

Article

Metanomianism and Religious Praxis in Martin Buber's Hasidic Tales

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Received: 11 November 2018; Accepted: 28 November 2018; Published: 4 December 2018

Abstract: It is well known that Martin Buber abandoned Jewish law as a binding code. Scholars have identified him accurately as a religious anarchist, and his perspective is best characterized as metanomian—that is, one that locates the essence of religiosity outside of any fixed system, without necessarily opposing that system as a matter of principle. And yet, such general characterizations offer only a very vague picture of Buber's stance. This paper demonstrates that it is especially illustrative for us to turn to Buber's Hasidic tales. First of all, precisely because Buber's concept of practice was irreducible to any static system or code, the genre of narrative conveys far more than any abstract formulation can. Moreover, inasmuch as Buber's Hasidic tales were his own hermeneutical refractions of earlier sources, which were in themselves teeming with images of practice, our intertextual investigations reveal at once narrative representations of religious life and Buber's personal interpretations of those narratives. What emerges from this study, then, is a textured and vivid vision of religious practice, which was not merely a peripheral concern but a life-encompassing core of Buber's thought.

Keywords: Martin Buber; religious anarchism; metanomianism; Hasidism; religious practice; false piety; law; commandment; kavanah

1. Introduction

On the first Friday evening of Buber's visit to New York in 1953, the Jewish Theological Seminary organized a Shabbat dinner in his honor, and at around ten o'clock, it was time for the 75-year-old scholar to return to his hotel. However, a cold rain was falling and the hotel was located some fifty blocks south of the Seminary. The *shomrei Shabbat* dinner guests, some of whom were even sleeping at the Seminary in order to participate in the dinner, were hesitant to hail a cab for Buber, as that would mean encouraging a Jew to ride on the Sabbath. And yet, this appeared to be what the moment demanded, especially given the fact that Buber himself was not halakhically observant. As the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod recalled:

Since Buber was an elderly man and the weather was bad, we felt that it was all right. But Buber answered, "No, I'll walk." And so all of us decided to accompany him. We all walked along Broadway with him for fifty blocks and arrived at the hotel wet. He was wet also, but he had felt that it was not appropriate to ride in a cab.¹

After relating this story, Wyschogrod reflected, "Some people are better in their books than in their lives, and I've met such people. But I felt that Buber, the person, was often greater than his books."²

¹ (Gordon 1988, p. 114).

² (Gordon 1988, p. 114).

Let us hear now a very different story, this one from the Galician-Israeli writer and translator Yehuda Ya'ari, who helped Buber to produce his Hebrew anthology of Hasidic tales, *Or ha-Ganuz*. During that period in the late 1940s, Buber walked over to Ya'ari's house in Jerusalem every day in order to work on the project. However, on one such day, Ya'ari was surprised to see that famed figure appear at his door:

Buber came to me to work on his book on the eve of Yom Kippur. I was astounded and asked him if he didn't know that today was the eve of Yom Kippur. He answered that he knew and asked me if I kept the fast and the holy day. I nodded yes. Buber got up and said, "If you keep the Mitzvot, then I'll leave. Keep them."³

Ya'ari framed this story as an example of how "Buber's writings had little to do with his way of life," and after sharing the anecdote he added, "It was difficult for me to understand that Buber, who wrote about nurturing our relation to our tradition, did not keep the tradition himself."⁴

Insofar as Buber refused to embrace general rules about religious praxis, insisting that the divine command is perceptible only in the particular events and temporal dynamism of dialogical life, narrative is the ideal genre for capturing his views.⁵ However, while the narratives just recounted do shed light on Buber's approach to religious practice, they also demonstrate the indispensable role that commentary plays. In both anecdotes, Buber himself is manifestly uncommitted to Jewish law and yet eager to respect the practices of those around him, but Wyschogrod judges this to be a virtuous embodiment of the messages in Buber's books, while Ya'ari sees it as symptomatic of an abyss between Buber's books and way of life.

For these reasons and more, it is helpful for us to turn to Buber's Hasidic writings in order to clarify his concept of religious praxis. Indeed, the vast majority of his writings on Hasidism were in the form of tales, and Hasidic narratives themselves brim with images and discussions of Jewish ritual life. Moreover, inasmuch as Buber's anthologies reflect his own principle of selection and hermeneutical imprints, we can treat his tales as interpretations of Hasidic tales. Indeed, as I have demonstrated at length elsewhere, when Buber re-wrote and re-told Hasidic stories, that process of transmission was fundamentally exegetical.⁶ Thus, Buber's tales provide us at once with narrative representations of religious life and Buber's interpretations of those narratives. Nowhere else in Buber's literary corpus are his personal visions of praxis more vivid and textured than in his Hasidic writings.

However, given Buber's reputation as someone who "did not keep the tradition himself," to quote Ya'ari, it might seem surprising to devote an entire study to his concept of practice. Indeed, Buber accepted more or less the designation of "religious anarchist,"⁷ and his perspective on religious law is best characterized as metanomian.⁸ However, we should not overlook the fact that

³ (Gordon 1988, p. 121).

⁴ (Gordon 1988, p. 121).

⁵ For very insightful reflections on the relationship between narrative and religious normativity in general, and with respect to Hasidism in particular, see (Kauffman 2014).

⁶ See (Shonkoff 2018b); cf. (Shonkoff 2018a, pp. 273–301).

⁷ See (Mendes-Flohr 1983; 1991, p. 400; Scholem 1995, p. 245). See also Martin Buber's March 1954 letter to Maurice Friedman in (Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr 1991, pp. 576–77).

⁸ As far as I am aware, Nahum Glatzer was the first to characterize Buber specifically as "metanomian." See (Glatzer 1956, p. 121). See (Mendes-Flohr 1986, p. 115); idem, (Mendes-Flohr 1991, pp. 349, 351). I prefer the term metanomian to antinomian in the case of Buber because he was not committed necessarily to the breaking of religious laws but rather to the expansion of religious practice beyond laws. In this respect, my definition of antinomianism is narrower than that of Shaul Magid, who defines it broadly as "a term that may refer to any religious movement which claims that fulfillment of the divine will does not need to conform to accepted religious norms or doctrines." (Magid 2015, p. 102). According to Magid's definition, Buber was indeed antinomian, but I think it is valuable to characterize his approach to practice with greater precision. Also, it is worth noting that Buber was certainly not what Elliot Wolfson calls "hyper-nomian." See (Wolfson 2006, pp. 186–285). While the term "hypernomianism" is very helpful for grasping various

metanomialism itself is a distinct approach to practice—and, indeed, not all metanomialisms are the same.⁹ For Buber, what is key is not necessarily the abandonment of rituals, but rather the beholding of every moment in life as a site of religious practice. If normative structures of religious tradition help one to realize this fundamental principle, then so be it; but if one starts then to treat ritual actions as ends in themselves and thus regard other moments as merely mundane (or worse), then there is an urgent need for religious adjustment. Indeed, as far as Buber was concerned, his intention was not to diminish religious practice but to deepen it.¹⁰ What is essential is to open oneself constantly to the commands of God and to respond with the wholeness of one's life. Whether one does this while remaining committed to ritual practices or while deviating from such norms is quite inconsequential.¹¹

Accordingly, Buber never cast Hasidism as antinomian, or actively in favor of breaking Jewish law. Rather, he contended that the movement promoted such a robust and life-encompassing conception of religious practice that it exceeded the strictures of ritual without necessarily negating them.¹² Hasidism remained lovingly committed to Halakhah, but was nonetheless attuned to the deeper foundations of genuine practice: "In life, as Hasidism understands and proclaims it, there is, accordingly, no essential distinction between sacred and profane spaces, between sacred and profane times, between sacred and profane actions, between sacred and profane conversations. At each place, in each hour, in each act, in each speech the holy can blossom forth."¹³ Buber characterized this aspect of Hasidic religiosity as "pansacramentalism" or "sacramental existence," according to which every time and place is—potentially—a site of sacred action.¹⁴ From this perspective, the essence of any particular sacrament is its power to remind practitioners of how holy every moment of life is.¹⁵

figures and trends in the history of mysticisms, it does not apply to Buber inasmuch as he affirmed a sharp opposition between commandment (in the sense of dialogical responsibility) and transgression (in the sense of failure to recognize or act upon that responsibility). In this context, we might note Buber's aggressive and unequivocal critique of those "Gnostics" who blur boundaries between good and evil. See, for example, Buber's critique of Jung in his essays "Religion and Modern Thinking" and "Supplement: Reply to C.G. Jung," in (Buber 1999, pp. 78–92, 133–37).

- ⁹ For related contentions that "not all antinomianisms are the same" and that there is a need "for a more nuanced approach to it," see (Michaelson 2017).
- ¹⁰ For example, see Buber's critique of nineteenth-century liberal Judaism: "What was preached here was not reformation, only reform; not transformation, only facilitation (*Erleichterung*); not a renewal of Judaism, but its perpetuation in an easier (*leichterern*), more elegant, Europeanized, more socially acceptable (*salonfähigeren*) form. Truly, I prefer a thousandfold the gauche dullards who, in the simplicity of their hearts, observe day after day and without any shortcuts every detail of what they believe to be the command of their God, of their fathers' God. How could this feeble program [liberal reform] dare to call itself a revival of prophetic Judaism? The prophets, it is true, spoke of the futility of ceremonies; not, however, in order to make religious life easier (*erleichtern*), but rather to make it more difficult (*erschweren*), to make it whole and true, to proclaim the holiness of the deed." (Buber 1967a, p. 38); German: (Buber 1920, p. 67). I have emended Glatzer's English translation according to Buber's original German. Buber's precise target in this passage was Moritz Lazarus.
- ¹¹ For insightful discussions of Buber's perspective on Jewish law, see (Eisen 1998, pp. 190–96; Mendes-Flohr 1991, pp. 341–69).
- ¹² For example: "Hasidism had no desire to diminish the law; it wanted to restore it to life, to raise it once again from the conditioned to the unconditioned." Buber, "Jewish Religiosity," in (Buber 1967a, p. 92). Elsewhere, Buber writes that while Judaism may seem from an outside perspective like a highly dualistic form of piety, it is actually a vast matrix of practices that seek to hallow every stitch of earthly existence, and Hasidism merely drew this primal unity to a higher height. See (Buber 2016b, pp. 6–7).
- ¹³ (Buber 2016b, p. 8).
- ¹⁴ See (Buber 1966, pp. 165–81). See also Buber's reference to a "sacramental expression" wherein the Apter rebbe picks up the fallen girdle of a young Hasid, wraps it back around him, and describes this as an act of *gelilah* (dressing the Torah scroll). For Buber, it was precisely the fact that the Apter saw this non-normative act as ritually radiant that made it definitively "sacramental." (Buber 1988, p. 129).
- ¹⁵ Grete Schaeder claimed that Goethe was "the source of Buber's unusual use of the word 'sacrament'". It is certainly possible that Buber was influenced by Goethe's meditations on "the symbolical or sacramental

Given Buber's radical emphasis on religiosity as a way of life, however, how did he justify his own sharp swerve away from the concrete conduct of Hasidism, and how should we even begin to think about his representations of halakhic practice? How could Buber have possibly developed an adequate understanding of the Hasidic way, if he did not embody the very forms of life that constituted the movement's foundations? As Zalman Schachter-Shalomi noted, Buber's understanding of Hasidism was necessarily limited insofar as he derived it "largely from books and hadn't been involved in *davvenen* and singing Hasidic melodies," and thus could not know Hasidism from the inside, as it were, through the embodied epistemologies of practice.¹⁶ Such a critique of Buber is undeniably correct, and I see no reason to refute it. However, in turning to Buber's depictions of Hasidic practice, it is instructive for us to think with and beyond those dismissals.

In light of Schachter-Shalomi's critique, there are two important points for us to consider before launching into our investigations of Buber's tales. First of all, Buber was ultimately less interested in presenting, let alone propagating, Hasidism, *per se*, than he was invested in a project of Jewish renewal that drew inspiration from Hasidism—and he was quite cognizant of this fact:

To be sure, I knew from the beginning that Hasidism was not a teaching which was realized by its adherents in this or that measure, but a way of life, to which the teaching provided the indispensable commentary. But now it became clear that this life was involved in a mysterious manner in the task that had claimed me.¹⁷ I could not become a Hasid. It would have been an impermissible masquerading had I taken on the Hasidic manner of life—I who had a wholly other relation to Jewish tradition, since I must distinguish in my innermost being between what is commanded me and what is not commanded me.¹⁸

Thus, Buber was well aware that Hasidism was fundamentally a "way of life," irreducible to abstract teachings and ultimately alien to his own religious practice. However, he goes on nevertheless to claim that this very core of Hasidic praxis—the "kernel of this life," the "hallowing of the everyday," the intention to "overcome the fundamental separation between the sacred and the profane"—has the power to nourish a contemporary renewal of Judaism, in a decidedly different mode and a new context:

After the rise and decline of that life in the Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian ghettos, this kernel has entered into a contemporaneity, which is still, to be sure, only reminiscent, only an

sense," according to which "the inner religion of the heart and that of the external church [are] perfectly one," but Buber's use of the term resonates even more strongly with that of a different German Romantic, Johann Wilhelm Ritter. The following definition of "sacrament" in Ritter's writings bears a striking resemblance to Buber's own sensibilities—and, in fact, Buber copied and preserved this very passage in his personal notes: "What is the most religious activity, sacrament, still through this day, other than mere *remembrance, calling to mind* of that which one is doing!—The ordinary is performed *sacra mente* [with the 'sacred' in 'mind'].—The action during the sacraments is to a certain degree an excerpt of all possible activities, and *it itself* is thus hallowed." Both Ritter and Goethe, along with many other Romantics of their times, shared a sense that the rationalist tendencies of eighteenth-century Protestantism had eroded the more personal, emotional, and, indeed, bodily dimensions of sacramental spirituality. This critique of Enlightenment abstraction continued into the twentieth century, and, in fact, Buber's friend Paul Tillich offered similar critiques of the so-called "death of the sacraments" in contemporary Protestantism. However, Buber remained particularly close to Ritter's perspective. See (Schaefer 1973, p. 322; von Goethe 1870, p. 290; Ritter 1810, p. 614; Tillich 1948, pp. 94–112). Buber's handwritten notes on Ritter, which seem to be from 1920 and include the quotation above, are located in the Martin Buber Archives, National Library of Israel, Ms. Var. 350 02 39a. Note: There are instances when Buber uses the term *Sakrament* quite differently. In his book *Two Types of Faith*, for example, Buber tends to oppose "devotio" and "sacrament," where the latter term is virtually synonymous with institutional "religion." See (Magid 2018, p. 39).

