

TA'ANUG:
EROTIC DELIGHTS FROM KABBALAH TO HASIDISM

MOSHE IDEL

Describing feelings is a notoriously difficult thing to do. The problem is enhanced when those who do so use a language that is not their vernacular, and even more so when that language is part of sacred scriptures, which are understood as paradigmatic and as informing or teaching some sublime forms of experience that took place in the glorious past. Caught between the artificiality of the language and the authority of the sacred texts, the dimension of personal experience is often attenuated and sometimes even obliterated. Clichés, models, paragons, rituals, and ideals canonized in the ancient past are powerful obstacles to representing present experiences. These observations certainly apply to Jewish mystical literatures, written in their vast majority during the Middle Ages, and later, in Hebrew and Aramaic, under the strong impact of biblical and other Jewish canonical values and writings. Jewish thinkers and mystics used ancient terminology not only to express their own experiences during the Middle Ages, but also to develop complex systems of thought which emerged from the appropriation of significant parts of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, which were grafted on the canonical Jewish writings. As part of this process, among many other things they developed a variety of views regarding delight.¹

The ancient Hebrew vocabulary is rich in terms that can be translated as delight or pleasure, such as *ta'anug*, *'oneg*, *no'am*, *hana'ah*, *sha'ashu'a* (and in its plural form *sha'ashu'im*), or *nahat ruah*. Each of these terms has its own semantic field, but to describe them with sufficient nuance would go beyond the scope of this chapter. With regard to the following discussions, most important is the first of these six terms, which expresses a stronger form of pleasure than the others. In the Song of Songs 7:7, the term *'Ahavah* (love) accompanies *ta'anug* as a qualifier: *'ahavah be-ta'anugim*, literally a love [full] of delight. However, the expression here describes not a feeling, but the beloved herself; it has therefore quite a personal

¹ For concepts of delight in Jewish philosophy see the important survey by Berezin, "Felicity', 'Delight', and 'Virtue.'"

dimension and, we may assume, also carries some kind of corporeal implication. This is also the case with the other occurrence of a plural form that becomes more accepted in later layers of Hebrew; it is found in Ecclesiastes 2:8, where it takes the form *ta'anugot benei 'adam*, that is to say, the delights of men and women.

Even more important for the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism is the biblical assumption that man can delight in God. In various verses (Isaiah 58:14, Psalms 37:4, Job 22:6 and 27:10), the reflexive form of the verb *'ng, tit'aneg* refers to a contact with God, which means that someone may, in principle, take delight in God. The implication of this type of relationship is that God is not conceived of as substantially transcendental or unapproachable, even less unknown by man, but that, at least according to these biblical verses, a strong erotic relationship is deemed to be possible. Or, to put the following discussions in a wider perspective: on the one hand, the biblical theology of the covenant has sometimes been cast in marital imagery, thus creating a sense of intimacy which has some erotic aspects; and, on the other hand, the biblical and rabbinic rituals that were regarded as quintessential for this covenant were understood in rabbinic and later forms of Judaism as some kind of activity that creates intimacy, including an erotic one, between God as the male and the people of Israel—or its counterpart on high, *Knesset Israel*—as the female.² The theme of delight, found in other parts of the Bible, has been drawn into this development, thus creating the assumption that the rituals in question have some erotic valences, described by the term delight.

In the following, we shall survey a few of the instances in which *ta'anug* is used by Jewish mystics, but it should be noted that we will skip the most widespread application of the noun and the verb, related in rabbinic literature and in Jewish mysticism to the post-mortem delight of the righteous, or their souls, in Paradise known as beatitude. Thus the following discussions do not deal with post-mortem beatific visions, but with experiences that take place while the mystic is alive. Still, those personal eschatological descriptions would deserve separate treatment, since they also had an impact on how mystics understood their experiences while alive, that is, as an adumbration of the Paradisiacal states, or an actualization of future experiences by elite figures in the present.

² See Idel, "Rabbinism versus Kabbalism," and *Kabbalah and Eros*, 22–38.

Taanug: Mysticism, Ritual, Theurgy, and Theosophy

Let me start with a survey of the issue that is central to our discussion below: the nexus between delight and ritual. Such a linkage occurs explicitly in the Bible (Isaiah 58:13), where the Sabbath is called *Oneg* (delight), and has been reiterated thousands of times in subsequent Jewish literatures.³ In rabbinic literature, the performance of the complex rituals connected to the rest that is required during the Sabbath has been understood as inducing a state of delight without further systemic explanations. Indeed, even a Jewish philosopher who was not much inclined to appreciate the need to gladden the body, such as the early thirteenth century R. David Qimhi, wrote in his commentary on Isaiah that

it is a positive commandment to cause delight to the body during the day of Sabbath by pleasant and good food, since by distinguishing it from the other days in a positive manner he will remember the creation, and that God created the world *ex nihilo* and rested on the seventh day, and because of it he will praise God and exalt him by his mouth and heart, and his soul will delight.⁴

Qimhi sees the Sabbath as the opportunity for progressing from bodily pleasure to spiritual delight; the latter, in its turn, is connected to the pure contemplation of God, detached from the demands of the body, which have already been satisfied. Evidently, only the soul of the observer of the Sabbath ritual enjoys the experience—God's reaction is neither specified nor assumed.

In the Kabbalistic literature, however, the delight of the Sabbath was interpreted in terms of the affinities that were believed to exist between this day and a supernal divine power, referred to in many cases as Sabbath: with the *sefirah* either of *Binah*, or *Yessod*, or *Malkhut*.⁵ The Sabbath as a supernal power constellates the time of the earthly Sabbath, which is the time of delight in general and, according to a widespread view, also the time of conjugal union.⁶

³ On the connections between delight and Sabbath in rabbinic literature and in Kabbalah see the important monographs of Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 63–64, 152 note 94, 154 note 103; and *Sod ha-Shabbat*, 54–55, 167, 179–180; and Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, III, 1215–1238.

⁴ See his commentary on Isaiah 58:13, printed in *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, fol. 83d.

⁵ See the studies mentioned above, note 3.

⁶ Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 289–296.

A brief though quite significant mention of delight is found already in the *Book of Bahir*, one of the earliest and most important documents of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, which emerged at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The anonymous Kabbalist writes: “Habakuk said ‘I know that my prayer has being received in a delightful manner, and I too have been delighted.’”⁷ This attribution of delight to the prophet has no parallels in the Bible. We may assume that the text means to refer to a double delight: the divine one that emerges in response to the prayer of the Kabbalist, and that of the Kabbalist himself. The first one is a variant of the earlier rabbinic statements according to which God wishes to receive the prayers of righteous and is affected by them.⁸ The second one is part of a rabbinic view, already described above, which assumes that the ritual of Sabbath generates delight.⁹ We may surmise therefore that prayer is an action that induces delight within the divine realm: a view that I propose to describe as a theurgical operation and which reflects a position that can be discerned also elsewhere in the *Book of Bahir*.¹⁰ Thus a ritual event is understood as generating delight both in the divine and in the human realms. This simultaneity is important, since it attributes to the most widespread ritual in rabbinic and Kabbalistic Judaism an overarching status: its performance generates delight on the two different levels of reality, divine and human. Given the centrality of *Sefer ha-Bahir* in the history of early Kabbalah, we may assume that this short statement left its imprint on many discussions involving delight, even when the title of the book was not explicitly quoted.

For how delight is related to another theosophical stand, we may quote an early thirteenth-century Kabbalist, R. Ezra ben Shlomo of Gerona, who resorted several times to the noun *ta’anug*:

“Let him kiss me by the kisses [of his mouth]”:¹¹ Those are the words of the glory¹² that desires, as one who wants to ascend, to adhere [in order] to be enlightened by the supernal light, which is not imagined,

⁷ See Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, 145 note 48, and for the Kabbalists who used this section see Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, 49.

⁸ See, e.g., *Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah*, fol. 60b. On Rabbinic theurgy see, e.g., Lorberbaum, *Image of God*, 156–169 (Hebrew), and Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*, 28–46, 91–97 (Hebrew).

⁹ See above, note 3.

¹⁰ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 161–162.

¹¹ Song of Songs 1:2.

¹² Namely the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*. See Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah I*, 27 note 75 (Hebrew), and Vajda, *Le commentaire d’Ezra de Gerone*, 56.

but ascends [only] in thought and as an idea, and this is the reason why it is addressed [in the verse] in a third person [namely “his mouth”]. And the kiss is an allegory for the delight of the adherence of the soul to the “source of life”,¹³ and the “addition of holy spirit” and this is the reason why it is written “by kisses” [*mi-neshiqqot*], since each and every cause¹⁴ receives thought and addition from the sweet light¹⁵ and from that pure splendor.¹⁶

I understand this passage—and some of its parallels, which are even more strongly influenced by Neoplatonism—as describing two moments in the mystical life: one is the conjunction with the source, and the other is its sequel, namely the augmentation of the Holy Spirit as the result of that adherence.¹⁷ If a nexus is assumed to exist between the two moments, the question may be asked: whose, exactly, is the delight? If it is the human soul alone who enjoys the experience of delight, it is difficult to understand why an additional effluence of the Holy Spirit is generated. However, if we attribute the delight to the hypostasis, designated as “source of life,” that enjoys the adherence of the soul, then we may regard the increased influx as resulting from the excitation of that hypostatic level of divinity by the mystic’s soul. Indeed, as we learn later on the same page, the “addition of the holy spirit” refers to an influx pouring down upon the “seventy-two names,”¹⁸ and the phrase “the addition of blessing” refers to a process that takes place within the *sefirot*.¹⁹ In any case, it should be emphasized that an explicit link between adherence of thought and addition of blessing or influx is found also in other instances in R. Ezra. This allows us to assume that we are dealing here with a stable connection, not just a casual one.²⁰

¹³ Presumably the first or the second *sefirah*. See Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, I, 32 note 120. See also the footnote of Tishby, in his edition of R. Azriel of Gerone, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, 35 note 13 (Hebrew).

¹⁴ I.e. *sefirah*.

¹⁵ *Or matoq*. This expression occurs also in R. Azriel of Gerone’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, 34, in a similar context, i.e. dealing with the return of the soul to its source and the joy it enjoys.

¹⁶ *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, II, 485. For another English translation see Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona*, 39–40; Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, 166–167 (Hebrew); Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being*, 264. For the occurrence of *ta’anug* in some other instances in this book, see *Kitvei ha-Ramban* II, 491.

¹⁷ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 46–47.

¹⁸ *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, II, 485, 498. The phrase occurs also on 530.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, II, 485, 526. See especially Vajda, *Le commentaire d’Ezra de Gerone*, 257 and the pertinent footnotes.

²⁰ See the passage in R. Ezra, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, fol. 114b–115a, published in Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, 119–120 (Hebrew), with the pertinent bibliography.

