The Role of Kabbalah in Revitalizing Modern Orthodoxy

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The term “Modern Orthodoxy” is a broad label applied to a wide spectrum of religious observance and a variety of philosophical stances. Yet despite this inclusivity, Modern Orthodoxy currently finds itself at a crossroads in which its borders and central message are being reconsidered and redefined. Leaders are reexamining the boundaries of what is deemed permissible by halakha in realms such as conversion, kashruth, and rabbinic ordination. Furthermore, both clergy and laypeople alike are looking for innovative ways to re-imagine Modern Orthodoxy from the inside through new approaches to prayer and spirituality, while at the same time maintaining their scholarly commitment. My purpose in writing this article is relatively simple: I hope to spark an ongoing conversation that focuses upon the question of how Jewish mysticism may aid in revitalizing Modern Orthodoxy. Or, to reframe the question in terms of a hypothesis: Although facets of the classical Jewish philosophical tradition have already been chosen as a banner for the re-invigoration of contemporary Orthodoxy, I intend to demonstrate that our kabbalistic and mystical literature will be an equally rich source for this process of intellectual and spiritual rebirth.

It cannot easily be denied that an overwhelming number of the great Jewish spiritual leaders of the twentieth century have used mystical thought in their quest to make religious life meaningful for a modern Jewish community. Among these are influential traditional thinkers such as Abraham Isaac Kook, Hillel Zeitlin, and Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as well as Shlomo Carlebach, Michael Fishbane, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The broad list includes many leaders outside of the Orthodox world as well, for other Jewish movements have also embraced mystical ideas as a compelling and additive component of modern religious thought. More liberal thinkers such as Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Arthur Green have sought to bring the study of mysticism to the front of a vibrant contemporary Jewish theology. Over the past hundred years leaders across nearly all sectors of modern Jewish life have promoted Kabbalah to the foreground as a potent catalyst for spiritual renewal.

Despite this increase in popularity, Kabbalah has a somewhat besmirched and Janus-faced reputation. On one hand, many contend even now that Kabbalah is intellectually flaccid, conceptually irresponsible, and even quite dangerous to conventional notions of God and Torah. Kabbalah’s prominent position is undoubtedly in some part due to an approach favored by some contemporary institutions that warp the tradition by de-contextualizing its teachings and projecting them through a business model using post-modern philosophy. These facile portrayals of mysticism should not be conflated with the authentic Kabbalah as taught by the traditional leaders mentioned above.

There is no reason to assume that immersion in Kabbalah necessarily makes one more likely drift into antinomianism and heresy. While it is true that some Jewish mystics such as the infamous Shabbatai Tzvi have indeed done so, a great number of our outstanding talmudists and halakhic commentators—from Ramban to the Vilna Gaon—were undeniably steeped in

the language of Kabbalah as well. Surely for them mysticism and law were not two competitive modes of thought, with the latter precipitously seeking to mitigate the anarchical hazards of the former. In their eyes halakha and Kabbalah were fused in an organic and complementary system that simultaneously ensures ritual observance while promoting spiritual engagement. Indeed, mystical texts often display a strong legal conservatism, and their authors are so preoccupied with cultivating inner piety by providing halakhawith infinitely deeper shades of meaning. Kabbalah is only truly dangerous when heedlessly removed from the framework of tradition.

On the other hand, Jewish mysticism is sometimes criticized for being xenophobic, or esoteric to the point of obscurity. However, nuanced and careful readings of mystical texts will prove that much of Kabbalah's wisdom is neither arcane nor antiquated, but must simply be framed in such a way that allows it to be a relevant resource for contemporary Jewish thought. Another often-levied charge against the study of mysticism is that although Kabbalah is true and authentic (at least in some way), we are a generation of such low stature that we lack the spiritual fortitude, and even the permission, to involve ourselves with its ideas. I believe that we who straddle the worlds of modernity and tradition cannot afford to maintain this position, for it will totally preclude drawing religious inspiration from any part of our mystical tradition. In sum, regardless of the accusations of its detractors, the study of Kabbalah may indeed be a potent force in the revitalization of Modern Orthodoxy, for it will only foster rigorous intellectual engagement, further strengthen traditional halakhic commitment, and profoundly broaden our own religious experience.