¹⁶ (Schachter-Shalomi and Miles-Yepez 2003, p. x).

¹⁷ Buber refers here to his shift from mysticism to dialogue in the wake of World War One.

¹⁸ (Buber 2016b, p. 3).

indication in the spirit, but even so can accomplish something in this manifestation that was basically foreign to the reality of that time.¹⁹

Buber envisions a Jewish way of life that will be “only reminiscent” of Hasidism, and yet infused with its most essential vitality. While his perspectives on Hasidic practice were inevitably myopic in some respects, given his personal distance from it, his primary intention was to draw inspiration from those sources that might irrigate a new flourishing of Jewish religiosity, and this is the frame through which we should approach his writings.

In this vein, it is important to underscore that, as far as Buber was concerned, Hasidism itself was ultimately a failure, slipping into legalistic fetishism and compulsive ritualism.²⁰ On one hand, he saw this decline as a result of historical factors: The revolutionary insights and primordial religiosity of early Hasidism provoked aggressive antipathy from Mitnagedim, who feared the collapse of traditional order, and from Maskilim, who scoffed at ecstatic effervescence—and the original vitality of Hasidism caved under pressure.²¹ On the other hand, however, Buber was simply unable to make himself believe that the degeneration of Hasidism was due entirely to historical circumstances. Ultimately, the narrow bridge between “sacramental existence” and halakhic obedience was just too slippery.²² The great Hasidic sages may very well have grasped the inner power of rituals as catalysts for sacramental existence, but Buber sensed that unshakeable commitments to fixed rules devolve inevitably into rigid short-sightedness and witherings of spirit. Thus, he scoured the sources for expressions of Hasidic metanormianism and felt licensed to ignore or downplay other elements due to the nature and goals of his own project.

This leads us to our second point in response to Schachter-Shalomi’s legitimate critique: Although Buber’s familiarity with Hasidism was indeed “largely from books,” his engagement with those texts was so hermeneutically intimate that it ought to raise questions for us about the boundaries of Hasidic discourse. As I have shown elsewhere with regard to Buber’s portrayals of theological expression and theological cognition in Hasidism,²³ Buber’s portrayal of religious practice in Hasidism was at once idiosyncratic and textually attuned. The fact is, Buber’s Hasidic writings amplified an ethos that was genuinely present in Hasidic discourse, even if it was not actually enacted by Hasidic people. Indeed, while the many polemical accusations of antinomianism waged against Hasidism from its inception were ultimately unfounded, some of those claims were genuine responses to messages embedded in Hasidic sources. Mystical journeys toward liberation from corporeality can undermine the holiness of bodily practices, Hasidic values of serving and seeking God “in all your ways” can erode the authority of elaborate ceremonial systems, and certain strands of later Hasidic messianism seem to have danced “on the margins” of Jewish law.²⁴ In short,

¹⁹ (Buber 2016b, p. 5).

²⁰ Buber’s notion that Hasidism experienced a “decline” after its founding generations was shared by many scholars, and this view was most famously introduced by Simon Dubnow. In recent decades, however, scholars have contended that the nineteenth-century was actually a “golden age” for Hasidism, as measured by power, influence, and sheer numbers of followers and publications. See (Biale et al. 2018, pp. 4, 7–8), and the entirety of Section 2.

²¹ See Buber, “Jewish Religiosity,” in (Buber 1967a, p. 92).

²² “It is understandable why Hasidism had no incentive to break loose any stick from the structure of the traditional Law, for according to the Hasidic teaching there could not exist anything that was not to be fulfilled with intention or whose intention could not be discovered. But it is also understandable how *just thereby* the conserving force secretly remained superior to the moving and renewing one and finally conquered it within Hasidism itself.” (Buber 1966, p. 127); German: (Buber 1937, p. xxviii). Emphasis added.

²³ (Shonkoff 2018b, chp. 2 and 3).

²⁴ See Arnold Eisen’s astute comment that “Hasidism offered authority, grounding inside the tradition, for the rebellion *against* tradition which Buber sought to foment.” (Eisen 1998, p. 191), emphasis in original. See also (Green 1981, pp. 104–29; Kauffman 2009; Magid 2003). For elements of antinomianism or “hypernormianism” in earlier Jewish mysticism, see (Wolfson 2006, pp. 186–285). We might also consider Scholem’s broad declaration: “By its very nature mysticism involves the danger of an uncontrolled and uncontrollable deviation from traditional authority.” (Scholem 1965, pp. 17–18).

Buber radicalized an already existing radicalness in Hasidism. When he presented Hasidism in a metanomian light, he did no more and no less than isolate and amplify sensibilities that were present in Hasidic sources. Indeed, many of his most strikingly metanomian tales prove to be faithful representations of texts that he plucked directly from mainstream Hasidic sources.

With this perspective in mind, we might complicate Ya'ari's contention that Buber was disingenuous for "nurturing our relation to our tradition" although he "did not keep the tradition himself." If Jewish "tradition" is synonymous with Halakhah, then Ya'ari's claim is undeniable. However, if Jewish tradition encompasses not only legal rulings but also reflections on the meaning of the Law—not to mention the vastness of Aggadah—then Buber's relation to Jewish tradition was quite robust and should be reconsidered. Buber's most vivid representations of religious practice are in his Hasidic writings, and, as we shall see below, these reflect a most active and intimate immersion in Hasidic sources. While Buber's portrayals of Hasidic praxis were not wholly accurate from a historical standpoint, he was indeed responding to elements in the sources. Exactly *how* he did that, and *what* emerged from those hermeneutical encounters—these are now our primary concerns.

2. Whatever You Are Engaged with at the Moment

In 1924, the Hasidic writer Moshe Ḥayyim Kleinmann published the following tale about his teacher's teacher, Rabbi Moshe Polier of Kobrin²⁵:

After his death, the wise rabbi from Kotsk, Rabbi Menaḥem, may the holy tsaddiq's memory be a blessing, asked one of [Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin's] Hasidim, who had been with him in Kobrin and traveled to Kotsk, about his rabbi, may his memory be a blessing. And this was what he asked him: "What thing was essential for him?" And he answered: "Everything that happened was essential for him." And the aforementioned holy rabbi [Rabbi Menaḥem] said: "It wasn't for nothing that they called him 'Polier (פאליער)'—he weeded (געפאליוועט)²⁶ from morning until evening, and about him it says, Man goes forth to his action (לפעלי) and to his service until evening (Ps. 104:23).²⁷

The centerpiece of this story is the disciple's statement that, for Moshe of Kobrin, every moment was consequential and thus it would be senseless to identify a single principle or practice that was supreme in his eyes. The Kotsker's puns on the rebbe's surname then affirm that the Hasid's answer points to the constancy of Rabbi Moshe's religious practice.

Buber loved this tale, publishing his version of it frequently as soon as he discovered the original.²⁸ For obvious reasons, he embraced it as a bold formulation of sacramental existence, and

²⁵ Kleinmann was originally a hasid of Rabbi Avraham of Slonim, who had been a disciple of Moshe of Kobrin. See (Nigal 1995, pp. 208–11; Dan 1975, p. 223).

²⁶ The Yiddish term here seems to be a variant spelling of געפאלעוועט (infinitive: פאלעווען), meaning to weed or hoe. It is conceivable, although unlikely, that the intended word here is געפאליעט (infinitive: פאליען), meaning to be burning hot or to become scorched. Although this latter verb may seem more sensical, given the Hasidic concept of ecstasy as *hitlahavut* (lit. to be aflame), it would be surprising for Kleinmann to add the double-*vav* (וו) in the middle of the word, as this would indicate an entirely different class of verbs. I am grateful to Isaac Bleaman for his consultation on this question.

²⁷ (Kleinman 1924, p. 55). הרבי הזקן מקאצק הרר"מ זצוק"ל שאל לאחד מחסידיו שהיה לו בקאברין שנסע לקאצק, על אודות מרן ז"ל אחר. (Kleinman 1924, p. 55). הסתלקותו, וזה היה שאלתו, איזה דבר היה העיקר אצלו, והשיב לכל דבר שבא היה אצלו העיקר, ואמר הרה"ק הנ"ל לא להנמ קראו אותו "פאליער" ער האט גפאליוועט מבוקר עד ערב, ועליו נאמר "יצא אדם לפעלו ולעבודתו עדי ערב".

²⁸ In his very first publication of Hasidic anecdotes following the appearance of Kleinmann's collection, Buber featured it in a series of only sixteen tales (Buber 1927a, p. 224). The following year, Buber added this tale retroactively to a revised version of *Das verborgene Licht*, printed in his *Die chassidischen Bücher*, and he included it as well a few years later in his selective collection *Hundert chassidische Geschichten*, not to mention Buber's later, more exhaustive anthologies. See (Buber 1927, p. 579; 1935, §26; 2015, §899). Moreover, Buber cited this tale repeatedly in his essays on Hasidism. See, for example, his essays "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence" and "The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion," in (Buber 1963, p. 223; 1966, pp. 177, 228; 1967b, p. 736).

yet he also interpreted it according to his own dialogical sensibilities. Most importantly, in response to the question about what was most essential to Moshe of Kobrin, whereas Kleinmann's Hasid responds, "Everything that happened was essential for him (לכל דבר שבא היה אצלו העיקר)," Buber's Hasid "reflected, and then gave the answer: 'Whatever he was engaged with at the moment (*Womit er sich gerade abgab*; מה שנתעסק בו אותה שעה).'"²⁹ Thus, for Buber, the crux of the response is not only that everything is religiously consequential, but also that the spiritual significance of events lies first and foremost in the level of relational attention that one gives to them. In other words, the teaching is not so much an ontological claim about the nature of things than it is a phenomenological statement about practice. In this respect, it is significant that Buber categorizes this tale, in his anthology *Das verborgene Licht*, as pertaining to matters of "service" (*Dienst*).³⁰ For Buber, the Kobriner heeded the demands of religious existence most fruitfully because "he gave himself (*er sich...abgab*)" to every moment. And, as Buber emphasizes explicitly in his discursive reflections on Hasidism, this matter touches upon the very heart of sacramental existence: "The person of sacramental existence...really and simply gives himself (*sich gibt...her*)... He gives himself (*gibt sich...her*) in service; that means: every time anew. To the question what (in the sacramental sense) is important, the answer was: 'Whatever one is engaged with (*sich...abgibt*) at the moment.'"³¹ What is essential, according to Buber's Kobriner, is to give oneself wholly to what is happening.

Not only did Buber regard this tale as a prime expression of sacramental existence in Hasidism, he also viewed its hero, Moshe of Kobrin, as a key exemplar of that way of life. Indeed, while he concedes in his introduction to *Die Erzählungen* that the Kobriner was a "little-known man" in the history of Hasidism, even among tsaddiqim of the later generations, Buber devotes a quite lengthy section of the anthology to him—forty-eight tales, to be exact—and celebrates him specifically as a master of practice:

He did not enrich the teaching. But in life and word—in the unity of life and word—he lent it once again a wholly personal, refreshingly vital expression.

One can reduce what he taught to three of his sayings: "You shall become an altar before God"; "There is nothing in the world without a commandment"; and "Just as God is limitless, so his service is limitless." But surrounding these sayings there spread an astonishing fullness of image and example—of lived life—which was at times reminiscent of the early Hasidic masters. For the rest, what is told about him in this book requires no elaboration or explanation.³²

For Buber, the Kobriner's greatest contribution to Hasidic wisdom was embodied in his very way of life, a perpetual practice whereby one offers himself wholly to the normative force of each moment. And Buber concludes that it is hardly necessary to add discursive reflections, for the deeds speak for themselves. In fact, one can even detect a sort of reticence in Buber when he quotes those three sayings of the Kobriner, as Buber affirms quickly that what was truly consequential were the forms of life that surrounded those sayings. And yet, in his actual anthological section on the Kobriner, Buber decided to leave out the first and third of those three sayings, evidently because their surrounding

²⁹ (Buber 1991, vol. II, p. 173); German: "Das Wichtigste," in (Buber 2015, §899); Hebrew: "Ha-Iqar," in (Hebrew 1968, p. 359). I have emended Marx's translation according to Buber's German and Hebrew renditions.

³⁰ See "Das Wichtigste" in the section entitled "Vom Dienst" in the version of Buber's *Das verborgene Licht* printed in (Buber 1927b, p. 579). The tale does not appear in the first edition of *Das verborgene Licht* (1924), as Kleinmann's collection was not yet published when Buber completed the manuscript.

³¹ "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence," in (Buber 1966, p. 177); German: (Buber 2016a, p. 171). In another reference to this tale, Buber rewords "er sich gerade abgab" as "er sich gerade befaßte." These two hermeneutical formulations are functionally the same with respect to my argument. See Buber, "Der Ort des Chassidismus in her Religionsgeschichte," in (Buber 2016a, p. 209).