By attributing delight to supernal causes as well, I do not mean to deny the possibility that, in R. Ezra, the soul is also delighted, as we can learn from the phrase *ta'anug ha-neshamah*—the delight of the soul—that occurs a bit further on the same page.²¹ My assumption is that by ascending on high, the soul enters the theosophical system and undergoes processes similar to those of the divine powers. Thus in this case too delight has a double subject, just as in the *Book of Bahir*. Indeed, elsewhere in this commentary, the term *ta'anug* refers, quite plausibly, to the reception of the divine influx by the supernal feminine power, the *Shekhinah*.²² In fact, in R. Ezra's theosophy, there is a strong parallelism between the last *sefirah* and the human soul.²³ Let me point out that the nexus between *devequt* (adherence or union) and delight became quite widespread in Hasidism, to such an extent that it is quite difficult to distinguish between the two terms.²⁴

In a collection of Kabbalistic traditions written down at the end of the fifteenth century, perhaps in the Ukraine or in the Byzantine Empire, by a certain R. Moshe of Kiev, we find a clear expression (that may well reflect an earlier tradition) of connections being drawn between delight, on the one hand, and a theosophical-theurgical stand, on the other:

The lower entities leave an imprint on the supernal one²⁵ by their actions, and this is the reason why each man should delight during the elected day because of the delight of the King and the Queen. And whoever adds to this delight, it is [even] better.²⁶

The members of the “royal” pair mentioned here are the *sefirot Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, that is to say, the male and the female divine manifestations respectively, and their erotic union is considered to be of paramount importance for the state of harmony in the higher and lower worlds. Their delight depends upon the human performance here below, and hence by adding delight below a person induces an addition of delight on high. Therefore we have here a first explicit testimony for the induc-

²¹ *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, II, 485.

²² *Ibid.*, II, p. 486.

²³ See R. Azriel's *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadat*, 12–13.

²⁴ See, e.g., the many occurrences in R. Benjamin of Zalisch, *Ahavat Dodim*, 22, 23, 52, 53, 215 etc.

²⁵ I.e. the sefirotic powers.

²⁶ *Sefer Shushan Sodot*, fol. 77b, par. 473. On the possibility that this collection of traditions has been influential on Hasidism, see Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 262, 311, 315–317 (Hebrew). On Sabbath and theurgy see also Idel, “Sabbath,” 74–79.

tion of delight on high by means of human delight, understood as a theurgical activity. However, in this instance, the processes taking place within the divine world as the result of the human delight—what I call theurgy—are not described as having an effect outside this world, namely in the lower realms of reality (which would turn them into an instance of magic).

Let me now turn to the eighteenth century, where we find a dramatic increase of interest in the nexus between delight and ritual. For example, R. Nathan-Neta' of Sieniawa, a mid-eighteenth-century author of a commentary on the prayer-book, entitled *'Olat Tamid* writes that

Sometimes, when a person recites the verses of the Psalms, a voice is stirred up for him, [namely] a voice to him, and it is from his [own] soul, for out of his joy a great voice enters him, to urge the love of lovers. This happens sometimes even when the person does not know the intention²⁷ [and nevertheless] his soul knows and enjoys a spiritual delight. In the *Qeriyat Shema'* as well, a person brings upon himself, with each and every [pronounced] letter, light to the soul [and to] the 248 limbs. And it is incumbent [upon the person] to pray with intention [as far as concerns] each and every [pronounced] letter, since [he] hints to the supernal worlds, by each letter [pronounced] in holiness.²⁸

The delight mentioned here is related, as we learn from the second part of the passage, to a dwelling of divine light upon the soul and body of the person who prays. This experience does not depend upon whether the text someone is ritualistically performing is understood, but on the capacity of the sounds of the text to draw down the light within this world, thereby causing human delight.

However, the unquestionable peak of interest in the mystical aspects of delight occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century, basically in Hasidic literature. The transition from Kabbalah to the first Hasidic writings marks a further step in the process of the eroticization of Jewish mysticism. As we shall see below, the Hasidic literature resorts to the term *ta'anug* much more often—possibly as much as ten times more often—than is the case in the much more extensive corpus of Kabbalistic literature. This statistic preponderance is, in my opinion, of the utmost importance in order to appreciate the new strong emphasis on delight in Hasidism, which is less concerned with discussions of the coupling of the divine pair, the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* of

²⁷ *Kavanah* namely the meaning of the words.

²⁸ R. Nathan-Neta' of Sieniawa, *'Olat Tamid*, I, fol. 33b, and see also *ibid.*, fols. 47b–48a.

Kabbalah, and much more with the feeling of delight, which is related to the direct contact between the worshipper and God.²⁹

There can be no doubt that R. Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov [1699–1760] (known also as the Besht), the founder of eighteenth-century Hasidism, put more emphasis on the importance of delight as a religious value than any other Jewish mystic before him. More thorough research into his seminal views on the topic is a desideratum, and in the future I hope to dedicate a separate study to them. For example, the affinity between delight and worship is found already in a statement attributed to him, which describes the *Tzaddiq* as “one who delights in the worship of God.”³⁰ According to another view of the Besht, the alternation between coming closer to God and retreating from him, *ratzo va-shov*, is intended to continuously recreate the feeling of delight that is “the quintessence of the worship of God.”³¹ In the name of the Besht, we learn from a passage in one of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy's books that

there are ten *sefirot* in man, who is called microcosm, since the thought is named 'Abba' [Father], and after the *Tzimtzum* it was called 'Imma' [Mother] and so on, down to faith, which is called “two loins of truth”; and delight [*ta'anug*] in worship of God is called *Yessod*, *Tzaddiq*, and sign of the Covenant.³²

This is a comparison between microcosm and theocosm. However, for our purpose it is important to emphasize the affinity between *ta'anug* and the *membrum virile*. Though it is the worship of God that is explicitly invoked as generating the delight, its occurrence in the immediate conceptual vicinity of the “sign of Covenant”—a widespread term for circumcision—and the *sefirah* of *Yessod* do not leave any place for ambiguity about the fact that the two concepts, delight and the phallus, are directly related (we will discuss this topic in more detail in section 5).

The Great Maggid of Medziretch, one of the main disciples of the Besht, asserts that

²⁹ Idel, *Hasidism*, 120–121, 136–137, 140–143, 153, 234–235, 262, 328, 370; Etkes, *Ba'al Hashem*, 140 (Hebrew); Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 144–147, 285–286 (Hebrew); and Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 121, 187, 218–220, 352–353, 358, 360, 370.

³⁰ R. Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov, *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fols. 86a and 170a.

³¹ Cf. Ba'al Shem Tov, *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fols. 92b, 139c; compare also the Great Maggid's *Keter Shem Tov*, fol. 16b.

³² *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 86a. See also Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 150–151, 352 n. 366. For a parallel discussion found in the same book see below, section 5.

when [the sons of] Israel perform the will of the Place [in Hebrew a term for God] they are adding delight on high...when [the sons of] Israel are repenting and cause the return of everything to its source, they add delight on high.³³

We witness here the phenomenon of a rabbinic theurgical term being substituted by *Ta'anug*: in the case of the rabbinic view, Israel, or the righteous, provide sustenance [*mefarnesim*] to God,³⁴ but in Hasidism this becomes "Israel provides delight to God."³⁵ Elsewhere the Great Maggid described those who serve God in order to induce delight, just as sons who delight their father.³⁶ In a tradition that originates from the Great Maggid's circle, it is said that by means of praying someone is inducing delight into God, that He then dwells within the world, and hence the world is replete with delight as well.³⁷ Likewise, the Great Maggid's son, R. Abraham Friedmann (also called the Angel), mentions two forms of worship: that of the righteous persons [the *Tzaddiqim*] who perform the commandments in order to induce delight into God, and another—described as higher, and performed by the greater *Tzaddiq*—that intends to bring grace to the entire world.³⁸ According to this master, it is by means of his very annihilation that the *Tzaddiq* draws the divine revelation down into the world here below.³⁹ Thus the theurgy of delight is understood as inferior to the process—to which I would refer as magic, as indicated above—of the drawing down of the divine influx.⁴⁰ The specific sequence between the two stages may be significant: the delight, or erotic excitement, which the worshiper induces in God, creates the influx, which can be imagined as an emission that enters the world. Indeed, according to a viewpoint that we find in the Hasidic masters, the world in its entirety is conceived of as a female in comparison to God, imagined as a male.⁴¹

³³ *Or ha-Emmet*, fol. 51b.

³⁴ See e.g., *Midrash Zutta on Shir ha-Shirim*, ch. I.

³⁵ See the collection of traditions from the Great Maggid's circle, entitled *Or ha-Emmet*, fol. 53c. Compare also to his *Or Torah*, fol. 27b.

³⁶ See the passage adduced in the name of the Great Maggid by R. Levi Isaac of Berdichev, *Qdushat Levi ha-Shalem*, 100 translated and analyzed in Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 155. See also the same tradition *Qdushat Levi ha-Shalem*, 194.

³⁷ See Schatz Uffenheimer, *ibidem*, 162. See, also *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 93–96.

³⁸ *Hesed le-Avraham*, fol. 7bc.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 12c.

⁴⁰ See Idel, *Hasidism*, 65–81.

⁴¹ See, e.g., R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or ha-Me'ir*, fol. 16c; and Idel, *Hasidism*, 134.

A similar distinction between delight and drawing down is found in another Hasidic tradition, from the school of a disciple of the Great Maggid, R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev:

Sometimes the letters rule over man, and sometimes man rules over the letters. This means that when man pronounces speeches with power and devotion, the speeches then rule over him, because the [divine] light within the letters confers to him vitality and delight so that he may address speeches to the Creator; but this man cannot abolish anything bad by performing other combinations [of letters]. But when someone pronounces speeches with devotion and brings all his power within the letters and cleaves to the light of the Infinite, Blessed be He, that dwells within the letters, this person is higher than the letters and he combines letters as he likes... and he will be capable of drawing down the influx, the blessing, and the good things.⁴²

By investing all one own's power and devotion in recitation, a person can take over the initiative and rule the letters; by combining them in new ways, he can thus govern the whole of reality.

This second aspect of Hasidism I would call "magical". In contrast, the righteous of a lesser kind (the "theurgical" one, described in the first part of the passage) does not invest "all" his power. Hence he is only given delight, without being capable of transforming reality: the process remains limited to that of his own self-transformation.