The Mandate for Intellectual Creativity

Modern Orthodoxy historically has prided itself on demanding a relatively high level of intellectual engagement of its adherents. In order to retain the vibrancy of this tradition, we must continue to originate new works of scholarship that are both spiritually meaningful and intellectually compelling. If this creative flexibility and openness is not sustained, even Modern Orthodoxy will not remain immune from lapsing into blind reliance upon routinized dogma. An ossified and formulaic ideology will not captivate the minds and hearts of the next generation, nor will it strengthen their resolve to commit themselves to a system of life founded in observance of halakha and mitzvoth while surrounded by a society that does not require this of them *a priori*. We must not only reiterate the wisdom of the sages who came before us, but continuously seek new ways to refine and rearticulate our intellectual heritage in a manner that speaks to our own contemporary experience.

Kabbalistic literature demonstrates a bold interpretive approach that is intrinsically creative. The mystical exegete has license to break open scriptural texts and recombine them in such a way that they reveal new religious messages, a method very much akin to that of the ancient *ba'alei haMidrash*. Verses are scrutinized on a microcosmic level for the tiniest inconsistency or ambiguity, which the kabbalist then uses to elucidate a point regarding a spiritual truth that may be either cosmic or personal. The paradigm of scriptural interpretation qua dramatic act of innovation is repeatedly exemplified in *Sefer haZohar*, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism. As the chronicle unfolds, R. Shimon bar Yohai and his compatriots interpret verse after verse in the manner mentioned above, and through their homilies it becomes clear that they believe all existence is sustained through the efforts of the *talmidei hakhamim* who ceaselessly engage in Torah study. However, in order to re-infuse the world with vitality, their learning cannot be simple repetition or rote memorization of preexisting texts or concepts. Scholars must rather constantly offer fresh and dynamic interpretations of biblical passages. The Zohar even expresses creative engagement with Torah as the ultimate act of *imitatio dei*: God's creation of the world through speech is mirrored by a scholar's innovative exegesis of the words of the divine text.[i][DEA1]

The early Hassidic masters were also keenly attuned to this need for constant and creative reengagement with the traditional corpus. Their teachings are vibrant and daring, and perhaps even more importantly, their interpretive process itself often demonstrates the supple flexibility with which they treat our textual canon. Early Hassidic works generally present multiple, and at times even contradictory, explanations for the same verse, each one of them targeted to articulate a unique spiritual point. In this exegetical method, and in the teachings generated through it, the overarching rule is clear: There exists an unending obligation for individuals to constantly plumb the depths of Torah and bring out ideas that have hitherto remained unexpressed, and that address the particular needs of that generation. We shall find this mandate for interpretive innovation clearly elucidated in the following passage from *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, an important collection of homilies attributed to the R. Moshe Haim Ephraim of Sudilkov (d. 1800):[ii]

> "This is the book of the descendents of man."[iii] Let us begin with what I have said about the verse "Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin-offering."[iv] There is a tradition that "diligently inquired" (*darosh darash*) is the halfway point in the words of the Torah,[v] but the significance of this is not yet clear.
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> In answer we can say that the Written Torah and the Oral Torah are one, as is known. They are totally indivisible from each other, for one cannot exist without the other. This means that the Written Torah reveals its hidden mysteries through the Oral Torah; the Written Torah without the Oral Torah is incomplete. It was only half of a book until the Sages came and expounded (*darshu*) the Torah and revealed things that had previously been sealed. At times they even uprooted something in the Torah, as in the case of lashes, where the Torah assigns the number forty but the Sages subtracted one.[vi] All of this was made possible because of their divine inspiration, which gave them the ability [to interpret it in this manner]. The completion of the Written Torah depends entirely on the Oral Torah. Therefore one who denies that the principle *kal veHomer* is from the Torah, or disagrees with a statement of the Sages is like one who denies the Torah of Moses itself.[vii] All depends on the interpretations (*derashot*) of the Sages, and they are the essence of the completion of the Torah …
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> … and so it must be in every age that the interpreters complete the Torah, for the Torah is expounded in each generation corresponding to the needs of that particular time, according to the root of the soul of that generation. The Blessed One will enlighten the eyes of the sages of the generation with His holy Torah, and one who denies this is also likened to one who repudiates the Torah.