³² (Buber 1991, part II, p. 23); German: (Buber 2015, p. 170). I have emended Marx's English translation according to the original German.

contexts did not resonate enough with his own visions of religious life!³³ As for the second dictum—“There is nothing in the world without a commandment”—this material does indeed appear in Buber’s tales about the Kobriner, although Buber alters the wording therein and, moreover, adds his own striking formulation to the conclusion of the tale: “Everything is commandment (*Alles ist Gebot*).”³⁴ To be sure, this pansacramental perception of all moments as sites of religious practice is manifest repeatedly in the teachings and tales of the Kobriner. But we may also appreciate nonetheless ways in which Buber accentuated those elements.³⁵

Buber’s most forceful anthological spree on pansacramentalism occurs in his chapter on Menaḥem Mendel of Kotsk. Four consecutive tales in that section bear bold testimony to the Kotsker’s stance that every moment—not only those in ritual contexts—should be honored with religious attention. It is noteworthy that Buber’s renditions of the original sources for this sequence are virtually verbatim. The more illuminating hermeneutical devices to highlight here are, rather, Buber’s principles of selection and anthological ordering. Indeed, it is clear that his bundling of these four tales from three different Hasidic collections was a product of careful thought: In his personal notebook, he recorded 219 tales about the Kotsker from various collections, and the four sources that he would eventually cluster are scattered throughout that list (numbers 18, 90, 180, and 189, to be exact). From this vast array, Buber then listed eighty-seven of his favorites on a loose sheet of paper, which he arranged in a tentative order wherein the four sources remain separate from one another (numbers 7, 48, 50, and 73). Subsequently, Buber filled another loose sheet of paper with an even more reduced list, including eighty-two tales that appear more or less according to their order in *Die Erzählungen*. In this last list, the four tales are finally drawn together as an anthological unit. Through such considerations of Buber’s paper trail, there is no doubt that this unification of sources was the result of much thought.

It is worthwhile for us to turn to Buber’s sequence here in its entirety:

Great Guilt

³³ As evidenced in Buber’s unpublished notes, he did list those two dicta as possible tales for the anthology. See his unpublished notes on Mosche von Kobryn in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #33, “Ein Altar werden,” and #34, “Der unendliche Dienst.” Evidently, however, he concluded that it would be best to just isolate those single-sentence formulations in his introduction to *Die Erzählungen*, as we saw above. Indeed, in the original source of *Amarot Tehorot*, the first saying, “You shall become an altar before God (איר זאלט קענען זיין אמוזה לפני השי"ת),” was in fact the crescendo of the Kobriner’s teaching about how Jews ought to conduct themselves during holidays, when “You shall bind yourselves to the holiness of the festival, *until the horns of the altar* [Ps. 118:27].” And the third saying, “Just as God is without end, so is his service without end (וכמו שהשי"ת הוא א"ס כך עבודתו הוא א"ס),” was originally in the context of the Kobriner’s assertion that one must strive always to lift his consciousness toward ever more heavenly heights in order to attain increasingly lofty levels of theological comprehension. Clearly, neither of these teachings resonates strongly with the sacramental existence that Buber identifies with the Kobriner: In contrast to the hallowing of each moment in everyday life, one saying over-emphasizes designated times of holiness, and the other appears to equate divine “service” with acosmic meditations. For the original sources of both dicta, see (Polier 1910, p. 20).

³⁴ See Buber, “The End of the Matter,” in (Buber 1991, part II, p. 161); German: “Am Ende der Sache,” in (Buber 2015, §861); Hebrew: “*Sof Davar*,” in (Buber 1968, p. 350). Cf. (Polier 1910, p. 15). Interestingly, in his personal notes Buber entitled this tale “Kein Ding ohne Mizwa,” which is a direct translation of the original dictum that Buber highlights in his introductory words about the Kobriner—and yet, it is a formulation that Buber alters in his own version of the tale.

³⁵ For another related example in his section on the Kobriner, see Buber’s tale, “Alles ist Dienst,” in (Buber 2015, §858); Hebrew: “*Ha-Kol 'Avodah Hu*,” in (Buber 1968, p. 349) (not in English translation). After a quite faithful representation of the original source’s discussion of a type of eating that is itself a form of divine service (as opposed to just preparation for divine service), Buber adds his own formulation as the concluding crescendo of the tale: “for here, everything is service (*ist alles Dienst*).” Moreover, despite the fact that this locution does not appear in the original source, Buber entitles the tale “Alles ist Dienst,” although he listed the source initially in his unpublished notes as “Essen und Opfer.” See Buber’s notes on Mosche von Kobryn in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #36. For the original source, see (Polier 1910, p. 23).

Rabbi Mendel said:

“One who learns the Torah and is not troubled by it, who sins and forgives himself, who prays because he prayed yesterday—a very scoundrel is better than he!”³⁶

The Week and the Sabbath

Once the rabbi of Kotzk said to Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger: “I don’t know what they want of me! All week everyone does as he pleases, but come sabbath he puts on his black robe and girds himself with his black belt, and puts on the black fur hat, and he’s already chummy with (du und du mit) the Sabbath Bride! I say: As one does during the week, so let him do on the Sabbath.”³⁷

Earnestness

The rabbi of Kotzk called to some of his hasidim: “What is all this blabber about praying earnestly?! What does that mean, to pray earnestly?!”

They did not understand him.

“Is there anything at all that one may do without earnestness?” he said.³⁸

No Break

Rabbi Mendel saw to it that his hasidim wore nothing around the neck while praying, for, he said, there must be no break between the heart and the brain.³⁹

Buber drew these four tales together to underscore a central pillar of practice: One must strive to overcome any dualism whatsoever that divides time, space, or self into sacred versus secular spheres. In other words, religious existence must encompass the wholeness of life—and this takes extraordinary effort. This sequence of four tales conveys the interconnected messages that: (1) Like all moments, the practices of Torah study, repentance, and prayer must never become habitual matters of course; (2) it would be folly to fancy that the trappings of ritual can simply expunge the trivialities of a thoughtless existence; (3) practitioners ought to take their walks to synagogues no less seriously than their prayers therein; and (4) genuine religious practice demands that the person is wholly here, with heart in mind and mind on heart. Of course, that fourth tale could be interpreted in various ways, yet Buber’s anthological positioning of it in the afterglow of the previous three casts a particular light upon it—and a light, we should add, that differs from the context in the original

³⁶ (Buber 1991, part II, p. 281); German: “Große Schuld,” in (Buber 2015, §1173); Hebrew: “*Ashma Gedolah*,” in (Buber 1968, p. 437). Buber drew this tale from (Grinwald 1897, p. 97). See his notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #189, “Die grossen Sünde.” With regard to Buber’s hermeneutical principle of selection, it is worth noting that the teaching just before this one in (Grinwald 1897) portrays God’s commandments as vehicles for drawing near to God, comparing the multitude of laws to a father who loves his son and thus gives him a great burden. As evidenced in his personal notebook, Buber skipped this teaching and recorded only the more metanomian one.

³⁷ (Buber 1991, part II, p. 282); German: “Woche und Sabbat,” in (Buber 2015, §1174); Hebrew: “*Hol ve-Shabbat*,” in (Buber 1968, p. 438). Buber drew this source primarily from (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 3, p. 70). According to his notebook, he also consulted a variation in (Grinwald 1897, p. 92). However, Buber’s version is clearly based upon that in (Rakats 1927–1931). See his notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #90, “Werktag und Sabbos.”

³⁸ (Buber 1991, part II, p. 282); German: “Ernst,” in (Buber 2015, §1175); Hebrew: “*Be-Koved Rosh*,” in (Buber 1968, p. 437). Buber drew this source from (Grinwald 1897, p. 92), although for some reason he cites it (implicitly) in the source index of (Buber 1968) as from (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 1). See Buber’s notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #18, “Alles muss ernst sein.”

³⁹ (Buber 1991, part II, p. 282); German: “Keine Unterbrechung,” in (Buber 2015, §1176); Hebrew: “*Beli Hatsitsah*,” in (Buber 1968, p. 438). Buber drew this material from a late collection attributed to (Morgenstern 1940, p. 134). See Buber’s notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #180, “Zwischen Hirn u. Herz”.

collection.⁴⁰ With such hermeneutical acumen, Buber presents sprees of sources that convey a sacramental existence beyond the bounds of any dualistic system.

Ultimately, however, Buber felt that the Kotsker strayed too far in his resistance to religious normativity. In his introductory discourse, Buber indicates that the rebbe's outlook reached a decidedly "antinomian note," and this onset of antinomianism had less to do with the rebbe's deviation from Halakhah, per se, than with his distancing from people. "From that time on," Buber notes, "throughout the remaining twenty years of his life, Rabbi Mendel kept to his room behind two doors which were almost always closed." And on the rare occasions when the Kotsker did interact with others, "He cursed them in choppy words that burst from his lips with such force that they were seized with terror and fled from the house through doors and windows." For Buber, it was precisely this antisocial behavior that was symptomatic of antinomianism. And there was nothing romantic about this phase, signifying no less than the demise of Hasidic religiosity.⁴¹ According to Buber, the quality of one's interpersonal relationships—certainly more than any compliance with ritual codes—is the ultimate litmus test for the robustness of one's religious practice. As in Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the solitary seeker who says "Now I love God; man I love not" may very well be a "saint," but his practice is meaningless, directed toward a dead God.⁴²

Buber presents many Hasidic tales that stress how interpersonal relationships are part and parcel of sacramental existence. One particularly illustrative example is his rendition of a story about Rabbi Ḥayyim of Sanz (1797/9–1876), which Buber drew from the collection *Meqor Ḥayyim*, by Abraham Michelson. According to the original source—and, due to its length, I paraphrase here with some direct quotes⁴³—Rabbi Ḥayyim completes his afternoon prayers and then dismisses all his Hasidim. One lingers, however, and requests a favor. Rabbi Ḥayyim gets so angry that the man runs away, and when the man then returns to make his request again, he cannot even get a word in because of the tsaddiq's anger. Rabbi Ḥayyim's father-in-law from Tluste witnessed this interaction, and he asks Rabbi Hayyim why he is angry. Rabbi Hayyim responds with a story about rabbis Menaḥem Nahum of Chernobil and David of Mykolaiv which demonstrates that the afternoon prayers correspond to the highest reaches of spiritual consciousness, the World of Emanation (תפילתו מנחה הוא). "If someone comes from the World of Emanation," Rabbi Hayyim reasons, "and one comes to him with his words, how would I not get angry?" In response, the rabbi of Tluste shares Rabbi Hayyim of Kosov's interpretation of Exodus 19:14—"And Moses descended from the mountain to the people"—in light of Rashi's comment that "Moses did not turn to his own affairs (לעסקיו), but from the mountain to the people."⁴⁴ It is difficult to fathom what Moses's "affairs" were atop that mountain, the rabbi of Tluste explains, since there was obviously no business or commerce out

⁴⁰ See (Morgenstern 1940, p. 134).

⁴¹ See (Buber 1991, part II, pp. 42–43); German: (Buber 2015, p. 185).

⁴² (Nietzsche 1978, pp. 10–12). On Buber's connection to this work from a very young age, see (Mendes-Flohr 2001).

⁴³ The entire source from (Michelson 1912, pp. 45–46), is as follows: וסיפר החסיד יר"א מ' משה אליעזר שו"ב מק' ווישא אשר פ"א היה אצל הגה"ק בצאנז והי' שם בעת ההוא גם מחותנו הגאון החסיד אבד"ק טלוסט ז"ל ואחר מנחה התחיל הגה"ק מצאנז ליפטר אנשים אשר היו שם בעת ההוא. והג' מטלוסט ישב שם אצל השלחן. וראה אשר איש א' ביקש איזה בקשה מהה"ק ד"ה [דברי חיים] וכעס עליו מאד עד שברח מפניו. ואח"כ בא האיש עוד הפעם לשאול בקשתו ולא הי' יכול בשו"א לדבר מחמת כעס של הד"ה ז"ל. ושאל אותו הרב מטלוסט לאמור: מחותני למה אתם כועסים. והשיב לו הד"ה אשר פ"א בעת תפלת מנחה הזדמן הרה"ק מוהר"ד ממיקאלייב לביהמ"ד של הה"ק ר"נ בעל מאור עינים מטשנובל. ובאמצע תפילת מנחה הריח הרר"נ כי בא אדם גדול לבית מדרשו. ותיכף כשגמר תפילתו התחיל הה"ק ר"נ לבקש מי הוא. ותכיר בפני הרר"ד אף לא הי' יכול לדבר עמו כי הק' ר"ד הי' מתפלל או. והמתין שם עד שסיים תפילתו. ושאל אותו הרר"נ. פין ואניד איז א' יוד. והשיבו כי הוא בא מעולם אצילות כי תפילתו מנחה הוא נגד עולם אצילות. וכעת יוכל מחו' להבין באם בא אדם מעולם האצילות וזה בא בדברים שלו היאך לא אכעוס. והשיב לו הרב מטלוסט אשר מפי חמיו זקנו בעל תורת חיים זל"ל מקאסיב על הפי' ויורד משה מן ההר אל העם ופרש"י מלמד שלא פנה משה לעסקיו אלא מן ההר אל העם. ולכאור' קשה וכי מה עסקים היו למשרע"ה במדבר שלא פנה להם אלא אל העם וכי חנוני או סוחר היה אלא פי' דוודאי משרע"ה בעת אשר ירד מן ההר עוד הי' מדובק בעולמות העליונים ותיקן שם דברים גבוהים וזאת הי' עסקיו על משה לדבק עצמו בעולמות העליונים ולהמתקן שם כל הדינים ח"ו. וזה הרבותא של משה בעת פנה מן ההר לא פנה לעסקיו. היינו להיות עוד דבוק שם אלא אל העם לשמוע בקשותיהם וכל מה שבלב ישראל ואח"כ הי' מעלה בקשותיהם הגשמיים עם תפילתם הכל למרום. וכששמע זאת בעל ד"ה תיכף נתקן דעתו וקרא בחזרה להאיש לשמוע בקשתו וכמעט כל הלילה שמע כל מה שבלב אנשים שהיו שם וכולם הציעו לפניו בקשותיהם. וברכו להג' אבד"ק טלוסט עבור זה עכ"ל.