That religious deeds intend to create delight in God is particularly conspicuous in a book of R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, another student of the Great Maggid, who gave a brief and fine description:

He who directs all his deeds in order to create delight for his Creator, draws down the *'Alef*, the symbol of the Ruler of the World, in all his deeds. But if he takes the delight for himself [alone], not in order to create a delight in his Creator, he is separating the *'Alef*, the Ruler of the world.⁴³

Therefore the act of drawing down is part of a broader scheme that begins with the induction of delight into the higher world, apparently envisioned as male (as we saw above), but not for the sake of the operator alone. For the concept of mystical attainment as being generated

⁴² R. Aharon of Zhitomir, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 40ab. See also *ibid.*, II, fol. 47d. On the phenomenon of bringing down the influx by means of intense study see Idel, *Hasidism*, 182–185.

⁴³ R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma'ayan ha-Hokhmah* (Podgorze, 1897), fol. 38c. For the two stages, namely inducing delight and then drawing down influx, see also R. Israel of Ruzhyn, *Sefer Irin Qaddishin Tanyyana* (1907), fol. 10d.

by the drawing forth of *ʿAleph*—a symbol of God—into something, especially the mystic himself, there are several parallels in Hasidism.⁴⁴ In the passage just quoted, it is sharply distinguished from an egoistic type of delight that will actually separate God from the mystic: it is only a devotional mood, which intends to create delight in God, that will draw Him down within the mystic and his deeds. We can discern here an attempt at minimizing the magical aspect of the act of “drawing down”. Thus, for example, we learn from some traditions belonging to the school of the Great Maggid, who was R. Israel of Kuznitz’s teacher, that the *Tzaddiq* induces the emergence of a feminine facet in the divine. R. Levi Isaac adduces, in the name of his master the Great Maggid, the following passage:

As is well-known, the word *ʿZo*⁴⁵ refers to the feminine facet [of God] . . . [if] the quintessence of the worship of God is to cause delight to the Creator, blessed be He, then the Creator is referred to as if he is a Recipient, this being the meaning of the verse: “This [*zo*] came from God”⁴⁶ namely as if the Holy One, Blessed be He, implies the facet of the female, the facet of *ʿZo*, which is a wondrous thing in our eyes.⁴⁷

The ritual is understood as creating delight for God, perceived now under the aspect of a recipient, that is to say as a feminine entity that is affected by a masculine one: basically a male worshiper. This inversion of the traditional roles is reminiscent of the theurgical activity in the mainstream of Kabbalah, where the divine realm is imagined to be deeply affected by human activity.⁴⁸ A similar idea is found in another important disciple of the Great Maggid, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apta. In his widespread *ʿOhev Israel* he distinguishes between two dimensions of the worshiper:

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 65.

⁴⁵ This is the feminine demonstrative pronoun in Hebrew.

⁴⁶ Psalms 118, 23.

⁴⁷ R. Levi Isaac, *Qdushat Levi ha-Shalem*, 195 and see also *ibid.*, 194 and 353. This tradition was adduced and discussed by R. Moshe Eliaqum Beri’ah, *Da’at Moshe*, fol. 75a, and see also his relative, R. Elimelekh ben Hayyim of Kuznitz, a descendant of the Kuznitzer Rebbe, in his *ʿImrei ʿElimelekh*, fols. 6d, 136d. Compare also to a similar interpretation in a collection of the views of the Great Maggid, *Shemu’ah Tovah*, fols. 51a, 55b, 94ab and *ʿOr ha-ʿEmmet*, fol. 6d; R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma’ayan ha-Hokhmah*, fols. 39b, 86ab, 93b, and R. Meir ha-Levi of Apta, *ʿOr la-Shamayim*, fol. 98d. On the experience of delight while studying the Torah see the quote in the name of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, adduced in R. Benjamin of Zalisch, *Ahavat Dodim*, 20–21. More on delight in the last book; see, e.g., the interesting discussions on 24, 85.

⁴⁸ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 156–199.

everything in the world necessarily possesses aspects of male and female. This is especially true in the case of the worshiper of God, who has to possess the aspects of male and female...namely that of emanator and recipient. The male aspect means, for example, that which is always emanating: by dint of his holiness and great cleaving, and the purity of his thought, he emanates a spiritual delight into the supernal lights, worlds and attributes. And he has also a female aspect, namely that which is the recipient and draws down to the lower worlds the influx from the supernal worlds, and to all [the members of] the community of Israel whatever they need and all kinds of good graces... The male aspect causes an influx on high and this influx becomes semen and becomes a male aspect with respect to the female...and the female aspect of the *Tzaddiq* is his faculty of receiving the supernal influx and of drawing from above to below all kinds of good things and material issues.⁴⁹

The recipient of delight is therefore defined, by the very quality of receptivity, as female, independent of any question of gender or sex. This approach, reminiscent of Jung's views of male and female as two qualities found in both men and women, is here part of the more abstract and ontological category of emanator and recipient, stemming from Neoplatonic sources. Inducing delight defines, or redefines the hierarchical relationship and the gender of the factors involved in the experience. In the same vein we read in R. Nahman of Bratzlav, one of the prodigies of Hasidic world:

It is known that the recipient of delight from someone else is called a female... Therefore when the Holy One, blessed be He, receives delight from the prayer of Israel it is as if He becomes a female in relation to Israel...since by the smell that God receives from the prayers of Israel He [then] becomes the secret of the female.⁵⁰

Thus, we may conclude that both in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah and in Hasidism the ritual—consisting basically, although not exclusively, of prayer—is widely understood as having a real impact on the divinity: it induces delight and generates a state in the divine world that may be understood as feminine. Unlike the hypostatic feminine power in the theosophical Kabbalah, which is affected but not generated by human actions, in Hasidic texts it is assumed that the feminine aspect in divin-

⁴⁹ R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apta, *Ohev Israel*, fol. 81cd. On delight see also *ibid.*, fols. 80cd, 81ab, 83cd, 85b. Compare also to R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma'ayan Hokhmah*, fol. 93b.

⁵⁰ *Liqqutei Moharan*, Mahadura Qamma, no. 73.

ity emerges as the result of a specific ritual act that induces delight.⁵¹ This entity constitutes a form of relationship between the human and the divine, rather than a distinct female hypostasis, and this correlative situation is pertinent for the understanding of the above passages. Likewise, the two aspects of the righteous—male and female—do not pertain to sex or gender, or to changes on that level.

I refer to this two-tiered relationship between the human elite—the righteous—and the divine as the mystical-magical model that informed many discussions in Kabbalah and Hasidism.⁵² Among the main interpretations of this model is the erotic one that emphasizes the importance of inducing delight as the first stage of this model. While marginal in the general economy of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, this erotic interpretation of the mystical-magical model moved to center stage in Hasidic literature.

Delight in Ecstatic Kabbalah

Most of the discussions above assume that it is possible for ritual to have an impact on the complex divine realm, mainly understood as compounded of ten *sefirot*. The induction of delight was therefore part of a more elaborate theory concerning the religious task of the Kabbalist, who had to perform the commandments in such a way as to contribute to improving the relations between the divine powers. While the main trend of Kabbalah therefore attributed great importance to the correspondence between human deeds and divine powers, a somewhat later Kabbalistic school, developing in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, focused upon human activity aimed at a direct contact with the divine. One of the signs of this contact was the feeling of delight that the mystic felt during his mystical experience. Many of the expressions of delight found in this current, known as “ecstatic Kabbalah,” owe much to neo-Aristotelean and Neoplatonic philosophical texts, where delight was described as accompanying the supreme human activities, such as the act of intellection and adherence to supernal spheres. This trend draws its inspiration mainly from the kind of perspective

⁵¹ See also R. Abraham Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Israel*, fols. 83cd, 85c; R. Jacob Isaac ha-Levi Horowitz, known as the Hozeh of Lublin, *Zot Zikkaron*, fol. 3b, etc.; and R. Yehudah Leib of Yanov, *Qol Yehudah*, fol. 5c.

⁵² Idel, *Hasidism*, 95–145, especially 133–140.

exemplified by Maimonides' descriptions of the pleasure and joy of the few *perfecti* in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:51.⁵³

Essential for understanding both Maimonides and other Jewish philosophers, as compared to the Kabbalists and the Hasidic masters discussed above, is the fact that while the mystic feels delight when he is in cognitive contact with God, God as an intellect does not share this delight. The impassible God of the philosophers intelligizes constantly, but without being himself subject to the feeling of delight. Unlike Maimonides' earlier discussions of the delight that is the patrimony of the righteous in their post-mortem existence as part of their intellectual activity, the passage in his *Guide of the Perplexed* referred to above deals with a near-to-death experience of delight, which may occur in quite exceptional individuals.

Much more Plotinian, on the other hand, is the language used to describe a mystical experience in a treatise known in Hebrew as *Peraqim be-Hatzlahah* and attributed to Maimonides. Written originally in Arabic, presumably in the mid-thirteenth century and with some relation to Sufism or to Jewish Sufi circles in the Near East, it evinces some interesting parallels to ecstatic Kabbalah. Here the nexus between ritual, ecstasy, and delight is quite explicit:

The one who prays shall turn towards God, stand on his feet and feel delight in his heart and his lips, his hands stretched forward, and his organs of speech speak while the other parts [of his body] are all afraid and trembling, while he does not cease uttering sweet sounds; [then] he makes himself broken-hearted, prepares himself, beseeches, bows down and prostrates himself weeping, as if he is before a great and awesome king. And feels a sensation of sinking and trembling until he finds himself in the world of intellective beings⁵⁴

Apart from these two examples—Maimonides' *Guide* and the *Peraqim be-Hatzlahah*—the term delight occurs only rarely in philosophical sources until the mid-thirteenth century.⁵⁵ However, in the ecstatic Kabbalah

⁵³ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 627–628.

⁵⁴ *Peraqim be-Hatzlahah*, 7. The Hebrew translation uses the term *ta'anug*, which is translated as delight. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, 167 n. 225; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 93, 98, 165. Compare also to Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, 173–177. On Jewish Sufism in the thirteenth century Near East see the numerous studies of Fenton, e.g., “Judaism and Sufism,” 755–768 or Fenton, ed. & tr., *The Treatise of the Pool*. This is a Plotinian stand. See the Jewish appropriations of the theory of ascent to the intellectual world discussed in Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 41, 51, 168–169; and Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 192–193.