The nature of the "descendents" mentioned in the original verse, although not explicitly identified in this passage, is unmistakable: they are the novel reinterpretations brought forth in each generation. It is our obligation to complete the Torah anew in every age by means of our creative engagement with the text, and the R. Moshe Haim Ephraim demands that the sages of each and every age make the biblical text eternally relevant through their innovative interpretations. In other words, they must offer some sort of new spiritual message that speaks to each generation beyond the strictures of its literal interpretation. This creativity is the lasting intellectual progeny of mankind, which complements and even completes the Divine component of our inherited wisdom.

As if to preempt the assumption that we share the same unlimited freedom as the early Sages, he cautions us against this by condemning any and all dissent from their rulings. Creative interpretations of Torah are necessary, but they do have limits. However, he levies this warning against the other extreme as well, saying that one who challenges the need for reinterpretation and the authority of each new generation is equally guilty of denying the validity of Torah itself. It is clear that a balance must be struck between these poles, but if we becomes paralyzed with fear and refuse to reinterpret the Torah, our reticence will prevent us from fulfilling what R. Moshe Haim Ephraim argues is among the central precepts of our faith.

Recognizing this approach to interpretation will be essential for Modern Orthodoxy in the years to come, since it will allow us to respond with great flexibility to the challenges of modernity, searching within our canon for ways to rearticulate its core ideas in a manner both intelligible and relevant to our lives. Furthermore, this passage does not suggest that we simply have the freedom to reexamine if, and only if, the spirit so moves us. Rather, it spells out an unceasing obligation that *demands* that we maximize our creative potential by constantly reinterpreting the Torah in a manner that is specifically applicable to our day.

The Question of Gender

It is clear that the question of gender roles will remain a central issue for Modern Orthodoxy in the coming decades. The recent controversies over new possibilities in female religious leadership only confirm this fact. Noting this, I submit that the literature of our mystical tradition has much wisdom to bring to the discussion as well. There are important trends in Kabbalah that present a finely balanced approach to the relationship between male and female, in both cosmic/symbolic and personal/physical terms. This fact should not be overshadowed by other mystical elements that display pre-modern

conceptions of gender bordering on what we might today call misogyny, for such a pejorative reading would be obtusely anachronistic. Furthermore, these same ideas are found within core rabbinic and halakhic literature as well, and they must equally be dealt with by any member of Modern Orthodoxy committed to our textual canon. In the following example, taken from the Hasidic classic *Avodat Yisrael* by the Maggid of Kozhnitz (d. 1814), we shall see that mystical texts may indeed have salient voice in the reexamining of gender roles as Modern Orthodoxy continues to evolve:[viii]