⁴⁴ See (Hayim of Kosov 1883, fol. 7b). Rashi's commentary is based on Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, *Ba-hodesh*, 3.

there in the desert. But when Moses descended from the mountain, he was still attached to the upper worlds, repairing supernal imbalances and sweetening divine judgements—and these were precisely the affairs to which he had attached himself. And, the rabbi of Tluste concludes,

This was the greatness of Moses at the moment he turned from the mountain, not to his affairs. He did not remain attached (דבוק) there, but rather turned to the people, to hear their requests and all that was in the hearts of Israel. And after this, he would elevate their corporeal requests along with their prayers—everything to on high.

When he heard this, the rebbe of Sandz's mind cooled at once, and he called back to the man in order to hear his request. And, for almost the entire night, he listened to all that was in the hearts of the people who were there, and everyone presented their requests to him.⁴⁵

It is obvious why Buber selected this source for his own anthology,⁴⁶ and in his own rendition of it he preserves the main elements: After being frustrated with the requests of a man following the afternoon prayers, the Sandzer rebbe encounters the commentary on Exodus 19:14, which teaches that Moses's greatness was manifest precisely when he turned from his own mystical affairs on the mountain to the social concerns of people down below. To be expected, Buber minimizes the Sandzer's fury, muffling the fact that Hasidism allowed for such cantankerous, short-tempered *tsaddiqim*.⁴⁷ For our purposes, however, the more significant alterations pertain to Buber's depictions of the boundary between spiritual and social spheres. In Michelson's version, the rebbe of Sandz complains, "If someone comes from the World of Emanation (מעולם אצילות), and one comes with his words (בא בדברים שלו), how would I not get angry?" That is, mystical consciousness is above language, so it makes complete sense that "words" would rupture that rapture. In contrast, Buber's Sandzer protests, "One who speaks *Mincha* stands over-against the world of primordial separation (*Welt der Ursonderung*); how should he not get angry if he comes from there and is now bombarded with the petty concerns of petty people (*den kleinen Sorgen der kleinen Leute*; דאגותיהם הקטנות של האנשים והקטנים הקטנים)" With these changes, Buber rejects the notion that there is some ontological abyss between religious and interpersonal realms. In fact, he is not even willing to dignify the Sandzer's inner, solitary experience with the Kabbalistic concept of the World of Emanation—Buber associates it, rather, with *Sonderung*, subjectivist separation from others.⁴⁸ Moreover, in substituting the intrusion of "petty concerns of petty people" for the original problem of "words," the central message of this tale is no longer how the Sandzer learned to navigate the discordance of language and spirituality, but rather how he came to realize that what he had formerly perceived as "petty" was actually of great spiritual gravity. Similarly, whereas the original source suggests that Moses heard all the people's "corporeal requests" (בקשתיהם הגשמיים), Buber says that he heard all "their petty concerns (*kleinen Sorgen*; דאגותיהם הקטנות)." Thus, just as Buber avoided the propagation of ontological binaries

⁴⁵ (Ḥayim of Kosov 1883, fol. 7b).

⁴⁶ See Buber, "To the People," in (Buber 1991, part II, pp. 209–10); German: "Zum Volke," in (Buber 2015, §966); Hebrew: "El ha-'Am," in (Buber 1968, pp. 383–84). See also Buber's reference to this tale in the introductory remarks to his anthology *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*. Buber, "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," in (Buber 1966, pp. 139–40); German: (Buber 2016a, pp. 68–69).

⁴⁷ Whereas in the original source, the very sight of the man made the rabbi "so angry at him that [the man] ran away from him (וכעס עליו מאד עד שברח מפניו)," Buber notes that the man was characteristically "pushy (*zudringlichen*; טרדן)" and that it was only after "he did not let up (*als er nicht ablassen wollte*; כשלא הרפה ממנו)" that "the *tsaddiq* shouted at him (*fuhr ihn der Zaddik an*; נזף בו הצדיק)."

⁴⁸ This is the only place in all of Buber's *Erzählungen* that he uses this term. The more standard German translation of מעולם אצילות is "Welt der Emanation." See, for example, (Scholem 1988, p. 298). On Buber's use of the term *Sonderung* to denote a problematic detachment from things, see his discussion of "der absoluten *Sonderung* von Ich und Gegenstand," in (Buber 1983, p. 38); also his identification of the "true nature" of the It-world with "Versonderung" (Buber 1983, p. 71). We should note that Buber does preserve the term מעולם אצילות in his Hebrew version of the tale. Presumably, much of his Hebrew-speaking audience would have been familiar with the doctrine of the four worlds, and thus it would have been unwise for Buber to avoid the term.

between spirituality and language, he does so again here with regard to spirituality and corporeality.⁴⁹

The issue at stake in this story, for Buber, is therefore not the need to vacillate between spiritual and social spheres, but rather the need to behold spirituality in this relational world. It is not speech or corporeality that are antithetical to religious consciousness, but rather misperceptions of “pettiness.” The Sandzer learns this crucial truth that there is no real conflict between religious life and interpersonal encounters. It follows, then, that where the original source teaches that the great Moses “turned” (פנה) from his supernal affairs on the mountain to the vulgar concerns of the people down below, Buber says that Moses “let go (*ließ...ab*; הניח)” of that lofty work and “extricated himself (*machte sich...los*; נהלץ) from the upper worlds.” Thus, Buber actually diverges from the language of Exodus 19:14 in order to suggest that the shift from solitary spirituality to relational engagement is not just some generous act of charity, but rather a disentangling of oneself from tempting delusions that one had been clutching. In this tale, at least, the rabbi of Sandz learns a foundational truth of sacramental existence: perceived walls between rituals and relationships are mirages. In his introductory remarks about the Sandzer, Buber suggests that the rebbe never quite managed to embody that insight—ultimately, he lacked “the unity of a figure shaped by the unity of soul”⁵⁰—but through his selection of this tale and, moreover, his hermeneutical transformation of it, Buber offers a glimpse of that spiritual-social synthesis to his readers.⁵¹

In other tales, Buber presents sacramental existence in terms of the opposition between bookish detachment and relational readiness. The de-emphasizing of text study was, of course, a distinctive feature of early Hasidism, despite the great intellectual intensity of the movement. While there were a variety of factors that energized this shift—particularly the Hasidic transformation of *devekut* into a constant goal of spiritual life—the lowered status of study was rooted partially in elevated emphases on social interaction.⁵² One exemplary teaching comes from the Besht’s disciple Ya’akov Yosef of Polnoye: “One need not devote all one’s time to the study of Torah, but one should also become involved with other human beings. In that too he can experience the fear of God and the fulfillment of the commandment of being aware constantly of God’s presence.”⁵³ To be expected, Buber amplifies the social reasons for marginalizations of text study in Hasidism. He presents multiple tales, for example, that highlight the symbolic and yet very real boundary between one’s solitary study indoors and the world of human interaction outdoors. Drawing from the homiletical section of *Butsina de-Nehora* (1897), Buber shares Rabbi Barukh of Mezhbizh’s bold interpretation of Pirkei Avot 2:13—“You shall not be evil in your own eyes (ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך)” —to mean, hyper-literally, you shall not be evil before yourself, through facing only yourself. According to the language of Buber’s rendition:

Every person is called to bring something in this world to perfection. The world needs everyone. But there are people who always sit locked up in their rooms and study and do not step out of the house to converse with others (die sitzen beständig in ihren Kammern eingeschlossen und lernen und treten nicht aus dem Haus, sich mit andern zu unterreden). For this they are called evil. If they conversed with others, they would bring perfection to that which is allotted to them. This is the meaning of “Be not evil before you yourself,” that

⁴⁹ The original teaching from *Torat Hayyim* that the rabbi of Tluste cites in Michelson’s tale stressed even more the opposition between spiritual affairs and matters of corporeality (גשמיות). (Hayim of Kosov 1883, fol. 7b).

⁵⁰ (Buber 1991, part II, p. 30); German: (Buber 2015, pp. 175–76).

⁵¹ For another tale with a similar message, see Buber, “Permission,” in (Buber 1991, part I, pp. 265–66); German: “Die Erlaubnis,” in (Buber 2015, §498). In this story, Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s brother gets punished by God for not obtaining permission from his wife to travel to the Maggid of Mezritsh.

⁵² See (Weiss 1997, pp. 56–68).

⁵³ (Ya’akov Yosef of Polnoye 1780, fols. 23b, 24d). As quoted in (Hundert 2004, p. 193); cf. (Wilensky 1970, p. 145).

is, by staying before you yourself and not going out to the people; be not evil through solitude.⁵⁴

This rendition in Buber's anthology is quite faithful to the version he consulted in *Butsina de-Nehora*,⁵⁵ although Buber accentuates the border between study inside and society outside. To be sure, this spatial distinction is perceptible in the original source, where Rabbi Barukh refers to those "who always sit closed up in many room (בחדרי חדרים), always studying there and not going outside (ואינו יוצא לחוץ) to speak with human beings." However, Buber picks up on this imagery here and expands it into the end of the tale. Whereas the version in *Butsina de-Nehora* concludes "Be not evil before yourself, that is, be not evil through sitting alone in solitude (וזהו ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך, (פי" עם הדבר שאתה יושב לבדך בהתבודדות), Buber converts the original boundary between private and public into a full-fledged motif: "'Be not evil before you yourself,' that is, by staying before you yourself and not going out (*ausgehst*) to the people; be not evil through solitude." The verb *ausgehen* that Buber employs here is a key term throughout his writings for dialogical self-transcendence, the "going outside" of oneself, as it were, that is necessary for beholding an Other. "Whoever goes forth (*ausgeht*) in truth to the world, goes forth (*geht...aus*) to God. Concentration and going forth (*Ausgehen*), both in truth, the one-and-the-other which is the One, are what is needful."⁵⁶ Returning to the tale at hand, therefore, Buber's Rabbi Barukh intimates that people who remain closed up indoors commit a transgression by not crossing a boundary.⁵⁷

This is the task, then: to continually "go out" from inward intellectualism and spiritual interiority to open spaces of interaction. Buber himself wrestled throughout his life with this aspect of practice. In fact, in a brief essay entitled "Books and Men," which he penned when he was nearly seventy years old, he acknowledged, "I have not, indeed, cleaved to life in the world as I might have; in my relations with it I fail it again and again; again and again I remain guilty toward it for falling short of what it expects of me."⁵⁸ And yet, Buber allows himself this: "I do, indeed, close my door at times and surrender myself to a book, but only because I can open the door again and see a human being looking at me."⁵⁹

In Rabbinic Judaism, of course, Torah study is more than just an aesthetic or intellectual activity; it is ritual action. Thus, we should not overlook the normative significance of Hasidic stories about turning from texts to people. To be sure, we might locate precedents in classical Rabbinic thought, such as in Reish Lakish's well-known teaching: "There are times when the nullification of Torah is its

⁵⁴ Buber, "Vor dir selber," in (Buber 2015, §103); Hebrew: "*Bi-fnei 'Atsmekha*", in (Buber 1968, p. 101); English: "With Yourself," in (Buber 1991, part I, pp. 89–90). Cf. Buber's similar telling of this tale in his introduction to *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*: Buber, "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," in (Buber 1966, pp. 140–41); German: (Buber 2016a, p. 69).

⁵⁵ (Barukh of Mezhibizh 1885, p. 12). HaCohen's bibliographical citation in (Buber 2015) differs from that in Buber's private notes. See Buber's notes on Baruch von Miedzybors in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #7, "Sich nicht absondern."

⁵⁶ (Buber 1996, p. 143); German: (Buber 1983, p. 113). See also: "Whoever goes forth (*ausgeht*) to his You with his whole being and carries to it all the being of the world, finds him whom one cannot seek." (Buber 1996, p. 127); German: (Buber 1983, p. 95). In their translation of the Hebrew Bible, Buber and Rosenzweig render the famous phrase of Genesis 12:1, לך לך, as "Go forth (*Geh du aus*)," whereas in the context of Buber's critique of Kierkegaard's individualism, Buber translates the latter's reading of לך לך as "Go before thee (*Geh vor dich hin*)" and points out that such an interpretation promotes a "power to free oneself of all bonds." (Buber and Rosenzweig 1934, vol. 1, Gen. 12:1); (Buber 1962–1964, vol. 1, p. 220). Buber, at least in his post-mystical years, would likely have disapproved of the Zohar's hyper-literal rendering of לך לך as "go to yourself" (Zohar 1:78a), as this would suggest that Abraham was commanded to seek God by means of an inward turn.

⁵⁷ For additional tales wherein Buber accentuates the boundary between indoor studying and outdoor relations, see his "Die Störung" and "Die Lehrbeflissenen," in (Buber 2015, §§694, 52). Buber drew those tales, respectively, from (Ehrman 1903, I:31a); (Rakats 1929, p. 85). On the latter tale, see below.

⁵⁸ (Buber 1957, p. 3); (Buber 1953, pp. 7–8).

