prov. 6:23], [namely, to] the letters that bestow wisdom and emanate the influx of lights and vitality, which are true and eternal. When one merits to understand and to cleave to the holy letters/sounds, one is able to fathom from these very letter/sounds even future [events], and for this reason the Torah is referred to as “enlightening the eyes” [Ps. 19:9], for it enlightens the eyes of those who cleave to the letters in [a state of] holiness and purity, like the *Urim* and *Thummim*. Ever since my childhood, since I came to know, with loving attachment, my teacher . . . Israel [Besht] . . . I have known for certain that this was his custom.³⁶

The association above of “in speech and in thought” with cleaving to the “letters/sounds” constitutes, in part, a parallel to the Beshtian tradition quoted earlier from *Keter shem tov*.

Notably, both Torah study and prayer are vocal rituals, commonly performed in the company of others, and within Hasidism—often loudly, especially in the case of the Besht. Thus the Besht's *devekut* was not necessarily a private experience but could be achieved in public, within the communal

³⁶Meir Harif Margoliot, *Sod yakhin uvo'az*, ed. Nathan Margoliot (Jerusalem, 1990), chap. 2, 41–2. This passage has been mentioned or analyzed by several scholars. See Scholem, *Hashalav ha'aharon* (above, n. 2), 132–3; Weiss, *Studies* (above, n. 1), 59; id., “Talmud-torah leshitat r. israel besht,” in *Sefer hayovel tif'eret yisra'el*, ed. H. J. Zimmels et al. (London, 1967), 162–7; Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (above, n. 1), 312–3; Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1996), 135–6, where another English translation is offered; Pedaya, “Haba'al shem tov” (above, n. 11), 33, 58; Idel, *Hasidism* (above, n. *), 176, 178, 184, 356 n. 28. See also id., *Absorbing Perfections* (above, n. 3), 183–4, and *Enchanted Chains* (above, n. 3), 108–10.

prayer house.³⁷ On one occasion, the Great Maggid was apparently unable to bear the loud recitation of prayer by the Besht, his revered master, and had to leave the synagogue in order to pray alone in the study house.³⁸ The story may reflect an emblematic moment in the early history of Hasidism. It adumbrates a new tendency that emerged, possibly already near the end of the Besht's lifetime, toward some form of domestication of the wilder, uncanny aspects of hasidic praxis.³⁹ This tendency has inspired the scholarly interpretation of certain aspects of the Besht's praxis. The loud noises he emitted during the recitation of prayer, which could amount to a veritable cacophony, may indeed have offended the ears of such sensitive individuals as the Great Maggid, and given rise to silent contemplation of the written letters instead, as would appear from the teachings of some hasidic masters. But it seems that a number of modern scholars have shared the same sensibility, similarly privileging this more refined mode of cleaving in their presentation of the Besht.

By highlighting the sonorous performance of the text, and attributing to it much greater importance than scholarship has ascribed to it before, I mean much more than simply to insist on the correct interpretation of the term *otiyot* as it appears in certain contexts, in which I have chosen to translate it as "letter/sounds." The difference between vigorously vocalizing the letters and the silent contemplation of their graphic form is not a mere matter of nuance; it touches on a phenomenological distinction between two mystical approaches, both of which may be discerned in the wider corpus of Beshtian traditions. For one who cleaves to the printed letters, their images on the page are a given, and the amount of energy he invests in gazing at them is much smaller than the energy required of one whose objects of cleaving are vocalized, especially if he recites them at great speed, which the Besht is known to have recommended at times as a method of avoiding the intrusion of "alien thoughts."⁴⁰

³⁷For the function of the hasidic mystic within society rather than in solitary contemplation, see Gershom Scholem, "Mysticism and Society," *Diogenes* 58 (1967), 17–9. For the recitation of prayers aloud as a factor that unifies the worshippers, see Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 244.

³⁸See *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (above, n. 22), 51, §36; Etkes, *The Besht* (above, n. 1), 126–7. For other differences, in terms of both mystical praxis and doctrine, between the Besht and the Great Maggid, see Pedaya, "Haba'al shem tov" (above, n. 2), especially 30–2.

³⁹See Weiss, *Studies* (above, n. 1), 122 n. 50; Moshe Idel, "Yofyah shel ishah: letoledot hamistikah hayehudit," in *Bema'agelei hasidim: kovets mehkarim lezikhro shel profesor mordekhai vilenski*, ed. Immanuel Etkes et al. (Jerusalem, 1999), 317–34.

⁴⁰See Idel, "Tefilah, ekstazah, umahashavot zarot" (above, n. *), 58 n. 3, and the passage from *Likutim yekarim*, translated and discussed in Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (above, n. 1), 245.

An intense acceleration of inner activity⁴¹ becomes evident in the Besh-tian sources when we shift our focus from contemplating the form of letters to cleaving to their sound. Notably, it is difficult, though not impossible, to imagine cleaving to the written text in silent contemplation by way of atomizing, namely, breaking it into semantically meaningless sequences of consonants, for when one gazes at the page, one sees, in the first instance, whole sentences and words whose semantic cargo can hardly fail to impress itself on one's consciousness. In contrast, it is easier to imagine cleaving by way of breaking up the vocalized text into its constituent syllables, when each syllable is articulated as a distinct unit of speech. Moreover, contemplation of the printed letters implies a posture of passivity, as the letters already exist on the page, and the practitioner encounters them ready-made, while the vocal articulation of the text requires of him active participation in the production of sound, and in the case of the directives issued by the Besht, the investment of considerable vocal effort. The question may therefore be asked: how passive and contemplative can the mystic be when his objects of cleaving are so dynamic, when he not only generates them himself, but is also "cleaving"—attaching himself to them—and, in addition, as the Besht recommends, is expected to see or to cleave to the "lights" contained within the utterances, a state which, moreover, is sometimes depicted in terms of sexual union.⁴²

The answer would seem to be that vocal activity played a more substantial role in the teaching of the Besht than has previously been recognized, and that this factor shaped Hasidism dramatically, much more so than the contemplation of letters or the supernatural ability to see their "lights" and to receive by means of this both visual and auditory messages from the supernal worlds. While the intense vocalization of prayer, which was part and parcel of the daily ritual occupying much of the Baal Shem Tov's (and everyone else's) wakeful hours, had a significant impact on what was to become the hasidic mode of prayer, his other experiences, which were in any case rare and certainly extraordinary, remained unique to him. Whether or not these experiences took place in what we generally recognize as reality is a matter of belief, though they were undoubtedly central to the Besht's self-awareness and his image in the eyes of the others; but it is quite difficult to integrate them in any reliable reconstruction of the "actual" Besht.

⁴¹See Moshe Idel, "Performance, Intensification and Experience in Jewish Mysticism," *Archaeus* 13 (2009), 93–134.

⁴²I propose to elaborate on this issue elsewhere, in a fuller analysis of the Besht's experience of cleaving.