> There are times when a woman has no desire to adorn herself and unite with her beloved. And yet, because of her profound understanding of her husband and her deep longing to bring him happiness, she dresses herself up and smiles at him, to the extent that it seems to him as if she is beckoning. Her true intention in this is not for herself, but rather to gladden the heart of her husband.
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> In these moments she feels awful and upset on account of some external difficulties or frustrating events. If only her husband understood the entirety of what lies within her heart and the greatness of the love hidden within her bosom, demonstrated in concealing her anguish and resolving to bring happiness to her husband. Certainly because of this, his love for her will be increased a thousand times! If it were within his power to put all to right and sweep away her suffering and the worries of her soul, in an instant her husband would do all that he could.
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> The same dynamic holds true with *Keneset Yisrael* and her Beloved. If she suffers for any reason, or is afflicted by some evil decree, she nonetheless gathers her strength and adorns herself, doing what her Husband asks of her by rejoicing with him on Shabbat and holidays, and during the time of prayer or the performance of a mitzvah. When the blessed Creator, who knows and understands all thoughts, sees that she has turned aside from the sorrows of her heart, His love burns within Him like the pillars of fire. He understands the embitterment of her soul, and is infinitely capable of triumphing over and subduing all of her enemies. This is the meaning of: "Who is a proper woman? The one does the will of her husband!"[ix] In other words, she brings the will of her Husband into reality.

This passage rearticulates familiar categories of male and female in a tremendously innovative way, suggesting a conception of gender in which the relationship between the two is nuanced, balanced, and in many ways equal. While there are other excurses within kabbalistic literature that invert or challenge notions of gender more fundamentally, I have nevertheless selected this text precisely because it does invoke traditional imagery to convey a spiritual message of both personal and national relevance. It will be impossible for Modern Orthodoxy to fully shed the gender distinctions codified by our rabbinic heritage, and although sufficient reinterpretation will allow women an increasingly active role in public religious life, completely eradicating the differences between male and female would run contrary to how Modern Orthodoxy understands its connection to tradition. This excerpt thus demonstrates a way in which traditional allegories may be reread in such a way that they speak to our present generation.

The passage is interesting because of its implicit approach to reading rabbinic texts as well as its explicit content. The Maggid of Kozhnitz has presented us with a brilliant reinterpretation of a dictum that seems to praise women for pure obedience. He universalizes and expands the phrase away from its literal meaning by invoking the well-known allegory of man and wife as stand-in for the relationship between God and Israel, thereby reading the original statement against the grain. The power dynamic between male and female has still not been completely leveled, since it is the husband alone who seems capable of easing the sorrows of his wife. However, the radical core of the Maggid's teaching only becomes truly clear from the model relationship in the final lines: through her reflexive ability to overcome her own grief and then take active steps to reconnect to her beloved, "a female" (which after the metaphor cannot refer only to physical woman) is able to spark her "husband" (which must also be understood non-literally) into realizing his potential love and compassion. The reader is left with the conclusion that any relationship, both *bein adam leHaveiro* and *bein adam laMakom*, of real depth and lasting connection demands of one an extraordinarily high degree of selflessness.

It is not impossible to view even the Maggid's reading of the text as another negatively charged expression of passive power, in which the female is forced by her lack of agency to use coercion in order to accomplish her desires. Yet had he wished to convey this, the author would simply have stayed much closer to the original midrashic statement. I would argue that the thrust of the Maggid's message, as well his innovative exegetical maneuver, represent a manner of forging a new conception of gender in which old categories are retained, but the nature of the dynamic between the two has been creatively updated

and entirely reframed.

The Wisdom of *Hakhamei Sepharad*

Revisiting the kabbalistic tradition as a source for contemporary spiritual renewal will also help to broaden the intellectual spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy by including and reintroducing forgotten works of Sephardic sages. Books of non-Ashkenazi provenance do enjoy a higher status within Modern Orthodox circles than they do in the Hareidi world, which to a large degree has continued the tradition of Eastern European *yeshivot* that decries the study of any non-halakhic texts altogether (both Sephardic and Ashkenazi alike). However, it is my contention that much of the vast literature of the Sephardim, and especially those works which deal explicitly with kabbalastic themes, has been quite underrepresented in the general Modern Orthodox canon. Though the legal works of such classical Iberian *Rishonim* as the Ramban, Rashba, Ritva, Ran, and the great Rambam are accorded a high degree honor, the insightful and variegated treatises of a great many other important Sephardic authorities continue to lie fallow.