⁵⁹ (Buber 1957, p. 4).

foundation, as it is written, *that you smashed* (Deut. 12:2). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Congratulations that you smashed!"⁶⁰ One could argue that this dictum reflects a certain antinomian impulse, as Reish Lakish seems to celebrate the destructive act of smashing.⁶¹ According to Rashi's standard interpretation, however, Reish Lakish implies specifically that one ought to interrupt Torah study when confronted with opportunities "such as burying the dead and greeting a bride"—ethical actions that are both inherently situational, demanded by particular moments of relational life. This latter position is, in fact, more consonant with Buber's sensibilities than the maximalist, antinomian reading of Reish Lakish's teaching. To continue studying in the face of situations that demand interpersonal responsiveness would be to violate the very core of sacramental existence, which demands steadfast readiness. In other words, allowing for "interruptions" in Torah study for the sake of dialogical attunement is itself a refusal to interrupt religious practice. As the Besht himself put it, according to one tale: "What am I to do? I have no time to study because I have to serve my Maker." The Besht's bookish grandson was so moved by those words that he turned immediately to the Hasidic way—and Buber adds in his own rendition that this event takes place "outside the city," beyond the confines of closed doors.⁶² For Buber, transgressing the boundary between pious solitude and responsive relationality is a great fulfillment of religious practice.

3. Laws and Commands

It is worth stressing, once again, that Buber's position on practice is not antinomian, but metanomian. Regarding our previous discussion, for example, the ritual of Torah study can most certainly be sacred—as long as one remains receptive and responsive to what is happening here and now, which might call upon the learner at times to redirect action. In Buber's vision of religious praxis, what is most important is to be attentive to the commands (*Gebote*) of God, which is to say, the unique tasks that issue forth from every moment—if only one listens. These may very well coincide with the laws (*Gesetze*) of religious tradition, but not necessarily.⁶³ Indeed, there are times when fixations on fixed laws threaten to drown out the still, small voice of commandment.

If this danger of religious law does not yet make sense to Buber's readers, we might turn to Soloveitchik's "Halakhic man" for clarification. Although Soloveitchik himself celebrates this man as a hero of religious existence, his phenomenological description serves to elucidate the very hazard that concerns Buber: "There is no phenomenon, entity, or object in this concrete world which the a priori Halakhah does not approach with its ideal standard," Soloveitchik writes. "When halakhic man comes across a spring bubbling quietly, he already possesses a fixed, a priori relationship with this real phenomenon," and "he is not particularly concerned with cognizing the spring as it is in itself."⁶⁴ This captures precisely what is potentially problematic about law, according to Buber: the person no longer sees the stream or even the flow of time itself, and thus she remains numb to concrete existence and divine presence. Fackenheim wrote with understanding when he suggested that, for Buber, "to obey a system of laws—independent in its validity of the Giver and of the hour for which He gives it—is not to respond to revelation but on the contrary to flee from it."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 99a-b.

⁶¹ See (Wolfson 2006, 238n180): "The issue seems to me a more fundamental abrogation of the law, which is tellingly captured in the violent act of smashing the tablets."

⁶² Buber, "The Scholars," in (Buber 1991, part I, p. 65); German: "Die Lehrbeflissenen," in (Buber 2015, §52); Hebrew: "*Ha-Matmid*," in (Buber 1968, p. 84). Buber drew this source from (Rakats 1929, p. 85). See his notes on der Baalschem in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #229, "Der Matmid."

⁶³ On this distinction between *Gesetz* and *Gebot* in Buber's writings, particularly in the context of post-Kantian Jewish thought, see (Mendes-Flohr 1991, pp. 341–69).

⁶⁴ (Soloveitchik 1991, p. 20).

⁶⁵ (Fackenheim 1957, p. 285). Fackenheim's comment resonates with Buber's own admission to Rosenzweig in his letter of June 1924: "I cannot admit the law transformed by man into the realm of my will, if I am to hold myself ready as well for the unmediated word of God directed to a specific hour of life." As printed in (Rosenzweig 1955, p. 111). Although Glatzer's well-known translation of this sentence is conceptually

We can already begin to see here how Buber's opposed normativities of *Gesetz* (law) and *Gebot* (commandment) correspond to divergent temporalities: the minutes of religion versus the moments of religiosity. In Buber's Hasidic tales, he integrates a terminological distinction between calculable time (*Zeit*) and the immeasurable hour (*Stunde*).⁶⁶ Whereas laws pertain to particular times, commands come at every moment. Consider, for example, his rendition of a tale about Rabbi Ḥanokh of Aleksander from Rakats's *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*. In the original version, a man asks Rabbi Ḥanokh why the Hasidim begin their prayers late. In response, the rebbe compares the matter to military conduct: "They are trained to do such-and-such at this time (שבזמן זה) and such-and-such at that time (ובזמן זה). But at the time (בזמן) of actual battle, they don't think at all about the propriety that they learned; they just do what they understand to be good for the battle and for the victory."⁶⁷ In Buber's rendition, however, Rabbi Ḥanokh employs different terms to delineate distinct temporalities: "As long as soldiers are in training...there is a set time (*Zeit*; זמן) for every activity, and they must keep to it. But when they go into battle, they forget what was imposed on them and they fight as the hour (*Stunde*; שעה) demands."⁶⁸ With proper training and incentives, anyone can adhere to the rhythms of ritual time, but such mastery does not necessarily sensitize one to the subtleties of lived moments. According to Buber, Hasidism appreciated this distinction, and they renewed ritual life in that light.⁶⁹

In Buber's Hasidic writings, the analogical correspondence of *Gesetz* and *Gebot* with *Zeit* and *Stunde* relates as well to a dichotomy of atonement (*Buße*) and return (*Umkehr*). In our efforts to clarify Buber's concept of practice, it is worthwhile to examine this additional binary. It is well known that throughout his dialogical, Biblical, and Hasidic writings alike, Buber stresses the power of *Umkehr*, drawing upon the classical Hebrew term for repentance, תשובה, which means literally a "return" to God. Hasidic sages spoke extensively about this spiritual turning toward divinity, toward *devekut*, toward the Hasidic way of life, and Buber picked up on this. However, he alternates in his tales between translating the term תשובה as *Umkehr* and *Buße*, depending on the context, and we learn much from examining the patterns of this oscillation. One observes readily that the latter term, *Buße*, denotes a formal atonement for one's sins and thus a sort of ritualistic repentance which may or may not have anything to do with sacramental existence, *Umkehr* implies precisely a re-turning of religious attention toward the here and now. For example, let us consider a tale from the collection *Meqor Hayyim*, wherein Rabbi Ḥayyim of Sandz laments to his new in-law, Rabbi Eliezer of Dzikov, following the wedding of their children, "Look at me, my hair is gray, my beard is white, and I still have not done repentance (תשובה)," and the Dzikover replies, "You've had only yourself in mind. Forget yourself, it's better to have the world in mind!"⁷⁰ In this case, since the Sandzer's concept of

accurate, it is also quite loose and involves an insertion of Buber's dichotomy of *Gesetz* and *Gebot*. The original German reads: "Ich kann nicht zugleich diese Tatsache [i.e., the legislation (*Gesetzgebung*) of human religion] in meinen Willen aufnehmen und aber des Spruchs und seiner Stunde gewärtig sein." (Buber 1972–1975, vol. 3), 2:196. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ For this distinction in Buber's phenomenology of dialogue, see (Shonkoff 2018b, chp. 1).

⁶⁷ (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 3, p. 74). See Buber's unpublished notes on Chanoch von Alexander, in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #16, "Grund der Gebetsverzögerung (Gleichnis von d. Soldaten)."

⁶⁸ Buber, "The Fight," in (Buber 1991, part II, p. 317); German: "Kampf," in (Buber 2015, §1281); Hebrew: "Loḥemim," in (Buber 1968, p. 465). I have emended Marx's English translation according to Buber's original German. Note: The terminological distinction applies as well to Buber's Hebrew version, where Buber renders the first reference to time as זמן and the second as שעה.

⁶⁹ For other prime examples of Buber's use of the term *Stunde* as the temporality of divine commandment, see "Verschiedener Brauch" and "Adams Sünde," in (Buber 2015, §§1192, 1208). The sources for these, respectively, were (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 2, p. 19); (Grinwald 1897, p. 14). For Buber's source citations, see his unpublished notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk, s.v. #68, "Kozker und Tschernobiler," and on Jizchak von Worki, s.v. #23, "Was die Schlange sagte." Both are accessible in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1.

⁷⁰ The original language from (Michelson 1912, p. 24) is as follows: 'כאשר השיא את בנו הה"צ ר' מאיר נתן עם בת הה"ק ר' אלעזר ז"ל מדזיקוב ביום השני אחר החתונה נכנס הרה"ק אל הרה"ק מדזיקוב ואמר לו. מחותן. הבישו נא וראו כי שערות ראשי וקני הלבינו ועדיין לא עשיתי תשובה. ויאמר לו הה"ק מדזיקוב. איהר האט נאר אייך אין זינען. פערגעסט אין אייך האט בעסער דיא וועלט אין זינען :

repentance was apparently antithetical to everyday hallowing, Buber translated תשובה here, of course, as *Buße*.⁷¹

However, let us turn now to a tale in which Buber integrates both terms, *Buße* and *Umkehr*, in a way that exhibits their different meanings for him. In the original sources, both scribed by Grinwald,⁷² Rabbi Simḥah Bunem reflects on the nature of repentance in the following words:

Why is the episode of the [golden] calf forgiven, although we find no mention of them performing repentance (תשובה) for this, whereas the sin of the spies was not forgiven, although it is written that the people mourned very much and hence performed repentance (תשובה)?⁷³ Isn't it [taught] that nothing can stand in the face of repentance (תשובה)?⁷⁴ And [Rabbi Bunem] continued: Because the essence of repentance (תשובה) is when a person knows that he has no hope and that he is like a broken clay vessel—for, in truth, what could repair the damage that he has done—and yet, nevertheless, he wants to serve God from now on according to what He commands. This is repentance (תשובה). And this was the case with the sin of the calf because it was the first sin, and they had no knowledge whatsoever that repentance (תשובה) helps, and thus [their repentance] was with a whole heart. But with the sin of the spies, they knew that repentance (תשובה) helps, and they figured that they would perform repentance (תשובה) and return to their prior condition. Thus, it did not help them, since they did not do it with a whole heart.⁷⁵

In this teaching, Rabbi Bunem points to two seemingly contradictory stories of sin in the Bible in order to make a larger point about repentance. Ultimately, he claims that repentance is only truly genuine and effective when it is wholehearted, that is, when it comes from a sense of utter brokenness without any expectation of salvation, combined with a strong thirst to serve God through obedience to His commandments. In contrast, attempts to secure divine forgiveness by means of tested techniques will prove futile, for they miss the essence of repentance itself.

In Buber's rendition of this teaching, he stresses the difference between these two acts of repentance, casting them not only as effective and ineffective, but rather, as the title he gives to the tale suggests, as "true and false" types.⁷⁶ Buber begins his own version:

⁷¹ See Buber, "Der Rat," in (Buber 2015, §977); English: "A Piece of Advice," in (Buber 1991, part II, p. 214). Buber uses the same term, *Buße*, in his rendition of this tale to open the section "Not to Be Preoccupied with Oneself," in "The Way of Man, According to the Teachings of Hasidism," in (Buber 2016b, p. 78); German: (Buber 2016a, p. 245).

⁷² (Grinwald 1897, p. 42). According to his unpublished notes, Buber also consulted another version of the teaching in (Grinwald 1899, p. 93). See Buber's notes on Simcha Bunam in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #53, "Die Sünde des Goldkalbs." Strangely, there appear to be two different versions of *Liqqutim Ḥadashim* that were both published in Warsaw in 1899. In his bibliographical annotations, Ran HaCohen seems to have consulted the versions accessible online through the databases of *HebrewBooks.org* and/or *Otzar HaHochma*, as these have a different pagination than the one Buber recorded in his notes (hence, HaCohen cites this tale as on folio 44b). The version that Buber consulted, however, is accessible online through the website of the National Library of Israel. In any case, the two versions of the tale in *Liqqutim Ḥadashim* are identical.

⁷³ See Exodus 32; Numbers 13–14.

⁷⁴ See Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 5a and Sanhedrin 49b. However, Rabbi Bunem's phrasing (as mediated by Grinwald)—אין לך דבר שעומד בפני התשובה—is closer to wordings in later citations, such as in Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot Teshuvah, 3:14) or, more significantly, in early Hasidic sources such as (Elimelekh of Lizhensk 1788, parshat Metsora'); (Anonymous 1815, fol. 3b).

⁷⁵ The original Hebrew in *Nifla'ot Ḥadashot* is as follows: שמעתי בשם הרה"ק ר' שמחה בונים מפרשיסחא זצ"ל מפני מה מעשה העגל נמחל להם ולא מציינו שעשו תשובה על זה ועל חטא המרגלים כתיב ויתאבל העם מאד אי"כ עשו תשובה ואעפ"כ לא נמחל להם הלא אין לך דבר שעומד בפני התשובה ואמר כי עיקר התשובה הוא באם אדם יודע שאין לו תקוה והוא ככלי חרס הנשבר כי באמת מה יועיל לפגם שעשה ואעפ"כ רוצה לעבוד את ה' מכאן ולהבא ועושה כאשר צוה ה' ואז הוא התשובה. וזה גם בחטא העגל כי היה החטא הראשון ולא היו יודעים כלל שיועיל תשובה ע"כ היה בלב שלם. אבל בחטא המרגלים היו יודעים שיועיל תשובה והיו סוברים שעשו תשובה ויחזרו כבראשונה ע"כ לא הועיל להם מחמת שלא עשו בלב שלם.