⁵⁵ See Berezin, “‘Felicity’, ‘Delight’, and ‘Virtue.’”

of Abraham Abulafia (1240–c.1291) we find numerous instances of the term *ta'anug*—more, in fact, than in the entire philosophical and Kabbalistic literature before him. Already in one of his earliest writings, Abulafia writes

And I see that up to Him [i.e., God], the quintessence of all experience arrives, as there comes from Him all the wisdom of logic [and] to every intellectual soul [comes] the delight of vision.⁵⁶

A fuller discussion of the concept of delight, in an explicitly erotic context, is found in his *'Or ha-Sekhel*, written in the early eighties of the thirteenth century in Messina:

The name [of God, namely the Tetragrammaton] is composed of two parts since there are two parts of love [divided between] two lovers and the [parts of] love turn into one [entity] when love becomes actuated. The divine intellectual love and the human intellectual love are conjoined, being one. Exactly in the same manner the name [of God] includes [the words] One, because of the connection of the human existence with the divine existence during the [act of] intellection—which is identical with the intellect in [its] existence—until he and He become one [entity]. This is the [great] power of man: he can link the lower part with the higher one, and the lower [part] will ascend and cleave to the higher, and the higher [part] will descend and will kiss the entity ascending towards it, like a bridegroom actually kisses his bride out of his great and real desire, characteristic of the delight [*ta'anug*] of both, from the power of the name [of God].⁵⁷

In the context of the present discussion, the salient point is the claim that the two loves are but two parts of a more comprehensive unit reflected by the structure of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton, which in terms of gematria comprises the value of the Hebrew words *Ahavah* (= love) and *'Ehad* (= one), both words having the numerical value of 13. Therefore “two loves” and “two times one” are comprised in the numerical value of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton, which is 26. Abulafia apparently implies that the union between the two types of love, or the two types of existence, is possible because of the fact that they are derived from a basic unity (similar to how Plato in his *Symposium* envisioned the two halves of the male and the female as having originally been part of one organic unity). Spiritually, the lower human love can meet and be transformed into a more comprehensive

⁵⁶ *Maftelah ha-Re'ayon*, fol. 21a.

⁵⁷ *'Or ha-Sekhel*, fol. 115a, and Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 66–67, where I suggested that this passage is a possible source for Spinoza's *amor dei intellectualis*.

entity, which also comprises the higher divine love. We thus witness an interesting case of *unio mystica* by means of love and intellection. The mystic feels delight; and the question that arises from this passage is whether God, or the cosmic Active Intellect that may play the role of the bridegroom, is delighted too. The end of the passage suggests that the question should be answered in the affirmative. This also seems to be the case in another passage: in Abulafia's commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, entitled *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, where he writes about

the cleaving of all [human] knowledge to the Name in its activities, in the secret of the delight of bridegroom and bride. And it is known that this wondrous way is accepted by all the "prophetic" disciples, who write what they write according to the Holy Spirit, and they are those who know the ways of prophecy.⁵⁸

The main gematria—referred as the secret—that informs this passage is *ta'anug* = 529 = *ha-hatan ve-ha-kallah* (the groom and the bride), which suggests that delight is not just a pure spiritual or intellectual feeling but has some erotic overtones for both of the entities implied in the process. The same gematria appears also in another passage stemming from Abulafia's circle, found at the end of the anonymous *Sefer ha-Tzeruf*, where the phrase *ha-hokhmah ha-'Elohit* (the science of the Divine) = 529 is adduced in this context, thus concisely expressing the main features of Abulafia's view of the subject:⁵⁹ the study of metaphysics is a delight, and it points to the common delight of the human and the cosmic intellect. In any case, here and in the following passages delight is understood as basically derived from an intellectual act.

A leitmotif in these and other passages is that the feeling of delight not only accompanies mystical experiences, but that this pleasure may in fact be the aim of mystical practice. In his *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia writes: "the letter is like matter, and the vocalization is like spirit, which moves the matter, and the apprehension of the intention of the one moved and of the mover, is like the intellect; and it is that which acts in spirit and matter, while the delight received by the one who apprehends, constitutes the telos."⁶⁰ According to the Aristotelian hierarchy of the four causes customary in the Middle Ages, the ultimate cause,

⁵⁸ *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, fol. 65b, and see now ed. Gross, 113.

⁵⁹ *Sefer ha-Tzeruf*, fol. 35a. The science of the divine is mentioned also immediately before the passage quoted from *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*. See note 59 above.

⁶⁰ *'Or ha-Sekhel*, fols. 106b–107a.

the purpose or the *telos* of a thing, is the most important of the four.⁶¹ For that reason, this passage of Abulafia may be understood as implying the primacy of delight over apprehension. However, elsewhere in his writings the distinction between apprehension and pleasure is not always so sharp, although there too delight is the final *telos*. In his commentary on the Pentateuch, he writes

The purpose of marriage of man and woman is none other than their union, and the purpose of union is impregnation, and the purpose of impregnation is [bearing] offspring, and the purpose of [offspring] is study [i.e., of Torah by the child born], and the purpose of that [study] is apprehension [of the Divine], and its purpose is the continuing maintenance of the one who apprehends with delight gained from his apprehension [*ta'anug hasagato*], and this is the significance of the circle of creation.⁶²

We might describe this approach as “intellectual hedonism,” since the *telos* of the entire creation is the achievement of spiritual delight. In addition to these theoretical expressions dealing with delights of the intellect, there are descriptions of the mystical experience itself and of the sensation of delight accompanying it. According to the quotations just given, it would seem that only the lower intellect enjoys the feeling of delight, because it alone intelligizes the higher intellect. In another instance, we again find an emphasis on the delight of the lower entity. Although it does not use the term *ta'anug*, the following text represents an interesting parallel to the passage quoted earlier:

And you shall feel in yourself an additional spirit arousing you and passing over your entire body and causing you pleasure, and it shall seem to you as if balm has been placed upon you, from your head to your feet, one or more times, and you shall rejoice and enjoy it very much, with gladness and trembling: gladness to your soul and trembling of your body, like one who rides rapidly on a horse, who is happy and joyful, while the horse trembles beneath him.⁶³

⁶¹ See, e.g., Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:13, “its object or its final end, which is the most important of the four causes.” Further on, in the immediate vicinity of the passage from *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia writes, “and the purpose is the most elevated of the reasons.”

⁶² *Ma'alah ha-Tokhahot*, fol. 7b (Gross, ed., 12); cf. his *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, fol. 128a, “and according to the prophet who derives delight in attaining the form of prophecy [i.e., a mystical experience].”

⁶³ *’Otzar Eden Ganuz*, fols. 163b–164a.

The comparison of the soul and the body to a horse and its rider is quite a common one in the Middle Ages.⁶⁴ Abulafia is ready to consider images related to physical pleasure as an appropriate means of expressing feelings that accompany his mystical experience. The ecstatic Kabbalist does not suggest anywhere that this image might be inappropriate to its subject; and on this point Abulafia in fact departs radically from Maimonides' teaching. Following Aristotle,⁶⁵ Maimonides sees the apprehension of the Divine as the highest goal of human activity; the delight which accompanies it is only a side-effect of this activity.⁶⁶ Abandoning Maimonides' approach in this respect, Abulafia crystallized a view—apparently based upon personal experience, and perhaps also influenced by Sufi claims—according to which there is an additional stage, higher than the acquisition of intellectual perfection, consisting of delight derived from the mystical experience. In another discussion found in his *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, the experience of delight accompanies the acceleration of the ritual actions comprising the mystical technique articulated by Abulafia.⁶⁷ The emphasis on delight in a corporeal context is found in R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar's *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, another ecstatic Kabbalistic book written in Messina, where Abulafia's disciple writes about the culmination of his mystical exercises: “behold, I was anointed from head to foot as with the anointing oil, and we were surrounded with great joy, and I do not know how to compare to it any image because of its great spirituality and the sweetness of its delight; all this occurred to your servant at the beginning [of the career as Kabbalist].”⁶⁸ Here we have the very rare case of a first-person confession as to the savorous nature of the mystical experience. A feeling of delight that is much less corporeal than the one depicted in the two preceding passages is found in Abulafia's Commentary on the Pentateuch, written in 1289, in the same city:

⁶⁴ See the medieval material gathered by Malter, “Personifications of Soul and Body,” 466–467.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics XII*, 7, f. 1072b; *Ethics*, end of ch. 7, 1174a–1176a; *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:2; *Haqdamah le-Pereq Heleq* (*Sefer ha-Ma'or*, 121–122) as well as *Guide* III:51. Maimonides took care to emphasize that the pleasure, which accompanies apprehension “does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures.”

⁶⁶ Compare the Andalusian philosopher ibn Bajjah's accusation against Sufis that they are in search of pleasure. Cf. Hawi, *Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism*, 72–73.

⁶⁷ *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, fol. 31a.

⁶⁸ See Idel, *Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar*, 479. For the fuller context of this passage, see the English translation in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 152.

It is appropriate that the intellect that perfects the soul will do so in all its aspects . . . And the lover and the bride are like the person who desires and the one that is desired and their common denominator is the desire . . . the soul loves the intellect because it is emanating upon it its light, brilliance and splendor, so that it [the soul] is receiving from it a great delight, because it sees by it [by means of the soul] all the existents and that there is nothing among them [i.e. the existences] that is similar, equal, or comparable to it, since all beauty is beneath its beauty, and all degrees are beneath its degree and all delights are beneath its delight. This is why it [the intellect] is to be loved alone, more than any [other] beloved, by the soul, because of itself. Likewise the intellect sees and gazes upon all the creatures but sees none which is more beautiful than it, and worthwhile of a degree and delight [greater] than the perfect soul of man, which knows its degree and beauty and essence, since it [the soul] is the single created form which is connected to this low matter. Those are the paths of love, affection and desire between the intellect and the soul.⁶⁹

Thus the feelings of desire and love are both attributed to the intellect, just as delight was. What is the precise nature of the intellect here is not entirely clear. Is it the individual intellect informing the individual soul? Or the cosmic intellect adorning the individual soul? On the basis of other parallels in Abulafia, the latter option seems to me more plausible, although the first one is not to be excluded. Thus Abulafia is much more open than the philosophers to the possibility that the cosmic intellect, or even God as an intellect, also reacts to the human love and aspirations for union, intellectual though this experience may be. Nevertheless, in his writings one would be hard pressed to discern either theurgical or magical aspects connected to the feeling of delight of the cosmic powers.

In a rather neglected book entitled *’Etz Hayyim* written in the first half of the fourteenth century by R. Isaiah ben Joseph, a Byzantine Kabbalist, we encounter a perspective reminiscent of one of the passages adduced above from *Sefer ’Or ha-Sekhel*:

Know that the delight of the indwelling of prophecy, which is the influx of the Agent Intellect known in Arabic as *kif ’aqal fa’al* is similar to the delight derived from intercourse, with the following difference between them: namely, that when a man completes the evil act of intercourse he despises it, but the influence of the intellect is the opposite.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Maftehot*, 6.

⁷⁰ *’Etz Hayyim*, 60.