Within this oft-overlooked corpus I would include the works of R. Meir ibn Gabbai, Moshe Alsheikh, Haim Yosef David Azulai (the *Hida*), and Hakham Yosef Haim (the *Ben Ish Hai*), to name only a few. All of these important writers and leaders are united by their central focus on Kabbalah as a meaningful and spiritually powerful system of religious experience and discourse, and I suggest that the seeds for spiritual revitalization may yet be found within their fertile yet neglected pages. Let us turn to a selection from Ibn Gabbai's sixteenth-century magnum opus *Avodat haKodesh* to illustrate this point:[x]

> The highest wisdom [the *sophia* of God, which is the second *sefirah*] contains as the foundation of all emanations pouring forth out of the hidden Eden the true fountain from which the Written and the Oral Torah emanate and are impressed [upon the forms of the celestial letters and signatures]. This fountain is never interrupted; it gushes forth in constant production. Were it to be interrupted for even a moment, all creatures would sink back into their non being … that great voice sounds forth without interruption; it calls with the eternal duration that is its nature; whatever the prophets and scholars of all generations have taught, proclaimed, and produced, they have received precisely out of that voice which never ceases, in which regulations, determinations, and decisions are implicitly contained, as well as everything new that may ever be said in any future. In all generations, these men stand in the same relationship to that voice as a trumpet to the mouth of a man who blows into it and brings forth a sound. In that process, there is no production from their own sense and understanding. Instead, they bring out of potentiality that which they received from that voice when they stood at Sinai.

This text provides a more nuanced counterpoint to the broad interpretive dynamism found in the passage from *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*. Like his Hasidic counterpart who was to write nearly four centuries later, Ibn Gabbai declares that interpretation of Torah is no stagnant act of dry repetition, but a flexible process that remains necessarily fluid because the Torah itself is constantly evolving. However, Ibn Gabbai carefully qualifies this seemingly unbounded interpretive license by explaining that a *talmid hakham* is not the originator of even the most innovative reapplications of Torah, since all interpretation has its source in an all-encompassing but unarticulated potential revealed at Sinai. The role of scholars across generations is rather to select which of these teachings must be actualized at any given moment. In other words, it is our task to reify, not to invent *ex nihilo*.

Despite relocating the origin of all interpretive innovation back to the Divine, Ibn Gabbai is not arguing a conservative position in which creative exegesis is forbidden. Human scholars have a clear responsibility to reengage with the ever-expanding font of Torah and breathe new life into it by rearticulating its teachings in a perpetually relevant manner. His qualification that all later interpretation has its source in God's revelation therefore does not *preclude* our efforts at innovation, but rather *reinforces* our gift (and perhaps even mandate) of creative license: the boundaries of authoritative interpretation have been greatly expanded to include even novel ideas not explicitly included amongst the traditions specifically enumerated at Sinai.

The Gift of Religious Language

Fostering spirituality is another prominent concern of Modern Orthodoxy. While this particular mode of religious thought is not necessary (or even compelling) for all, I believe that imbuing the next generation with a strong sense of traditional spirituality is now essential for ensuring the continuity of Modern Orthodoxy. Gentile philosophy is no longer the greatest menace to religious commitment, as it was in the first half of the twentieth-century. The newest existential threat facing Modern Orthodoxy is that ours is a generation of individualistic seekers driven to find personal spiritual expression in their religious lives. Without the flexibility to do this within the pale of Orthodox Judaism, these individuals will necessarily explore options outside the framework of our tradition.