⁷⁶ See Buber, "True and False Turning," in (Buber 1991, part II, p. 262); German: "Rechte und falsche Umkehr," in (Buber 2015, §1104); Hebrew: "Iqar ha-Teshuvah," in (Buber 1968, pp. 421–22).

One asked Rabbi Bunam: “Why was the sin of the golden calf forgiven, although we do not find in Scripture that the people performed return (Umkehr) and made atonement (Buße), yet the sin of the scouts was not forgiven, although the people, as we read, mourned very much on account of them.

To the careful reader, the initial question here diverges significantly from Grinwald’s versions. First of all, whereas the original sources state that Bunem himself posed the hermeneutical conundrum that he then answers, Buber places the question in the mouth of an anonymous inquirer. Admittedly, Buber does this quite often in his tales, usually as a literary device to convert homiletical monologues into dialogical exchanges. However, in this particular case, the unnamed interlocutor serves a more substantial role: With regard to the golden calf episode, whereas the original source notes simply that “we find no mention of them performing repentance for this (ולא מצינו שעשו תשובה על זה),” Buber’s inquirer says that “we do not find in Scripture that the people performed return and made atonement (*wir in der Schrift nicht finden, daß das Volk die Umkehr vollzogen und Buße getan hätte*).” Thus, whereas Grinwald used only one word, תשובה, in all references to repentance, Buber introduces two separate terms from the beginning of his version. Moreover, in placing them in the mouth of the anonymous inquirer, Buber uses this added character to commit a fundamental error, where he conflates returning (*Umkehr*) and atonement (*Buße*).

Therefore, in Buber’s version, the rest of Rabbi Bunem’s teaching becomes a way to differentiate between *Umkehr* and *Buße* as two distinct modes of religious action. As Buber’s Bunem goes on to clarify the “true” meaning of repentance, then, he uses only the term *Umkehr*—until he addresses the story of the spies once again at the end of the tale. “They knew then what returning (*Umkehr*) can accomplish, and they thought that they would perform atonement (*Buße*) and return immediately to their previous state.” The spies make the same erroneous conflation here as the inquirer did at the beginning of Buber’s tale. Both parties imagine misguidedly that *Umkehr* and *Buße* are synonymous, but this proves to be a fatal oversight. For Buber, those who regard repentance as *Buße*, as a performative process to be completed, will remain broken. *Umkehr*, in contrast, is no ritual.

In this vein, we should highlight one additional alteration that Buber makes: Whereas the original source identified “the essence of repentance” with one who has no hope for salvation and yet “wants to serve God from now on according to what He commands (לעבוד את ה' מכאן ולהבא ועושה) (כאשר צוה ה' *will er von nun an Gott dienen und tut's*).” Thus, while he affirms that *Umkehr* is fundamentally “service,” Buber is unwilling to define its core according to any legalistic obedience. *Umkehr* is a response to commandments, not laws. There is no designated time for its performance, only the omnipresent moment that beckons its fulfillment. As Rabbi Bunem taught elsewhere, according to Buber’s formulation: “The great crime of the person is that he can do the return (*Umkehr*) in every moment and does not do it.”⁷⁷

4. False Piety

A crucial concept in Buber’s writings, which further elucidates the dichotomies above, as well as Buber’s visions of religious practice more generally, is his notion of false piety (*falsche Frömmigkeit*, or *Frömmertum*). On one hand, false piety occurs when individuals fancy that their various subjective experiences or spiritual states crown them as profoundly religious or pious people, despite the fact that they have dispensed with any real sense of religious responsibility. According to Buber, as noted at the beginning of this article, he sees this as a major crisis in his own era, where many secular seekers celebrate religion’s “heir, the ‘spiritual,’ without, of course, allowing it the right to determine life in any way.” Amidst such psychologized and self-absorbed images of religiosity, Buber declares, “No

⁷⁷ Buber, “The Great Crime,” in (Buber 1991, part II, p. 257); German: “Die große Schuld,” in (Buber 2015, §1089). Buber drew this teaching from (Berger 1910, p. 47); (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 1, p. 52). See Buber’s notes on Simcha Bunam in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #39, “Sünde und Umkehr.” The terms in the original sources that Buber translates here as *Umkehr* and *Augenblick* are, respectively, תשובה and רגע.

false piety (*Frömmertum*) has ever attained this concentrated degree of inauthenticity.”⁷⁸ On the other hand, as we shall see, Buber suggests that excessive emphasis on the minutiae of religious law without due attention toward the theological foundations of divine commandments is also a form of false piety. At bottom, then, we may define Buber’s concept of false piety as: entertaining or projecting an image of oneself as religiously adept—either by virtue of inner experiences or traditionalist obedience—while being inattentive and unresponsive to the ongoing commands of God. Or in the language of Buber’s rendition of the Kotsker rebbe’s aphoristic formulation: “The falsely pious one (*Der Frömmeler*)...converts the main issue of piety (*Frömmigkeit*) into a side issue, and a side issue into the main issue.”⁷⁹ Both secular spiritualists and traditional legalists alike may marginalize the main issue of divine commandments and maximize marginal issues such as euphoric feelings or halakhic compliance. For Buber, avoiding this problematic pitfall of religious life is terribly consequential. In reference to the “superficial emotionalism” of contemporary spirituality, Buber warned a group of Jewish youth, “Religiosity may possibly penetrate the evaders but never the pretenders.”⁸⁰ And with respect to traditionalists who lose sleep over punishable sins, Buber anthologized Rabbi Pinḥas of Korets’s statement that while these “are taken lightly” by the divine judge, “false piety (*falsche Frömmigkeit*)—that is punished severely.”⁸¹

To further illuminate Buber’s concept of false piety, let us turn to his engagement with an anecdote about Rabbi Ḥayyim Me’ir Yehi’el Shapiro, also known as the Seraph of Mogelnits’s critique of those who strive to be *frum* (פרום, or ostentatiously “pious,” a Yiddish term related to the German *fromm*). Buber drew the tale from Israel Bromberg’s collection *Toledot ha-Nifla’ot*, and the original is as follows:

During the reading of the scroll [of Esther on Purim], which the Seraph himself read, a devout and God-fearing yeshivah student stood next to him, looking at his scroll. After the reading, the yeshiva student said, “I fear that I might not have heard well and thus skipped a word that I did not hear.” The Seraph said, “This is frum. One who is frum just wants to comply with the commandment, so he fears for example that he did not complete the eighteen benedictions. But the essential intention is to fulfill the will of God, so his will yearns for the will of God that is within the commandment, and man must cleave so much to the will of God within the commandment that he will be able to err (שישגה) a bit sometimes in the content of the commandment. As it is written: In His love, you will always err (באהבתו תשגה תמיד).”⁸²

The prooftext that the Seraph cites here is Proverbs 5:19, and in that context it is actually an exhortation to be satisfied with one’s own wife: “Let her be like the loving doe and graceful roe; let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and be ravished always in her love (באהבתה תשגה תמיד).” The

⁷⁸ “Hasidism and Modern Man,” in (Buber 2016b, p. 13); German: (Buber 2016a, pp. 312–13).

⁷⁹ Buber, “Infirmity,” in (Buber 1991, part II, p. 281); German: “Das Gebrechen,” in (Buber 2015, §1169). Buber draws this source from (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 1, p. 75). See his notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk, in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #65, “Was ein Frömmeler ist.” Buber’s German play-on-words here between *Frömmeler* (hypocrite) and *Frömmeler* (pious person) does not appear in the original source, of course, which uses only the Yiddish term פריימער. As we shall see below, however, this term does indeed have negative connotations at times in Hasidic parlance.

⁸⁰ Buber, “Herut: On Youth and Religion,” in (Buber 1967a, p. 154); German: (Buber 1919, p. 7).

⁸¹ Buber, “What Is Punishable,” in (Buber 1991, part I, p. 133); German: “Das Strafwürdige,” in (Buber 2015, §211). I have emended Marx’s English translation according to Buber’s original German. Buber drew this tale from (Friedman 1921, fol. 22b). See Buber’s notes on Pinchas von Korez in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #86, “Das Strafwürdige.” We should note, given our previous discussion about repentance in Buber’s thought, that Buber translates תשובה here as “Buße,” inasmuch as Rabbi Pinḥas is differentiating between the trivialities of legal observance and the grave concerns of authentic existence. The original source is as follows: ס' שצדיק אחד בא אל הרז"ל אחר פטירתו ושאל לו איך נהג אתו אודות חטאת נעורים והשיב שזה אינה תמורה ביותר בהרהר בתשובה ע"ז רק על חסידות של שקר אויף פאלשין חסיד מענישין שם מאד.

⁸² (Bromberg 1899, p. 8).

Seraph, according to the extant source, changed the gender of the biblical phrase from “her love” to “his love (באהבתו),” referring of course to God’s love, and the Seraph reads תשגה not so much as “be ravished,” but as “err,” make mistakes.⁸³ The *frum* yeshivah student is so anxious that he will transgress the law in some way that he misses the essence of the commandment. If he graduated from fastidious fear of God to intoxicated love of God, then he would inevitably mess up sometimes with legal technicalities, and this would in fact signal the strength of his attunement to the divine will.⁸⁴

One can imagine why Buber was attracted to this tale, given his own conviction that zealous legalism can thwart genuine service. However, in turning now to Buber’s rendition,⁸⁵ we can see nonetheless how he fashioned Bromberg’s source in his own image, granting us even clearer glimpses into his personal views on praxis and especially false piety. First of all, whereas in the original text the Seraph launches immediately—in front of everyone there, it seems—into his critique of *frumkeit*, Buber adds that the Seraph turned “afterwards to his confidant (*danach zu seinen Vertrauten*)” to share his thoughts. With this change, Buber’s Seraph does not rebuke the anxious yeshiva *bokher*, let alone embarrass him in front of the crowd. For Buber, such callous conduct would contradict the very message of this story, namely that genuine religious praxis reflects above all a sort of dialogical attunement in the world. It follows, then, that Buber restores the biblical prooftext to its original femininity: “In your love of her (*zu ihr*) you will always err.” Buber thus accentuates the relational textures of the text, refusing to reduce human love to a mere symbol of divine love, refusing to regard those earthly commitments and commands as separable from the transcendent will of God.

In this same spirit, where Bromberg’s Seraph declared that “the essential intention (עיקר הכונה) is to fulfill the will of God, so his will yearns for the will of God that is within the commandment, and man must cleave so much to the will of God within the commandment that he will be able to err (שישגה) a bit sometimes in the content of the commandment,” Buber’s Seraph formulates the matter differently: “One whose soul is directed toward fulfilling the will of God within the commandment, and cleaves wholly to God’s will, may miss something from the commandments, but it does not bother him.” Thus, first of all, Buber dispenses with the language of העיקר, or what is “essential,” for while Buber would certainly agree that it is preferable for halakhic practitioners to align themselves with the divine will within the commandments, such normative action is certainly not necessary. Rather, what is “essential” to Buber is receptivity and responsibility before whatever is happening—in this case, the spiritually and socially vibrant festival of Purim. For Buber, to imagine otherwise would be to conflate commandment and law, and to fall thereby into the trap of false piety. Indeed, where Bromberg’s Seraph derided the man for being *frum*, Buber could have simply called him a *Frömmer* (which is, in fact, the term he used in his personal notes for this tale!⁸⁶), but he chose instead to label him a *Frömmeler*, employing his key term for false piety.

Buber went so far as to entitle this entire tale, “Against the *Frömmeler*,” a blaring warning to his readers. The message here, however, is not that one should simply avoid ritual practices or break traditional laws as a matter of principle. Such clear-cut paradigms remain within the confines of false piety. Indeed, antinomianism is just another “-ism,” chained to the illusion that a particular set of actions (or inactions) should dictate the shapes of religious existence, which thus still threatens to distract one from the dynamism of the here and now, where evanescent commands arise eternally.

⁸³ Rendering תשגה as “err” in this way has a prehistory in Jewish mysticism. See, inter alia, Zohar 3:85b; (Heschel 1863, p. 105).

⁸⁴ On antinomian implications of unity with the divine will in Hasidism, see (Magid 2003). The notion that the divine will may not correspond simply to the Halakhah emerged among the medieval Hasidei Ashkenaz, although in that context it was about *expanding* the domain of Law in new, even more stringent and zealous ways. See (Soloveitchik 1976). For Buber, however—and for the Seraph as well, it seems—attachment to the will of God may lead to a *loosening* of the normative force of commandments.

⁸⁵ See Buber, “Against Pious Thoughts,” in (Buber 1991, part II, pp. 180–81); German: “Gegen die Frömmeler,” in (Buber 2015, p. 180).

⁸⁶ In his unpublished notes on Chajim Meir Jechiel von Mogielnica, Buber entitled this tale “Gegen einen ‘Frommer’.” See in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #13.

For Buber, the opposite of legalism is not antinomianism, but rather sacramental existence, where every moment is a site of practice, the details of which emerge dialogically within the moment itself.

5. The Kavanot in Hasidism, from the Besht to Buber

There was another illuminating alteration that Buber made in the tale above, which we did not mention. Confronting Bromberg's phrase "essential intention (עיקר הכוונה)," Buber not only omitted the word "essence," he also tinkered with the second term, "intention (כוונה, *kavanah*)." In his reworded reference to "one who directs (*gerichtet*) his soul to the will of God," Buber preserves the etymology of *kavanah*—literally to aim or "direct"—yet avoids any overt use of the term.⁸⁷ Why? After all, in the original source, the term *kavanah* seems to signify a rather Buberian focus on the inner meaning or divine source of Jewish practices, as opposed to just their outer trappings or codified elements.