Like Abulafia and some Jewish philosophers, R. Isaiah apparently conceived of sexual intercourse as an explicitly negative activity—an attitude that has few parallels in other forms of Kabbalah. The theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists and the Hasidic authors saw the two forms of delight as part of a continuum, or at least conceived the lower one as positive in principle, although inferior with respect to its counterpart; but in the passage just quoted and in Abulafia, it is evident that the authors are concerned with emphasizing the huge difference between corporeal and intellectual delight and evaluate the two as completely different.⁷¹

The above quotations about intellectual delight, together with others I did not cite here, all stem from a broader literary corpus, in fact a school, known as ecstatic Kabbalah. However, there are also instances to be found in other Kabbalistic schools independent of Abulafia and his students, although presumably drawing from philosophical sources similar to those which nourished the ecstatic Kabbalah. Thus, for example, we find a reference to delight in the context of intellection in a classic of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah that emerged from the school of Nahmanides' followers. The anonymous author of *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut* explains the significance of “the death by Kiss” in the following words:

The soul of the righteous one will ascend—while he is yet alive—higher and higher, to the place where the souls of the righteous [enjoy their] delight, which is “the cleaving of the mind.” The body will remain motionless, as it is said:⁷² “But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.”⁷³

This is quite an interesting case of the post-mortem experiences of the righteous souls being applied to a mystical experience in the present. We may therefore assume that in other forms of Kabbalah as well a few parallels exist to the main paradigm of ecstatic Kabbalah.

⁷¹ See also Abulafia's text translated in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 204. Compare, however, the homogenizing approach of Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 263.

⁷² Deut. 4:4. Compare also to the interpretation of this verse by R. David ben Zimra's *Metzudat David*, fol. 3c.

⁷³ *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut*, fol. 98b. See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 44–45.

Renewing Delight in Eighteenth-Century Hasidism

In many eighteenth-century Hasidic sources, we find discussions about the possibility of enjoying delight on a permanent basis.⁷⁴ The precise source of these discussions is not clear, and there are several possible explanations for its emergence. One possibility is that they are indebted to the views of the early fifteenth-century Catalan Jewish philosopher, R. Hasdai Crescas.⁷⁵ The Hasidic masters, however, emphasized the necessity of renewing the delight related to ritual on a daily basis: they were interested in the ritual dimension of their religious life and not so much in the theological debates between Crescas and Maimonides. On the other hand, Yehudah Liebes has suggested a possible Sabbatean source for these Hasidic discussions.⁷⁶ For my part, I would emphasize that in both cases, the philosophical and the Sabbatean, ritual was relatively unimportant; and hence I would rather call attention to the possible continuity between theurgical texts such as those discussed above (section 2) and the delight-oriented understanding of worship in Hasidism.

Let me begin with a discussion handed down in the name of the Besht by his grandson, R. Moshe Hayyim Ephrayim of Sudytkov:

Just as old age causes weakness in all the limbs of man because the faculties, the humors and the circulation of blood that vivify man, are in decline, so too in the realm of spirituality, an old and aged one [i.e. an old man] does not draw a great delight or vitality, or something new. This is the meaning of the saying⁷⁷ “Every day they should be as new in your eyes,” because [of the verse]:⁷⁸ “They are every morning new, [and] great is your faith” which means that because they are new every morning, namely that you innovate every day the work of creation, by the dint of it, “Your faith is great.” We find, therefore, that the quintessence of every prayer and commandment is faith.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ See Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 218–219; the collection of early Hasidic traditions compiled by Nigal, *Leidat ha-Hasidut*, 159–164 (Hebrew); and Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 229.

⁷⁵ For his views see Berezin “‘Felicity’, ‘Delight’, and ‘Virtue,’” 108, on the dependence of delight on the continuous emergence of apprehension.

⁷⁶ See Liebes, *On Sabbateism and its Kabbalah*, 192, 394 note 134 (Hebrew).

⁷⁷ *Sifrei (Pesiqta’ Zutarti)*, Deut 6:6. This short statement had a very long career in Hasidism and I address here only very few instances of the interpretations offered by Hasidic masters of this Midrash. See also below notes 86, 93.

⁷⁸ Lamentation 3:23.

⁷⁹ *Degel Mahaneh Efrayim*, 214. Compare also to the important formulation attributed,

If the attribution of this passage to the Besht is correct—and I see no reason to question it—this means that already at the beginning of Hasidism a significant connection is drawn between the importance of freshness, vitality, and delight, and this in the context of a discussion of religious issues like prayer and faith.

Continuing a rabbinic and some Cordoverian treatments of the concept of *'Ain*⁸⁰—*nihil*—Hasidic masters elaborated on the importance of a theurgy of delight much more than their Kabbalistic predecessors. With the Hasidic masters, self-effacement was conceived of as being part of a continuous process of personal renewal, which could be attained within a larger framework of daily renewal of the creation and of the Torah, as well as continuous renewal within the Deity. This emphasis on the urgency of spiritual renewal also reflects the more general character of Hasidism as a revivalist movement. Indeed, while this discussion has no explicit connection to the Torah, or to the concept of Torah as a gift, such a nexus is found in a book of one of the early Hasidic masters, R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl [1730–1797],⁸¹ a younger student of the Besht. Presumably following the latter, the emphasis on the necessity of a continuously-renewed experience of receiving the Torah as a gift is connected elsewhere by R. Menahem Nahum with a particularly erotic understanding of study and theurgy. After adducing the Midrashic view of the Torah as both a bride and a gift, he writes in a remarkable passage reminiscent of the quote from R. Moshe Hayyim Ephrayim of Sudylkov in the name of the Besht, that

the union between the bridegroom and the bride, the Assembly of Israel⁸² and the Holy One, blessed be He, takes place by means of the Torah... And just as the bridegroom and the bride will delight in joy, so the Holy One, blessed be He and the Assembly of Israel are [enjoying]

correctly in my opinion, by R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy to the Besht, in *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fol. 83c. For the importance of faith, this time a belief that is interpreted here in both a theurgical and a pantheistic manner, see the Great Maggid of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 244–246. For the affinity between delight and vitality—as the divine pantheistic presence in all things—see also *ibid.*, 326.

⁸⁰ See Idel, *Hasidism*, 113. For an approach to Hasidism that almost totally ignores those possible sources found in earlier non-Kabbalistic and Kabbalistic literatures see Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*.

⁸¹ On this author see Green, *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl*, 1–27.

⁸² *Knesset Yisrael*. This is a cognomen for the last *sefirah*, which is commonly understood as the bride of God, and the union between them is conceived of as the main task of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah.

“like the joy of the bridegroom for/on his bride.”⁸³... He compared us to a bridegroom and a bride, since the permanent delight is not a delight,⁸⁴ only the union of the bridegroom and the bride, which is a new union, because they did not previously have intercourse. In such a manner someone has to unify the Holy One, blessed be He, with a new union every day, as if on this day it has been given, as the sages, blessed be their memory said: “Let the words of the Torah be new etc.”⁸⁵ And the reason [for the renewal of the Torah] is that the Holy One, blessed be He, is renewing the creation of the world [*Ma’aseh Bereshit*] every day, and the Torah is called “creation of the world” because by means of it [namely of the Torah] all the worlds have been created, as is well known. And God is continuously innovating and there is not one [single] day that is similar to the other one, and every day there is a new adherence and coming closer to the Torah, since the day has been created by it in a manner different from “yesterday that passed”.⁸⁶ This is the reason why Israel is called a virgin [*Betullat Yisrael*]... because every day its youth is renewed and the union of that day never existed [beforehand] since the creation of the world, and from this point of view it is called a virgin. Whoever is worshiping in such a manner is always called the walker from one degree [of worship] to another, and from one aspect to another, and every day he unifies a new union... and the Torah is called an aspect of the fiancée [*me’orasah*] that is an aspect of the bride, so that always a new union will be achieved as [that taking place] at the time of the wedding. This is the meaning of [the story about] Moses that he was studying and forgetting, namely that he was forgetting the delight, because ‘a permanent delight is not delight’, until the Torah had been given to him as a bride to a bridegroom, which means that he received the power to go every day from one degree to another,⁸⁷ and every new degree and ascent was for him an aspect of the bride, a new union, and this is the great delight like that of the bridegroom and the bride.⁸⁸

Routine and monosemic understandings of the sacred texts, which induce monotony, or inertia, are conceived here, implicitly, as the main danger for fresh religious experiences. The Torah as a gift is understood as possessing the quality of a bride, which means here a virgin whose

⁸³ Isaiah 62:5.

⁸⁴ R. Menahem Nahum, and his son Mordekhai were both very fond of this formula. Also R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta has attributed to the Besht a passage in which the dictum appears; see his book *Ner Mitzvah*, fol. 24b, written at the end of the eighteenth century.

⁸⁵ See above, n. 78.

⁸⁶ Psalm 90:4.

⁸⁷ This demand for a continuous renewal is a topos in Hasidism.

⁸⁸ R. Moshe Hayyim Ephrayyim of Sudytkov, *Me’or Einayyim*, 123. See also Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 25. I hope to return to this passage in a study on the Torah as gift, based on Marcel Mauss’ approach to the gift.

virginity is daily renewed, this being a metaphor for the perception that every sexual union is unique and different from every other one. It is therefore incumbent on the student of the Torah to obliterate his earlier knowledge, which may become an obstacle to fresh understandings of the Torah. In fact, the study of the Torah is conceived of as novel every day, because God is renewing creation daily by means of the Torah.⁸⁹ Conceived of as a male, God, according to the above text, needs the theurgical study of the Torah by Jews in order for him to enjoy a new kind of union with His female counterpart, the bride or the Assembly of Israel. Clearly we have here an echo of a strongly eroticized covenant-theology. Freshness, both on the cosmic and on the scholastic level, is strongly related to the resulting delight, metaphorically connected to an erotic freshness. Thus God cannot renounce the Torah: He needs it in order to recreate the world, and thus also to recreate His own delight on a daily basis. By doing so, He allows for the student to gain a fresh understanding on each and every day of study, as well as creating a new kind of union between the male and female aspects of the divinity induced by this study. The gift of continuously renewed delight is therefore firstly a human experience, and next a divine one. It should be mentioned here that the linkage between study of the Torah, on the one hand, and divine delight in this activity, on the other, is a widespread topic, already found in a Jewish text of late antiquity, apparently glossed in *Midrash Mishlei* chapter X, but belonging to the Heikhalot literature and resonating in Kabbalah long before the emergence of Polish Hasidism.⁹⁰

Let me further address a certain aspect of the long quotation given above, that is, the explicit nature of the reciprocity. The joy is felt as delight not only by the human student, nor only by the divinity as recipient of the theurgical impact. Both enjoy, but the mutuality of their experiences of joy does not obliterate the distinction between them. What takes place is an exchange, rather than a fusion, between the two poles of the erotic event, united though they may be during it.

A view similar to the one here discussed in the example of R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl is presented concisely in a text by R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apta, a late eighteenth-century Hasidic

⁸⁹ To a great extent, this view is influenced by the Lurianic theory that every day the prayer should be a new one. See R. Hayyim Vital, *Peri 'Etz Hayyim*, 17–18 and Idel, *Hasidism*, 334 n. 20.