Kabbalistic writings can give us an authentic Jewish spiritual vocabulary for articulating an entire type of religious awareness with God that simply cannot be adequately expressed in halakhic terminology. These mystical texts often delve into the personal spiritual experience of individuals who sought to articulate an extra-legal experience of the Divine, grappling with the almost impossible task of siphoning their encounter into the written word, and drawing upon these works will certainly enrich our own ability to discuss this rather sublime kind of piety. Examining the following excerpt from the Zohar, and a medieval commentary that builds upon the ideas within it, will be helpful in illustrating this point:

> Rabbi Yehuda opened: "*Her husband is known throughout the gates, as he sits among the elders of the Land*."[xi] Come and see! The Holy Blessed One withdrew in His glory, for He is hidden away and sealed far above. No one who has since entered the world, nor anyone who has been here since the day of its creation, is able to grasp His wisdom; no one is able to comprehend Him.
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> Since He is hidden and sealed away, and He withdrew higher and higher, none of those above or below are able to cleave to him, until they say: "*Blessed is the Glory of the Lord from His place*."[xii] The ones below say that he is above, as it is written: "*His glory is upon the heaven*s."[xiii] The ones above say that he is below, as it is written: "*Your glory is upon the entire earth.*"[xiv] Until all those who are above and below say: "*Blessed is the Glory of the Lord from His place*." He is unknown, and there are none able to grasp Him, and yet you say, "*Her Husband is known throughout the gates*"?!
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> Certainly "*Her Husband is known throughout the gates (she'arim*)!" This refers to the Holy Blessed One, for He is known and may be cleaved to according to the extent that one imagines (*mesha'er*) Him within the heart, each according to his ability to cleave to the spirit of wisdom. He is known in the heart to the extent that He is imagined there. In this way "*He is known throughout the gates*" - in these contemplative reflections. Yet for Him to be known as is fitting [is impossible]—nobody is able to cleave to Him or to know Him.[xv]

In his monumental commentary to the Zohar entitled *Ketem Paz*, R. Shimon ibn Lavi (North Africa, sixteenth century) explores the implications, both cosmological and personal, of this remarkable passage:

> Rabbi Yehuda explains that no being has ever been created that is able to understand His wisdom, nor did the Holy Blessed One ever bring such a one into this world. Certainly not one who is able to grasp His essence! He is deep beyond all depth, and who is able to find Him? [Succeeding in] the quest for Him is impossible for the created beings, both upper and lower, until all exclaim, "*Blessed is the glory of the Lord from His place*!" …
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> … Perhaps Rabbi Yehuda holds that their quest spurs onward the movement of all the heavenly arrays, cycling around and around. To seek and never apprehend seems to the creations like utter foolishness, as one who says that if the intent of their rotation was [solely] to succeed, after the first or the second time that they are unable reach it they will believe that the quest will always be in vain.

> Yet those who truly experience longing never refrain from the search even if they do not succeed. This is like the desire of the lover for her Beloved, as it says, "*I will arise and circle about, in the town, in the markets and the streets. I shall seek the One whom my soul loves; I have searched and not found*."[xvi] Notice that the verse speaks in future tense, "*I shall arise and circle about … I shall seek*" - this means that she will not hold back from the seeking Him, for *the journey is her life*.Such is the longing of the supernal beings and their eternal search, for it is their sustenance and their very existence. Even if they cannot succeed in apprehending Him, through their quest itself [to gaze upon] the face of the Master they offer praise, greatness and glory to the One for whom they searching. He is [the source of] their existence, and that of all the created beings below.
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> In explaining this matter well, one may raise the question: if it is not within the power of any who seek God to comprehend even His place, how then could Solomon, who was the seeker and the quester par excellence, as well as the wisest of all men, write "*Her husband is known throughout the gates*" about the Woman of Valor, who alludes to the upper Assembly of Israel? Rather, certainly "*Her Husband is known throughout the gates (she'arim*)!" This refers to the Holy Blessed One, for He is known and may be cleaved to according to the extent that one imagines (*mesha'er*) Him within the heart. One must say that although achieving [the quest] is inherently withheld from them, He can indeed be comprehended by His creations, each according to their understanding and contemplative imagining of Him.[xvii]

The text of the Zohar is struggling with the seeming contraction between a scriptural verse and our own religious experience. When read in the symbolic manner of the Zohar, Proverbs 31:23 implies that an imminent God (the divine Husband) may be known and understood, but in reality all of creation encounters Him only as a transcendent Being completely removed from the worlds He has formed. Even the angels are unable to find Him or grasp His magnitude. In an attempt to solve this paradox, Rabbi Yehuda explains that while God cannot be restricted to a specific location, He may be known through (and only through) our mystical contemplation and reflection.