Particularly in his later writings, Buber sought to cast Hasidism as a decisive break from medieval Kabbalah, and in this effort, he underscored Hasidic innovations in the realm of kavanot. In sixteenth-century Tsfat, Lurianic Kabbalists had developed highly elaborate systems of kavanot that were thought to endow Jewish practices with immense theurgical potencies. Given the great complexity and quantity of these intentions, the performance of rituals—particularly prayer—required intense focus and extensive training. One groundbreaking move of early Hasidism was its transformation of these elements. And yet, of course, the language of kavanot lingered strongly in the Hasidic lexicon. Thus, in his attempt to accentuate the chasm between Kabbalah and Hasidism, Buber often omitted or otherwise altered the term in his hermeneutical engagement with Hasidic sources, reflecting his preference for spontaneous religious action and unconditioned consciousness over anything that struck him as fixed or pre-scribed.⁸⁸ Moreover, even in relation to those tales and teachings where Hasidic sages did indeed push back against Lurianic kavanot, we can nonetheless perceive Buber's own innovations. As we shall now see, this is a prime case study for how Buber identified radical shifts in Hasidism and yet radicalized them even further through his own hermeneutical frames.

The evolution of perspectives on the kavanot of prayer in Hasidism reflects, broadly speaking, a gradual shift from elaborate metaphysical systems toward increasingly subjective, personal modes of mystical practice. We might view this trend, in its broad strokes, as a "downward" trajectory (in the Neo-Platonic sense) from supernal mysteries toward more psychological and even sensory aspects of practice. "The main movement in the Hasidic theory of prayer is a turning from mental, interiorized performance to a much simpler and vocally oriented version of prayer," Idel suggests, "one that minimalizes the mental quality of prayer and restores the glory of the prayer as production of sounds."⁸⁹ Weiss went so far as to surmise that as late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mystics became less inclined to catalog content behind the veil of existence, as it were, their approaches to prayer became more grounded: "With the fading of the 'gnostic' aspect of the Sefirotic universe from the mind and heart of the Cabbalist, the original *Kavvanoth* became meaningless and their disintegration was inevitable."⁹⁰ However, we should not overlook the fact that such heightened emphases on embodied prayer were still directed heavily toward metaphysical transcendence.

⁸⁷ Similarly, in his Hebrew rendition, Buber refers here simply to "one who directs (שמכוון) his soul." Buber, "Ke-neged Qafdanut ha-Mithasdim," in (Buber 1968, pp. 362–63). Cf. Buber, "Die ursprüngliche Bedeutung," in (Buber 2015, §875); idem, "Geleitwort [zu 'Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge'," in (Buber 2016a, p. 67). In general, when Buber refers specifically to the Kabbalistic concept of *kavanah*, he tends to either render the term as *Intention* or simply transliterate it as *Kawwana*.

⁸⁸ In addition to the tale above, see also, for example, the concluding line of his "Verschiedener Brauch" (Buber 2015, §1192), where Buber changed the original locution, "with intention (בכוונה)" (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 2, p. 19), to "as the hour demands (*wie's die Stunde erheischt*)."⁸⁹ See also, inter alia, Buber's "Schlecht und recht" (Buber 2015, §864) compared to (Polier 1910, p. 29); and "Gegen die Kasteiung" (Buber 2015, §30) compared to (Barukh of Mezhbizh 1885, p. 64).

⁸⁹ (Idel 1995, p. 147).

⁹⁰ (Weiss 1997, p. 108).

Indeed, early Hasidic sages continued to portray the spoken words themselves as having great theurgical and even magical potency, if performed with proper kavanah or mystical awareness. It was merely the method that changed. Indeed, according to Idel, the transformation of kavanot in Hasidism was effectively “a return from prayer to spells.”⁹¹

In his own portrayals of these aspects of Hasidism, however, Buber further extended that downward trajectory from sefirotic subtleties toward flushness with physical practice. In our efforts to clarify his own visions of praxis, it is instructive to see how he did so. Let us turn first to a tale about the Besht, which Buber drew from Kleinmann’s *Or Yesharim*.⁹² The original is as follows:

Once the Besht commanded Rabbi Ze’ev [Volf] Kitses to study the kavanot for the order of the shofar blasts, so that he would announce before him the order of the blasts on Rosh Hashanah. He studied the kavanot and wrote them down on papers so that he could look at them while announcing the order. And he put them in his bosom, but [unbeknownst to him] the Besht made him drop them. When he came to announce the order of the shofar blasts, he started searching for them. Where? Where? Nowhere. He did not know the kavanot, which distressed him and pained him very much. And from the depths of his broken heart, he cried bitterly the simple order of the shofar blasts, without any kavanot. Afterwards, the Besht said to him, “Behold, in the palace of the king there are many rooms and halls, and different keys for every door. But an axe is equivalent to all of the keys, for one can open with it all of the locks of all the doors. So, too, with the kavanot: They are keys to every particular kavanah-gate, but a broken heart is equivalent to them all. When a person breaks his heart before God, he can truly open all the gates in the halls of the king, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”⁹³

This parable of the single “axe” or kavanah that substitutes for the many “keys” or kavanot derives, in fact, from the Besht’s most influential student, the Maggid of Mezritch, and it was then attributed retroactively to the Besht himself.⁹⁴ The earliest extant versions vary considerably, but they share the central point that a broken heart can break through barriers that are otherwise penetrable only through proper kavanot. It is important to note that in those early versions, and in that of Kleinmann, the axe is never portrayed as superior. In fact, the Maggid evidently compared the one who breaks locks to a “thief”⁹⁵ and, moreover, he suggested that the axe method reflects a sorry state of decline, for whereas the sages of yore employed “the appropriate kavanah for everything, now we do not have any kavanah, only the broken heart.”⁹⁶ In Kleinmann’s tale above, the Besht himself speaks this parable to his student in order to convey consolingly that his simple brokenheartedness is just as effective as any proper performance of kavanot.

For Buber, however, the shift from refined kavanot to raw kavanah in Hasidic prayer was far more significant than a mere substitution, let alone a degradation—it was revolutionary renewal. In his own version, then, Buber alters the message of this tale.⁹⁷ We see this most conspicuously at the

⁹¹ Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 147.

⁹² (Kleinman 1924, pp. 104–5). See Buber’s notes on the Baalschem in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #254, “Er hiesst Wolf Kizes Kawwanot aufschreiben.”

⁹³ The original language in (Kleinman 1924, pp. 104–5) reads: פ"א צוה הבעש"ט ז"ל להרב הר' זאב קוצעס ז"ל שילמוד הכוונות: מסדור התקיעות, ויהיה הוא המסדר תקיעות בר"ה לפניו, וילמוד את הכוונות ויכתבם על נייר להביט בתוכם בעת הסדור, וישמם בחיקו, והבעש"ט ז"ל צדד שישמטם, ובבואו לסדר התקיעות, והתחיל לחפשם אנה ואנה ואינם, ולא ידע מה לכוון, וירע לו מאד, ויתמרמר מאד, ויבך בכי תמרורים מעמקא דלבא בלב נשבר, וסדר התקיעות פשוט בלי שום כוונות, ואח"כ אמר לו הבעש"ט הנה בהיכל המלך נמצאו חדרים והיכלות הרבה, ומפתחות שונות בכל פתח ופתח, אך הכולל מכל המפתחות הוא הגרון, אשר אתו באפשרי לפתוח כל המנעלים מהפתחים כולם, כן הכוונות המה מפתחות לכל שער כוונה אחרת, והכולל הוא לב נשבר, כאשר ישבר אדם לבו לפני השי"ת באמת יכול לכוון בכל השערים בהיכלות של המלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה.

⁹⁴ See (Weiss 1997, p. 106).

⁹⁵ See, for example, (Anonymous 1792, fol. 37b; Aaron of Apta 1794, fol. 27b; Dov Ber of Mezritch 1900, fol. 14a).

⁹⁶ (Dov Ber of Mezritch 1900, fol. 14a).

⁹⁷ Buber, “The Axe,” in (Buber 1991, part I, p. 64); German: “Das Beil,” in (Buber 2015, §48); Hebrew: “Ha-Garzan,” in (Buber 1968, p. 83).

end. Whereas Kleinmann's Besht declared that "an axe is equivalent to all of the keys (הכולל מכל) (המפתחות הוא הגרון)" and "a broken heart is equivalent (והכולל הוא לב נשבר)" as well, Buber's Besht makes a far bolder statement: "the axe is stronger than all of them (*das Beil ist stärker als sie alle*; חזק מכל אלה), and no bolt can withstand it." And where Kleinmann's Besht reassures his student, "When a person breaks his heart before God, he can truly open all the gates in the halls of the king," Buber's Besht cries out, "What are all the kavanot compared to one really grieving heart!" Thus, in contrast to the original source's affirmation that the spontaneous kavanah of brokenheartedness is strong enough to stand in for all the technical kavanot, Buber suggests that the single kavanah is superior to the former system!⁹⁸

But why, exactly, does Buber's Besht regard Lurianic kavanot as inferior? This becomes clear through two other hermeneutical alterations in Buber's version of the tale. First, we get a hint where Buber renders the Besht's reference to the "different keys (מפתחות שונות)" that open every door as the "elaborate keys (*kunstvolle Schlüssel*)."⁹⁹ This emphasis on the highly technical nature of the kavanot begins already to pave the way toward Buber's subversive ending. Indeed, throughout his tales, Buber uses terms like *kunstvolle* and *kunstreiche* to denote a sort of intellectual or aesthetic finesse that prevents genuine religiosity.⁹⁹ Second, we gain even more insight into why Buber cast the kavanot as inferior through an alteration near the very beginning of the tale: Whereas the original source explains that Volf Kitses wrote down the kavanot in order to "look at them while announcing the order (להביט בחוכם בעת הסדור)," Buber indicates that he wrote them down "for greater security (*um sicherzugehen*)."¹⁰⁰ This change, in particular, should give us pause, as the path from security (*Sicherheit*) to insecurity (*Unsicherheit*) is a motif throughout Buber's philosophical and Hasidic writings for the surrender of control that accompanies dialogical encounter. Indeed, according to his view, the Hasidic break from Kabbalah occurred precisely in those terms:

The whole systematic structure of the Kabbala is determined by the principle of a security (*Sicherheit*) that almost never pauses, almost never trembles, almost never prostrates itself. In contrast, it is precisely in pausing, in letting itself be shaken, in deep knowledge of the frailty of all informational knowledge and the incongruence of all possessed truth, in the "holy insecurity (*heiligen Unsicherheit*)," that Hasidic piety has its true life.¹⁰⁰

For Buber, the abandonment of Kabbalistic kavanot is not merely symptomatic of a new metaphysics or a new desire to convert esoteric techniques into popular practice. It is, rather, a courageous dropping of inner defenses, a willingness to face the wildness of ever-unprecedented presence. To let go of *kunstvolle* kavanot is to let oneself be sacredly insecure. "What matters is not what can be learned," Buber writes with regard to this Hasidic innovation, "what matters is giving oneself to the unknown."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Buber made a similar change in another key tale, which he drew from (Rakats 1927–1931, vol. 4, p. 46) and rendered as "Blas!" (Buber 2015, §1070). In the original source, we are told that Rabbi Bunem instructed the shofar blower to skip kavanot because—according to a certain reading of BT Rosh Hashanah 16a—there are no particular kavanot for shofar blasts beyond the one essential kavanah to fulfill the commandment itself. Buber omits this ending, so Bunem's demand to skip kavanot appears simply as Bunem's own personal impatience with such those obstructive technicalities.

⁹⁹ See, for example, Buber's tales "Der Kantor des Baalschemtow," "Der Narr und der Kluge," and "Der Zaddik und die Menschen," in (Buber 2015, §§46, 1085, 634). See also Buber's comment already in *Daniel* (1913): "What the most learned and ingenious (*kundigste und kunstreichste*) combination of concepts denies, the humble and faithful beholding (*Erschauen, Erfassen, Erkennen*), grasping, knowing of any situation bestows." (Buber 1957, p. 27); German: (Buber 1917, p. 29). For non-German speakers, it is also worth pointing out that the related term *künstliche* means artificial, synthetic, or forced.

¹⁰⁰ Buber, "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence," in (Buber 1966, p. 179); German: (Buber 2016a, p. 175). In context, this statement pertains specifically to the Hasidic transformation of Kabbalistic kavanot.

¹⁰¹ Buber, "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," in (Buber 1966, p. 137). Buber comments here on a well-known teaching of Dov Ber of Mezritch. See (Israel ben Eliezer 1793, p. 24; Anonymous 1792, fol. 17b; Kallus 2011, p. 16). Cf. (Weiss 1997, pp. 106–7; Idel 1995, p. 152).

We are now in a better position to grasp Buber's place in the downward trajectory from the supernal to the sensory, from Lurianic kavanot through various phases of Hasidic revision. In truth, despite legendary claims to the contrary, it is likely that the Besht himself preserved earlier kavanot traditions, thus continuing to gaze beyond the letters of liturgy into sefirotic depths, and evidently praying from a Lurianic siddur.¹⁰² But after the Besht, according to Weiss's scholarly account, Hasidic masters transformed the practice in ways that grounded kavanot increasingly in more concrete, personal modes. The Maggid of Mezritch (1704–1772) affirmed the potency of a single kavanah, although it seems that this remained little more than "a vague emotional state of the worshiper."¹⁰³ Subsequent sages, such as Ze'ev Volf of Zhitomir (d. 1800) and an anonymous disciple of Elimelekh of Lizhensk, portrayed kavanot somewhat more vividly as emotional experiences anchored to the actual words of prayer—"The worshiper may no longer indulge in emotional excesses independent of the text on his lips," as Weiss put it.¹⁰⁴ And Meshulam Fayvush of Zbarezh (1742–1794) characterized kavanah as a contemplative focus upon the meaning of liturgical language.¹⁰⁵ Kalonymos Kalman Epstein of Krakow (1754–1823) then proceeded to cast *kavanah* in prayer as inseparable from the very breaths of liturgical speech.¹⁰⁶ These are, of course, only snapshots from the winding streams of early Hasidic thought, but they map a general direction. And we might now extend this view with the additional snapshots of Kleinmann's tale (Kleinmann 1924) and Buber's reworking of it (1946) from our discussion above, which draw Hasidic conceptions of kavanah even lower, toward levels of existence even more solid than emotion, text, or breath.