⁹⁰ For references to this text see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 171–172, 538 n. 32.

master who wrote that “routine and inertia obliterate the amusement and the delight,⁹¹ since permanent delight is no delight. And in the Holy Torah it is written⁹² that ‘In each and every day, lets them be as new in your eyes’”⁹³ In a manner reminiscent of R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, we find in this passage a close connection between delight and renewal, with both authors quoting the same rabbinic proof-text. However, it seems that these two passages are not directly related but reflect the impact of an earlier common source, presumably a passage of the Besht. Elsewhere, the same master distinguishes between an influx provided by the divine as part of the cosmological process and another type of influx which is a free divine gift to man. Moses, who was acquainted with both, preferred the second. However, God, who wanted to enjoy the worship of Israel, preferred to distribute influx only as a response to the performance of the commandments and to the study of the Torah by the Jews, because in this way He would receive delight from them.⁹⁴ This view seems to constitute a rejection of the theory of grace in its Christian forms, that is to say, of grace as freely given without a connection to human activities.

Rabbinic tradition saw the gift of the Torah as an entity descending in its entirety. In contrast with this, the passages adduced in this section are premised on the impossibility of transmitting the inner nature of the Torah in its totality: the Torah is seen not as a primordial entity that may move from one place to another, but rather its “true” nature is conceived of as an ever-changing entity. Hence the general concept of “renewal” is more important than that of “stability.” As seen above, the concept of moving from one degree to another is related in this Hasidic context to an understanding of the true nature of the Torah. Vertical ascensional mobility of the mystic from one rank to another becomes in Hasidism an ideal that is combined with the idea of a daily renewed universe, and to that of the intermittent delight of both God and man. It may well be that this emphasis on mystical ascent, which is very representative of Hasidic thought since its beginning, is connected (in this specific context) with the ascent of Moses to receive the Torah as described in rabbinic legends, where he was given gifts

⁹¹ The Hebrew phrase is *Sha'ash'uim ve-ta'anug*,

⁹² See above, n. 78.

⁹³ See R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apta, *Torat 'Emmet*, fol. 3c and his younger contemporary, R. Abraham Hayyim of Zlotchov, *Peri Hayyim*, fol. 51c.

⁹⁴ See R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apta, *Torat 'Emmet*, fol. 34cd.

other than the tablets. This ongoing ascent should also be understood in relation to another passage by R. Menahem Nahum, where he speaks about another “great gift”, which is the “world-to-come.” The next world consists in a state of “permanent delight,” which is too much to bear if it is experienced all of a sudden; therefore, God created the opportunity of a gradual accommodation towards this state by means of an intermittent experience of delight during the day of Sabbath in this world.⁹⁵

Coming back now to the general concept of “renewal” highlighted above, let me attempt to explain how it is imagined to take place. First and foremost, it is not the very structure of the consonants of the Torah that is renewed. In this respect, R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl differs from the perspective found in many other passages in the textual corpus of Kabbalah and Hasidism, which assume the possibility of a change in the order of the consonants of the biblical words.⁹⁶ Instead, he capitalizes on a concept of transformation derived from an astromagical theory, found already in the Middle Ages and adopted by, among others, R. Moses Cordovero. According to that theory, the written consonants and the sounds are containers or—according to the original terminology—palaces within which the supernal spirituality, the *ruhaniyyut*, is dwelling or into which it is attracted.⁹⁷ This spirituality is referred to by numerous other terms as well, such as light (*’or*), luminosity (*behirut*), or—most frequently—vitality (*hiyyut*). These various words all refer to the divine presence within the letters of the Torah: a concept which I propose to call linguistic immanence and which sometimes has explicit erotic aspects.⁹⁸ According to many Hasidic texts, this spirituality dwells within the letters of the Torah and is part and parcel of its very structure. However, according to numerous other texts, it may be attracted within the consonants by an intense performance of the verbal rituals of prayer or study of the Torah.⁹⁹ This second,

⁹⁵ See R. Menahem Nahum, *Me’or Einayim*, 261.

⁹⁶ See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 377–389.

⁹⁷ On the earlier sources of this term see the seminal studies of Pines, “Shi’ite Terms and Conceptions,” and “On the Term *Ruhaniyyut*,” “*Le Sefer ha-Tamar*.”

⁹⁸ For the erotic aspects of the linguistic immanence see, especially, R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya’aqov Yosef*, fol. 151c; and R. Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *’Or ha-Me’ir*, fol. 141b. See also Idel, *Hasidism*, 171–188 and especially *Messianic Mystics*, 224–225; and Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 23–24. For the affinity between vitality and delight see above n. 80.

⁹⁹ This view is found in several Jewish medieval and Renaissance sources; see Idel, Introduction to the facsimile edition of R. Joseph Al-Ashqar’s *Tzafnat Pa’aneah*, 43–46 (Hebrew).

more activist theory conceives of the human verbal act as possessing a talismanic feature of the kind that seems to inform our discussions above: here the inner dimensions of the Torah fluctuate according to the special mode of its study.

God as “Delight of All Delights”

Rather than as a recipient of delights generated by human worship as described in many passages above, God is sometimes described in Hasidic literature by formulations such as “the delight of all delights.” In such cases we are dealing with a basically Platonic approach, that has been influential in Hasidism and transposes all supreme values to a superior level of reality.¹⁰⁰ Just as human beauty has been envisioned as reflecting the original beauty of the supernal world, with divine feminine power as its ultimate source (as is also the case in some of materials that will be discussed below), likewise God is the highest place where delight is found.

The syntagm “the delight of all delights” should not just be seen as an interesting theological innovation but also as part of what can be called *Gestalt-Coherence* (that is to say, the fact that different terms can be seen as related due to their having a common denominator, resulting in some kind of loose cohesiveness that functions as a system).¹⁰¹ Thus the different forms of delight—the delight of the mystic, the delight generated by him in God, delight as divine presence in the world and as the vitality of all things, and finally, as we shall see below, God as delight—display a kind of *Gestalt-Coherence*.

The Besht is credited with having been the first to use the phrase “the world of delight”¹⁰²—*olam ha-ta’anug*. As already said, this expression is one of the many instances in Hasidism of a transposition of religious values to a supreme level of reality (compare e.g. the reification of human activities in expressions such as “the world of love,” “the world of thought,” or “the world of speech”). Such reified delight was perhaps meant by the Besht to be identical to God. In the same vein,

¹⁰⁰ See Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 168–178.

¹⁰¹ For the sources of this concept coined by Aron Gurwitsch, and my use of it in the context of Hasidism, see Idel, *Hasidism*, 49, 272 n. 15.

¹⁰² See R. Benjamin of Zalosh, *Ahavat Dodim*, 85. See also *ibid.*, 211. For the phrase “delight of delights”—*ta’anug ha-ta’anugim*—as a description of God see, e.g., R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya’aqov Yosef*, fol. 102d. On the parallelism between God and delight see already in the *Zohar*, I, fol. 99b (*Midrash ha-ne’elam*).

we read in one of the most important discussions pertinent to our topic that R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy (one of the Besht's leading disciples) confessed that he had learned from his teacher that

there are ten *sefirot* in man, because he is a microcosm and, as has been written in Rabad's [commentary on] *Sefer Yetzirah*,¹⁰³ what is found in the supernal worlds, is found also in the year [that is to say, in time], and in the soul of man¹⁰⁴. . . And on the lowest rank in man there is pain, poverty and suffering, and similarly to it in the attribute of *Malkhut*, which is the last [lowest] attribute "because her feet descend to death."¹⁰⁵ And the [attributes of] *Netzah* and *Hod* in man are standing pillars,¹⁰⁶ that man believes the faith in the Creator according to His truth. And the attribute of *Yesod* is when he delights in the worship of God, blessed be He, more than in any other of all delights, because "out of my flesh [I shall see God]"¹⁰⁷ since the member of copulation is the best of delights because by means of it, male and female are united. And out of the material [delight] he shall understand the spiritual delight, when he adheres to His Unity, Blessed be He, who is the root of all the delights."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ This is the book of the thirteenth-century Kabbalist R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, attributed mistakenly to the twelfth-century R. Abraham ben David, whose acronym is Rabad. On this important book and its impact on Hasidism see Idel, *Hasidism*, 12.

¹⁰⁴ This is a misreading of *Sefer Yetzirah* 6:1.

¹⁰⁵ Proverbs 5:5.

¹⁰⁶ Namely the two pillars of the temple, called in the Bible *Yakhin* and *Bo'az*, which were sometimes understood as corresponding to these two *sefirot*.

¹⁰⁷ Job 19:26. On the medieval interpretations of this verse in Jewish thought see Altmann, "The Delphic Maxim." Though this verse occurs several times in R. Joseph ben Shalom's book, I wonder whether one may find there a phallic interpretation, which occurs, however, several times in R. Moshe Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*. See, e.g., 16:6, continuing, presumably, the position of *Zohar*, I, fol. 94a and of *Tiqunei Zohar*, fols. 41b, 70a. For the strong relation between delight, the phallus, and the movements during prayer see the view found in several sources sometimes in the name of the Besht, e.g. *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 102d and Liebes, *On Sabbateism and its Kabbalah*, 98–99 and 124–125, where the Job verse occurs in quite a sexual though less phallic context, and see also page 130 there. See also note 113 below; and see the Zoharic phrase *'innuga de-kulla*, the delight of all, found in *Zohar* II, fol. 259a (and Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 228–229), which may have a sexual implication.

¹⁰⁸ R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 16c. It is hard to decide where the words of the Besht end and when does R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy intervene. See, however, another passage found in the same book, fol. 138d, where the interpretation of the Job verse in quite a similar way is attributed to the Besht, as well as on fol. 28d, where Joseph is linked to the delight of *Yesod*, again in a passage that starts with an attribution to the Besht. For the *a fortiori* view that learns from the material delight about the spiritual one see also, e.g., *ibid.*, fol. 16d. On pain and the *Shekhinah* see also the discussion of R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta in the name of the Besht in his *Sefer 'Or ha-Ganuz la-Tzaddiqim*, col. 3 fol. 1a.

This fascinating passage is reminiscent of a discussion in the name of the Besht I adduced above from the same book of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy. In both cases, the human microcosm and the theocosm are described as corresponding and isomorphic, although in the quote just given the Hasidic master is much more explicit in analyzing the human/divine correspondences. For our purpose here, it suffices to point out that the anatomical parallelism between the corporeal delight related to the human penis, and the delight someone takes in the union with God, is explicit and crucial for the entire passage. It is based upon an interesting interpretation of the biblical word *basar*, the common meaning of which is “flesh”, that is to say “body”, and which more specifically means “phallus” (as understood in various instances in the Bible, as well as in Kabbalistic literature, and certainly in the present text).¹⁰⁹ However, the point is not so much that the specifics of the anatomic structure of the phallus are pertinent to the claim made by the Hasidic master (if indeed they are relevant here at all), although such may be the case in some other Kabbalistic sources.¹¹⁰ Rather, what characterizes the Hasidic imagery here is the double function of the phallus as uniting two entities and inducing feelings of delight. This is only one among many examples of the appropriation of theosophical symbolism—here the *sefirah* of *Yesod* as delight—in a manner that shifts the emphasis from the theosophical meaning to a more anthropocentric one. Of great importance for our point that the Besht is the main source of views about delight found in the writings of his disciples is a lengthy passage found in another book of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, where even a sinner’s delight is understood as being connected to the supernal delight.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ See the way in which the term *basar* is used in Genesis 17:11, Ezekiel 16:26 and 23:20. See also the Beshtian texts adduced by R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta, *Keter Shem Tov* I, fol. 3ab. This understanding of *basar* in the verse of Job is found also in a text of R. Tzevi Hirsch of Galina. See above note 109 and below note 124.

¹¹⁰ See, e.g., Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*. Let me point out that though in some cases a strongly phallic understanding of some Kabbalistic texts as proposed by Wolfson is appropriate, his moving of this topic to the center of Kabbalah as a whole seems to me unwarranted in most of the Kabbalistic schools, including some of the texts he adduces in order to demonstrate his point. I cannot deal here with this interesting scholarly problem, and I hope to do so in a more detailed manner elsewhere.

¹¹¹ See *Kutonet Passim*, 240 and the analysis of Piekartz, *The Beginning of Hasidism*, 238–240 (Hebrew). See also Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 227–228. Whether this Hasidic approach has something to do with Sabbateanism is a question that cannot be addressed here. See above n. 109.

However, more Platonically-oriented formulations occur in texts that are relatively early in Hasidism and that may, again, reflect the Besht's view. For example, his grandson writes as follows about the patriarch Joseph remaining faithful to the imperative of knowing God in all his ways:

For example, when a certain delight [stemming] from a [certain] thing reached him, he should put his attention to the [primary] source and root of all the delights, wherefrom all the delights emerge, namely from the Cause of All Causes that vivifies all and gives vitality to all things, and it is from there that delight reaches him. And when he will direct his attention to it and will believe in it in a total manner then all the material delights are obliterated and this is the reason that it is hinted in [the verse] "And God was with Joseph,"¹¹² namely that he was always seeing the Tetragrammaton before his eyes,¹¹³ and he united himself to the inner aspects of all things, and to the root of all roots... and he penetrated all things and delights and he found the root and interiority that vitalizes everything, and wherefrom all delights are generated.¹¹⁴

The reference to the figure of the biblical Joseph is vital for understanding some of the resonances of this passage. This patriarch is known in Jewish tradition, and especially in the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, as the paragon of sexual chastity whose refusal of engaging in sexual relations with Potiphar's wife became exemplary.¹¹⁵ According to this passage, he preferred the contemplation of God as divine name over the coarse experience of sexual delight. The contemplation of the divine must therefore be seen as a method of fighting against corporeal desire or withstanding a sexual ordeal. A similar position is found in another early Hasidic book authored by R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl:

The entire quintessence of our worship is to purify the attributes that are within us and elevate them by the fact that by means of them, he worships God, Blessed be He. All this is done when a bad love or bad awe—God forbids—comes, and because of his good contemplation he contemplates, he will tremble and say in his heart: this is but a love fallen from the world of love, the love of the Creator, blessed be He, and it is incumbent on me to elevate it, and how shall I do this bad thing to

¹¹² Genesis 39:21.

¹¹³ Cf. Psalm 16:8. The practice of contemplating the letters of the Tetragrammaton precedes Hasidism but has been widespread in this type of Jewish mysticism. See, especially, R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma'ayan Hokhmah*, fol. 73b, where the contemplation of the Tetragrammaton serves as an exercise to temper the corporeal delight.

¹¹⁴ *Degel Mahaneh Efrayim*, 51.

¹¹⁵ Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 91; Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 145–146; and Idel, *BEN*.

lower it even more. And I love this bad thing that is a thing created by the Blessed One, and by Torah, by means of which all the creatures have been created, and He is the delight of all the delights, and this is the case of all the other attributes [ways of behavior]. In the moment that one of the attributes arouses [i.e., emerges within him], then he should be in awe and fear, and tremble [not] to use the scepter of king of the world¹¹⁶ in order to provoke Him and act against His will and rebel in front of His eyes. On the contrary, when that attribute arouses [i.e., emerges], and an opening of that attribute opens, then he should elevate the fallen things to their root [by his contemplation], since God, Blessed be He, has no greater delight than this great delight.¹¹⁷

According to this passage, the temptation of engaging in a sexual encounter that is considered illicit or inferior is not just an ordeal but also an opportunity for retrieving the supernal source of delight by elevating the lower to its higher source. Such an elevation combines the Neoplatonic concept of the return to the source (reversion) with a more activist approach that considers it an imperative to purify activities of a lower kind, so that they can be restituted to their source in the divine world. A similar approach is found also in the Great Maggid's treatment of Joseph.¹¹⁸

In the three Hasidic approaches to the possibly sinful relationship as described above, we are not dealing with a simple case of avoiding or escaping such a relation, but mainly with a project of refining the coarse shell that contains within it the divine spark conducive to the source of all delights. Delight is not rejected *per se*, but only in what the Hasidic masters conceived of as its fallen or inferior manifestation. The latter is still envisioned as capable of becoming, ideally, an opportunity for obtaining an even higher delight related to God, depicted as the supreme source of all delights. Only oblivion as to the substantial affinity between the lower and the higher delight may render the feeling of delight here below sinful.

What, then, about the attitude towards corporeal delight in Hasidism against the background of the Platonically-oriented discussions adduced above? Does corporeal delight enjoy some significant status in Hasidism,

¹¹⁶ This is a rabbinic phrase, dealing with the prerogatives of the human king, which has been interpreted by the late thirteenth-century Kabbalist R. Joseph of Hamadan and under his influence by many others, as referring to the divine phallus.

¹¹⁷ R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me'or Einayim*, 26. See also *ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁸ Great Maggid, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 29–30. See also 128–129. And see also Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 200.

or is it seen merely as an obstacle for reaching the divine realm as supreme delight? Are corporeal delight and attachment to the divine as a delightful experience considered incompatible? Or are there merely tensions between them, or indeed are they part of a continuum? These questions are hard to answer, and not in the least place because there is no reason to assume that all Hasidic masters would have agreed in this matter. Here as in many other cases, variety and controversy is integral to Jewish discourse; and indeed, one of the most important scholarly disputes about the nature of Hasidism—that between Gershom Scholem and his students, on the one hand, and Martin Buber, on the other—is grounded in very different ways of understanding the attitudes to the world found in Hasidic literature.¹¹⁹ In what follows, I will attempt to address one of the more explicit Hasidic approaches towards sexuality with which I am acquainted. As will be seen, I see it as reinforcing Buber's assumption that Hasidism had a much more positive attitude towards the material world than his opponents assumed.

Let me first turn to a passage by R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, another disciple of the Great Maggid of Medziretch. Commenting on the biblical recommendation to leave one's parents and adhere to one's wife, the Hasidic author asks:

Prima facie this is astonishing. Does the Torah recommend literally that someone will adhere to his wife and fulfill the passions of his heart? However, this should be interpreted as an advice given to man by the Torah about how to cleave to the Holy One, Blessed be He, and he should learn from the adherence to his material wife. If he sees that from such a delight he has an adherence and a pleasure that is transient and that dissipates after a short while, *a fortiori* he will have an adherence and a delight from the Creator; blessed be He, and he will feel the delight of all delights that is eternal, one that gives him life in the world to come. And this principle is that the aspects of the details of the delights that have descended in this material world, all descend from the Torah. The letters of the Torah are clothed in every thing that is created...and someone

¹¹⁹ Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism"; Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism." This is the expanded version of the article originally printed in *Commentary* 32 (1961), 305–316. On the controversy see Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 6–51; Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Man's Relationship to God and World," and her introduction to her *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 10–18 (Hebrew); and the studies of Oppenheim, "The Meaning of Hasidut"; Kepnes, "A Hermeneutic Approach"; the introduction of Dresner to Heschel, *The Circle of the Ba'al Shem Tov*. Buber's view of Hasidism, and the criticism by Scholem, has been extensively discussed in Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, 287–338. On Scholem and Hasidism see Jacobs, "Aspects of Scholem's Study of Hasidism"; and Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Gershom Scholem's Interpretation of Hasidism."

who is wise and understands by his own knowledge how to take a hint of wisdom even from those letters that are found on the lowest level [of reality], then generates delight... because this is the essence of the delight of the Blessed One... namely that even from a material delight he should take vitality and a hint of wisdom at the adherence to God.¹²⁰

In contrast to some other views in Hasidism, here the lower delights are not considered sinful or demeaning. Material delight is not considered in this passage as a feeling that is antagonistic to the attainment of the supernal one—in contrast, I repeat, to some other Hasidic discussions.¹²¹ On the contrary, a man can extrapolate from the temporary pleasure he enjoys in the sexual relations with his wife, to the even more sublime feeling that he may experience eternally from his adherence to God. The lower delight is not necessarily opposed to the higher experience but constitutes a presence of the spiritual within matter; and hence it is possible to adumbrate the experience of the latter by enjoying the former. It should be pointed out that in the above passages, the affinity between delight and adherence—*devequt*—may imply that there is an erotic overtone to cleaving to God as well. In a way, the Plotinian theory according to which the individual soul is not separated from the cosmic one, adopted widely by Hasidic masters, assumes a continuum between the spiritual and the material world and hence the possibility of reaching the former starting from the latter.¹²²

Moreover, delight is connected in many Hasidic texts with the study of the Torah and even with prayer, since the divinity is present in the entire realm of reality by means of the letters that were part of the creative process. Thus, while in many cases delight may be understood as resulting from the erotic contact between the worshipper and the transcendent divinity, in some other cases, as in the passage of

¹²⁰ R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or ha-Me'ir*, fol. 2c. See also *ibid.*, fol. 26b, in a parable explicitly attributed to the Besht. Compare also to the view of the early eighteenth-century Hasidic author R. Menahem Mendel of Rimanov, adduced by his student R. Ezekiel Panet, *Menahem Tzion*, 44, who distinguishes also between the transient and the eternal nature of the two kinds of delight.

¹²¹ See, e.g., R. Barukh of Kosov, *Amud ha-'Avodah*, fols. 98a, 99a, and 204d, where the assumption is that the spiritual delight obliterates the material one. Another approach, found several times in Hasidic literature, especially in R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha's *Ma'ayan Hokhmah*, assumes that the supernal delight is found within the lower one as holy sparks within shells, and the former should be freed of their bondage by elevating them, and thus abolishing the shells. This is an interpretation more consonant with Scholem's view.