"With the floor and with the bench." This was the single line about prayer that Buber cited more than any other in his Hasidic writings.¹⁰⁷ It was Rabbi Shneur Zalman's shockingly literal response to the question, "With what do you pray?," according to Heilman's 1902 biography.¹⁰⁸ The question seemed to invite an answer in the form of a profound verse or image that elevates one's prayer—an inner point of focus, a kavanah that endows words with wings. But Shneur Zalman surprises, prompting us to sense the surfaces beneath our bodies. And Buber comments: "This is no metaphor; the word 'with' is here meant quite directly: in praying the rabbi joins himself to the floor on which he stands and the bench on which he sits." And while Buber acknowledges that this involves an effort to "elevate" these materials through prayer, he insists that "this 'elevation' is by no means to be understood as removing the worldly character of things or spiritualizing the world."¹⁰⁹ To pray is to be flush with presence. With the following words, Buber concluded his essay on "sacramental existence" in Hasidism:

¹⁰² In fact, Buber himself did not shy away in his pre-dialogical writings on Hasidism from highlighting that the Besht prayed with "the great prayerbook of Master Luria"! See (Buber 1995, p. 92); German: (Buber 1908, p. 102). In his later Hasidic writings, Buber makes no mention of the Besht's use of a Lurianic prayerbook. Instead, he showcases a tale in which Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz's rejection of that very prayerbook, where he insists to his disciples that if you "put all the strength and purposefulness of your thinking into the kavanot of the holy names, and the combinations of the letters," then you "have deviated from the essential: to make your hearts whole and dedicate them to God." Buber, "The Prayerbook," in (Buber 1991, part I, p. 125); German: "Das Gebetbuch," in (Buber 2015, §190). Buber drew this tale from (Margoliot 1897, fol. 46b). See Buber's notes on Pinchas of Koretz in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #27, "Der Siddur des Ari." On the Besht's approach to kavanot and how it differed from later portrayals, see (Weiss 1997, pp. 99–109).

¹⁰³ (Weiss 1997, p. 112).

¹⁰⁴ (Weiss 1997, p. 112).

¹⁰⁵ (Weiss 1997, pp. 111–16).

¹⁰⁶ (Weiss 1997, pp. 116–17).

¹⁰⁷ See Buber, "The Beginnings," in (Buber 1966, p. 52); "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence," in (Buber 1966, p. 181); "Hasidism and Modern Man," in (Buber 2016b, pp. 9–10). Buber also included this in all editions of his *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*, as well as later more comprehensive anthologies. See (Buber 2015, §509).

¹⁰⁸ (Heilman 1902, pp. 4–5).

¹⁰⁹ Buber, "Hasidism and Modern Man," in (Buber 2016b, p. 10).

“With the floor and with the bench” shall one pray; they want to come to us, everything wants to come to us, everything wants to come to God through us. What concern of ours, if they exist, are the upper worlds! Our concern is “in this lower world, the world of corporeality, to let the hidden life of God shine forth.”¹¹⁰

6. Conclusions

We began with two tales about Buber’s own approach to religious practice. And while these shed some light, they also demonstrated the indispensability of interpretation. In Buber’s acts of halakhic disobedience, some onlookers saw hallowing while others smelled hypocrisy. In this respect, the combination of narrative and interpretation that constitute storytelling can convey at least as much about the storytellers themselves as about the related events. And given all the rich imagery of religious life in Hasidic literature, the tales of that movement are especially revealing about the storytellers’ perspectives on practice. It was with these matters in mind that we turned to Buber’s tales. His hermeneutical reformulations of Hasidic sources offer enormous windows into his own visions of praxis.

Religious anarchism, metanomianism—such terminological classifications of Buber’s practice may be accurate, but they are only helpful to a limited degree. Indeed, they draw our attention precisely to a distaste for a priori programs, a rejection of fixed forms or ideal types of practice. Hence, Buber’s response when Maurice Friedman pressed him on the details of his position on ritual:

The main difficulty is that I cannot see such a question independently from personal existence. For one, I know that I try to do what I experience [that] I am ordered to do; but how can I make this into a general rule about ritual being right or wrong and so on? I open my heart to the Law to such an extent that if I feel a commandment being addressed to me, I feel myself bound to do it as far as I am addressed—for instance, I cannot live on Sabbath as on other days. My spiritual and physical attitude is changed, but I have no impulse at all to observe the minutiae of the halakhah about what work is allowed and what not. At certain moments, some of them rather regular, some others just occurring, I am in need of prayer and then I pray, alone of course, and say what I want to say, sometimes without words at all, and sometimes a remembered verse helps me in an extraordinary situation; but there have been days when I felt myself compelled to enter into the prayer of a community, and so I did it. This is my way of life, and one may call it religious anarchy if he likes. Now how could I make it into a general rule, valid for instance for you! I cannot say anything but: Put yourself in relation as you can and when you can; do your best to persevere in relation, and do not be afraid!¹¹¹

In this light, the impossibility of reducing Buber’s concept of practice to clear-cut categories is not simply indicative of a flimsy concept of practice; rather, it is indicative of a particular principle. It is significant that Buber concludes this letter with an allusion to Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav’s teaching about living courageously on the “narrow bridge” of existence.¹¹² Indeed, Buber portrays the early generations of Hasidism as a pinnacle of practice in Judaism. Thus, in turning to Buber’s narrative representations of those lives, we learn a great deal. By tracing his principle of selection, hermeneutical alterations, and anthological ordering, our intertextual readings of his tales divulge more than any discursive summary possibly could.

In the process, we clarified Buber’s notion of sacramental existence, whose foundational principle is not only that every moment is religiously consequential, but that the spiritual significance of those moments lies primarily in the quality of relational attention that one devotes to them. For

¹¹⁰ Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” in (Buber 1966, p. 181); German: (Buber 2016a, p. 177). In earlier versions of this essay, there was an additional paragraph after this, but Buber omitted it in the final two versions that he published, as evidenced in Friedman’s English translation. See (Buber 2016a, p. 453).

¹¹¹ Martin Buber letter to Maurice Friedman from 27 March 1954, in (Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr 1991, pp. 576–77); German: (Buber 1972–1975, vol. 3, p. 368).

¹¹² (Nahman of Bratslav 2015, part 2, p. 48).

instance, those who regard other people as disruptive of spiritual practice are totally unclear on the concept. In fact, for Buber, the depth of one's interpersonal relations may be the most important indicator of the health of one's religious practice—certainly more so than any levels of inner emotion or legal obedience. For Buber, of course, rituals are not necessarily antithetical to pansacramental awareness, but excessive preoccupation with them can indeed distract one from the fact that presence itself, here and now, is the ultimate source and site of religious normativity. With this in mind, we clarified Buber's dichotomy of law (*Gesetz*) and command (*Gebot*), and showed as well how that corresponded analogically to his distinctions between measurable time (*Zeit*) and the immeasurable moment (*Stunde*), along with ritualized repentance (*Buße*) and wholehearted return (*Umkehr*). We demonstrated also how Buber's concept of "false piety" (*Frömmertum*) offers a negative frame that helps to identify the positive contours of his vision of praxis. According to Buber, we stumble into false piety when we entertain images of ourselves as religiously upright—by virtue of, say, inner experiences or ritual proficiency—while being inattentive and unresponsive to the divine commands issuing forth anew at all hours. For Buber, both secular spiritualists and traditional legalists alike can stumble into this pitfall.

Finally, in considering Buber's representations of kavanah in Hasidism, we gained an even more lucid sense of how he envisions moments of religious practice. Departing from the elaborate permutations of letters and names in Lurianic kavanot, Hasidic sages came to affirm that certain emotional or psychological states could be no less effective for the metaphysical potency of prayer. However, through close readings of Buber's tales, we saw how he pulled the Hasidic innovation to even more radical degrees. For Buber, proper kavanah is no more and no less than a unification of spiritual consciousness and physical practice, awareness and action, mind and body. When the mental eye is flush with material happening, so that the very floor and bench beneath the person are holy grounds for whatever one is being called to do—only then one is *observant* in the strongest sense of that word. Then and there, one stands in sacramental existence.

Buber's refusal to equate religious practice with Halakhah has led some critics to accuse him of severing the bond between law and spirit. For example, when asked in an interview at the University of Notre Dame about Buber's perspective on "organized religion," Abraham Joshua Heschel responded:

We must neither disparage the body nor sacrifice the spirit. The body is the discipline, the pattern, the law; the spirit is inner devotion, spontaneity, freedom. The body without the spirit is a corpse; the spirit without the body is a ghost. Thus, a mitzvah is both a discipline and an inspiration, an act of obedience and an experience of joy, a yoke and a prerogative. Our task is to learn how to maintain a harmony between the demands of halacha and the spirit of agada.

The weakness of Buber's conception is in his stressing one aspect to the exclusion of the other.¹¹³

I trust that we are now in a position to see such claims as reductionist, at best. To be sure, they overlook the fact that bodily–spiritual unity lay at the very heart of Buber's philosophical and religious writings for the last four decades of his life.¹¹⁴ But even more importantly, they fail to acknowledge Buber's deep concern with matters of religious practice. It is not law and spirit that

¹¹³ (Heschel 1996, p. 385). Steven T. Katz also implies that Buber's departure from traditional Jewish ritual is rooted in what Katz considers to be the decidedly disembodied nature of Buber's thought. Indeed, just after suggesting that Buber's concept of I–Thou relation is so "ghostlike" that it is hard to understand how one would even distinguish between one's own wife and one's neighbor's husband, Katz highlights the fact that "Buber does not set much store by prayer or ritual while traditional Judaism does, and again, the biblical God is understood by the tradition primarily as a lawgiver, while for Buber this is something he cannot be." (Katz 1992, p. 31). For a very recent claim about Buber's "juxtaposition of law and spirit," see (Kahana and Mayse 2017, pp. 378–79).

¹¹⁴ See (Shonkoff 2018b).

Buber sought to extricate from one another, but law and commandment—and, moreover, his differentiation between these elements was precisely for the sake of praxis. He was deeply critical of traditionalists and secularists alike who equated law and commandment and thus imagined that theological questions and practical concerns pertained to separate domains. “We reject this dialectic completely,” Buber declared. “In the image of the person to which we aspire, conviction and volition, personality and performance, are one and indivisible.”¹¹⁵ If one’s understanding of religious practice is limited to that of the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, then yes, Buber had nothing legitimate to teach in that realm, and we can shake our heads and say that he entertained foolish dichotomies of aggadah and halakhah, spirit and law. However, if we expand our definition of religious practice to include how one attempts to relate to God in all moments of life, then Buber did indeed have a great deal to teach.

Questions of religious practice were not simply peripheral concerns in Buber’s thought but absolutely central for him. Indeed, his philosophy of dialogue, his political thought, his presentations of Hasidism and the Hebrew Bible—all of these were inseparable from his concern with the enactment of religiosity in everyday existence. The fact that Buber was unwilling to systematize or otherwise articulate the details of religious practice had nothing to do with how fundamental the issue was for him. On the contrary, his very consistent refusal to present static formulations reflected the very core of his conception of practice. In fact, in the aftermath of the Shoah and his period of exceptional sensitivity to the “eclipse of God” in modern society, Buber suggested that the severance of religiosity from everyday action was “an especially threatening trait of the crisis” facing humanity:

One no longer knows the holy face to face; but one believes that one knows and cherishes its heir, the ‘spiritual,’ without, of course, allowing it the right to determine life in any way. The spirit is hedged in and its claim on personal existence (*Dasein*) is warded off through a comprehensive apparatus; one can now enjoy it without having to fear awkward consequences. One has ideas, one just has them and displays them to one’s own satisfaction and occasionally also to that of others. One seems to take them with grim seriousness; but that must be the end of it. One enthrones them on golden thrones to which their limbs are chained. No false piety has ever attained this concentrated degree of inauthenticity. Only now has one basically got rid of the holy and the command of hallowing.¹¹⁶

The very crisis of modernity, according to Buber, erupts partially from a dangerous misconception that religiosity is merely a mood or mentality, distinct from bodily behavior. Buber wanted to salvage the centrality of religious practice—the “command of hallowing” and all its “awkward consequences”—and he was convinced that Hasidic pansacramentalism illuminated a way: “Over against all this behavior of the present-day person, Hasidism sets the simple truth that the wretchedness of our world is grounded in its resistance to the entrance of the holy into lived life.”¹¹⁷ Buber put forth his own hermeneutical refractions of Hasidic practice as a diagnosis of modernity and a vision of repair.

Funding: Leo Baeck Fellowship Programme (Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes); Jacob Greenberg Dissertation Year Fellowship (University of Chicago Center for Jewish Studies); Travel and Research Grant (University of Chicago Center for Jewish Studies).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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¹¹⁵ Buber, “Herut,” in (Buber 1967a, p. 166).

¹¹⁶ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” in (Buber 2016b, p. 13); German: (Buber 2016a, pp. 312–13).

¹¹⁷ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” in (Buber 2016b, p. 13); German: (Buber 2016a, pp. 312–13).

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