¹²² See Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 43–44, 51–52.

R. Ze'ev Wolf, this contact is mediated by the act of fathoming linguistic elements found in all the realms of existence. Thus the higher delight does not necessarily require an escapist attitude: it is also possible to penetrate the superficial aspect of reality in order to enjoy a delightful experience here below, that actually represents a higher reality.¹²³ In other words, what we have here is an instance of the eroticization of the entire realm of reality, by means of letters that are imagined to have been instrumental in the creation and the sustaining of reality.

From this point of view we may speak of an inclusive type of Hasidic attitude as compared to the much more exclusive approaches of Hasidei Ashkenaz and Abraham Abulafia. The ecstatic Kabbalist dissociates material from spiritual delight, which is not the case in Hasidism. Although Abulafia was not inclined to asceticism, he nevertheless did not see the very performance of a sexual act as a means to intuit the supernal delight.¹²⁴ In the case of Hasidei Ashkenaz, the relation between corporeal and spiritual delight is less exclusive, but still the two are not parts of a continuum. In the famous early thirteenth-century *Sefer Hasidim*, the major book of Hasidei Ashkenaz, we read:

And that joy [out of love of God] is strong and overwhelms his heart so much, that even a young man who has not gone to a woman for many days, and has great desire, when his seed shoots like an arrow and he has pleasure, this is as naught compared with the strengthening of the power of the joy of the love of God.¹²⁵

While not critical of corporeal delight, the Ashkenazi author does not create a significant nexus between that feeling and the delight someone feels when he loves God.

It should be pointed out that the elevation of corporeal delight is part of a much more general attitude in Hasidism, which also includes

¹²³ See the very interesting passages from the mid eighteenth-century author R. Tzevi Hirsch of Galina, adduced by Pickarz, *Between Ideology and Reality*, 239–245 (Hebrew), where the need to enjoy material delight in order to reach the spiritual is evident. See also the important discussion of R. Aharon Kohen of Apta, *Or ha-Ganuz la-Tzaddiqim*, col. 4, fol. 3ab. See also the later R. Moshe Elyaqim Beri'ah of Kuznitz, *Be'er Moshe*, 185, where he connected the theory of elevation of the lower entities and of delight with that of an immanent presence of the divine everywhere in the world.

¹²⁴ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 204–205.

¹²⁵ *Sefer Hasidim*, par. 300, 240. In R. Eleazar of Worms' *Sefer ha-Malakhim*, and under its influence in *Sefer Raziel ha-Malakh*, it is written: "And at the time that a young man engages in intercourse and shoots like an arrow [i.e., ejaculates], that selfsame pleasure is as naught compared with the slightest pleasure of the World to Come." These three sources have already been adduced together in Guedemann, *Ha-Torah weha-Hayyim bi-ymei ha-Benayim*, I, 124, n. 2.

the elevation of mundane forms of beauty to their source, so that the beauty of a nice woman should be understood as reflecting in this world the splendor of the divine presence. The contemplative elevation of beauty to its source is described as causing delight to God—an approach that can be described as theurgy.¹²⁶

Concluding Remarks

One may speak of a continuous ascent in the course of the centuries of the importance of *ta'anug* in the general economy of Jewish mysticism. On the one hand, this development has to do with a general tendency in Jewish mystical literatures of attributing ever greater importance to feelings in general and to erotic imagery in particular; and on the other hand, it has to do with a process of mitigation of the hypostatic thinking that was originally dominant in the main schools of Kabbalah. This mitigation of hypostatic thought is one of the main reasons why delight is so important precisely in ecstatic Kabbalah and in Hasidism, two major schools which were less interested in theosophical structures and much more concerned with experiences.¹²⁷ On the other hand, the ascent of delight in Hasidism is concomitant to the decline—although not the total disappearance—of asceticism in this movement, an important development that has been widely recognized by scholars.

It is in Polish Hasidism, a conglomerate of several mystical approaches, that the variety of earlier themes related to delight was adopted, adapted, and combined in different ways. The most common denominator in those discussions is that delight occurs in the context either of performing a ritual,¹²⁸ or of resorting to a technique in ecstatic Kabbalah—that is to say, it typically accompanies certain types of

¹²⁶ See the important discussion by R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *'Or ha-Me'ir*, fol. 16cd. More on this issue in the context of a more detailed analysis of R. Ze'ev Wolf's passage, in Idel, "Feminine Beauty."

¹²⁷ To a certain extent, the main parallel to *ta'anug* generated by the worshipper as a factor that induces the divine erotic or sexual response is the Kabbalistic expression *mayin nuqbbin*—the female waters—which is the trigger for the arousal of the desire in the supernal male. However, this is again a more organic or physiological component, in comparison to the more emotional one, the delight. On the psychological readings of the sefirotic ontology of theosophical Kabbalah, which is evident already in the thirteenth-century ecstatic Kabbalah and its early Hasidic manifestations see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 146–153; *Hasidism*, 227–238.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., the phrase *ta'anug mitzvah*, the delight of performing a commandment, in *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fols. 90b, credited to the Besht, and compare to fol. 55a.

religious action. Delight must therefore be seen in the context of religious performance, and as parallel to the idea of adding powers on high (according to the more widespread theurgical interpretation of the ritual) or of drawing supernal blessing or vitality downward (according to the magical one). Furthermore, from a phenomenological point of view, it is quite fascinating to observe in this context descriptions of the divinity as experiencing delight and subsequently, in some cases, as explicitly feminine. Thus an important aspect of the meaningful relationship between the worshipper and God is conceived of as that of transforming one of its aspects into a feminine entity. It is only rarely that an explicit worship of the distinct feminine power, as found in Kabbalah, makes its appearance in Hasidism.¹²⁹ It should be pointed out that we may also encounter a few Hasidic descriptions of worship by means of the intellect that induces delight into divinity. These might be seen as instances of a synthesis between the intellectual aspect of the ecstatic Kabbalah and the theosophical-theurgical one.¹³⁰

In other words, we are dealing with two major and intertwined developments in Jewish mysticism. One of them has been surveyed above, that is, the eroticization of ritual. The other one began already in rabbinic literature but became much more prominent in the main trends of Kabbalah and entails a ritualization of eros and sex.¹³¹ The theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah emphasized the complex structure of divinity consisting of various types of hypostases, and subsequently the sexual affinities between two or more of them attracted attention; from this, emerged the core formula according to which the rites intend to unify a divine power, understood as male, and the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence, understood as female.¹³² Hasidism, however, while continuing this approach, shifted the focus of attention from the sexual anatomy of the divine powers and the attempt to influence them by means of rituals to emotional interactions between the worshipper and God.

Within this more general framework, there are two main ways of understanding human religious action: the Platonic ascent that brings the lower delight to its higher source, and the theurgical ascent

¹²⁹ See, *ibid.*, fols. 138d and 152b.

¹³⁰ See, e.g., the Great Maggid, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 266, where the “world of delight” is described as apprehension, and the description found in R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta, *Or ha-Ganuz la-Tzaddiqim*, col. 2 fol. 3a. For another affinity between this book of R. Aharon and ecstatic Kabbalah see Idel, *Hasidism*, 59–60.

¹³¹ See Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 143–144, 234–235, 240–241, 247–250.

¹³² See *ibid.*, 1–3, 233–236.

that causes delight within the divine sphere. Different though these approaches are, they have sometimes been combined in Hasidism. In any case, the increasing importance of delight since the Middle Ages, and its peak in Hasidism, can be better understood against what I consider to be the background of this development, that is, the rabbinic and Kabbalistic forms of Judaism as cultures of eros.¹³³ Thus the Hasidic emphasis on delight as resulting from some kind of erotic relationship between man and God, or man and the *Shekhinah*, is part of a much earlier move, one that took up certain approaches which were originally of secondary importance and moved them to the center. Still, unlike Abulafia's intellectual hedonism (mentioned above), theosophical Kabbalah and Hasidism did not indulge in what may be called carnal hedonism, positive though their attitude toward corporeal delight may sometimes have been.¹³⁴

On a more methodological note, the above discussions assume that Hasidism should be understood against the background of many different developments in medieval and premodern Judaism, the various Kabbalistic and Kabbalistic-ethical literatures being major but not exclusive sources for Hasidic mysticism. A panoramic approach, which in our case perhaps includes Crescas's philosophy too, is a much better way of understanding the various and sometimes conflicting developments in Hasidic thought than seeing it only through the perspective of its relationship to Sabbateanism.¹³⁵ However, broad though the range of sources nourishing Hasidism may have been, the role played by the Besht in shaping the thought of his followers, at least as concerns the case of delight, was paramount.¹³⁶ Still, his new strong emphasis on delight did not reflect only the patrimony of Hasidic masters in the limited sense of this term; as Jonathan Garb has recently shown, significant reverberations of the theurgy of delight may be discerned even in Jewish religious thought in the twentieth century.¹³⁷

¹³³ See *ibid.*, 22–38, 238–246.

¹³⁴ It should be pointed out that a rejection of ancient Greek carnal hedonism, by resorting to this very Greek term transliterated in Hebrew, and of Kant's moral hedonism, is found in an early twentieth-century Hasidic author, R. Menahem Nahum Friedmann of Stefanesti-Itzani towns in the province of Bukovina), in his commentary on the Rabbinic "Treatise of the Fathers," entitled *Perush ha-Man*, 319–320.

¹³⁵ For a panoramic approach to Hasidism see Idel, *Hasidism*, 9–15.

¹³⁶ For my general opinion as to the dominant role played by the Besht in significantly shaping Hasidic thought in the first generation of his disciples, see Idel, "The Besht as a Prophet and a Talismanic Magician."

¹³⁷ See Garb, "The Chosen will Become Herds," 101, 203–204.

The new emphasis on delight I surveyed above was also part of what I call the search for plenitude of experience in mysticism. By this I mean the assumption that by means of an intensified performance of the normal rituals, or by certain techniques, it is possible, at least in principle, to enjoy in the present a religious experience of the highest kind.¹³⁸ Whether this traditional understanding of Jewish ritual as intended to induce delight in both man and God reflects a state of neurosis (as Sigmund Freud argued in his attempt to explain the emergence of rites) is an interesting question which cannot be addressed here.¹³⁹ In any case, it is fair to say that pondering this type of speculation is itself not without its delightful aspects.

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¹³⁸ On plenitude in Jewish mysticism see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 283–289 and *Absorbing Perfections*, 423–427.

¹³⁹ It may well be that Freud was acquainted with forms of religion in which the performance of the rituals was conceived of as an obsession, not a delight, and he imposed the former on the latter.

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