This Zoharic passage is a relatively clear articulation of our inability to comprehend the divine. In his commentary to our text, however, R. Shimon ibn Lavi deepens R. Yehuda's homily by explaining that it is this permanent and eternal quest to apprehend God that sustains the universe. The endless journey is only possible because of the aforementioned paradox, since if we were truly able to grasp God, the search would immediately terminate and creation would lose its source of constant renewal. Yet neither are we allowed to desist from the journey to find Him simply because it can never be successfully completed; the greatest of value lies in the perpetual quest itself. A profound message of cosmic significance about the personal religious experience of a mystic search for God has thus been built upon an ostensible paradox between a biblical verse that suggests divine immanence, and the experiential truth of His total transcendence.

Without becoming too embroiled in the discussion of the relationship between linguistics and cognition, it is even possible that the very absence of such mystical language effectively precludes many spiritual experiences *ab initio*. More specifically, the inability to articulate or describe a particular concept in words may mean that one simply cannot experience it. If access to authentic Jewish mysticism is denied to those individuals who do not view halakhic study and philosophical rationality as the only modes of fulfilling religious practice, our numbers will necessarily hemorrhage to any and all other movements that have chosen to include Kabbalah within their curricula.

Conclusion

The argument put forward in the preceding pages, and the conversation for which I've implicitly and explicitly called, are not intended to be directives mandating a programmatic restructuring of Modern Orthodoxy along mystical and kabbalistic principles. Such an ill-advised reform would surely be unsuccessful, nor would it be necessarily desirable even if it were tenable. Indeed, in order to embrace elements of the mystical tradition, Modern Orthodoxy need not renounce the flagship ideology of synthesizing the benefits of modern intellectual thought with the rich wisdom of our heritage. Nor do I intend to make it seem as if Modern Orthodoxy has systematically or intentionally purged mysticism and mystics from amidst its ranks. Yet to ignore completely the wisdom of this spiritually compelling and perpetually relevant literature will risk alienating a valuable segment of the committed religious population. We should make a place for individuals who do not wish to join a particular Hasidic group, believing instead in a broader spiritual application for mystical teachings, but who hold this ideal in tandem (and not necessarily in tension) with an unwavering fidelity to halakha. In doing so we may even attract people dissatisfied with their present communities by providing a unique fusion of openness to modern philosophy

and scholarship with a commitment to traditional spirituality.

I do share the trepidation of many about indiscriminately bringing kabbalistic praxisinto Modern Orthodox ritual life. Promoting the recitation of esoteric mystical formulae will not likely accomplish any of these goals, nor would kabbalistic asceticism integrate well into contemporary society. However, I suggest that our times necessitate the bringing of the study of mystical texts into the curricula of our institutions across the board. Introducing these works will give us the vocabulary to open up and express an entire category religious experiences that had been previously sealed. Courses in pastoral care and public speaking have been adopted by many Modern Orthodox seminaries in an attempt to answer the need for a new model of religious leadership. In this vein, we must also train teachers and rabbis who can read kabbalistic and Hasidic texts with the same fluency that they tackle medieval or modern philosophy.

Though pietistic works like *Nefesh haHaim* and the existentialist-philosophical treatises of Rav Soloveitchik do certainly cover similar ground, our rich kabbalistic heritage has a wealth of material that only a literature composed over the span of a millennium can offer. Jewish high school students should also be offered courses in classical mystical thought, at least as an elective. Young adults of this age certainly have the maturity to begin addressing issues such the approach to prayer, gender roles, personal religious experience, and the dialectic between tradition and innovation, from a mystical perspective, provided that the texts are carefully chosen and taught.

It is true that many kabbalistic and Hassidic books are written in a terse and complicated style of Hebrew, employing symbolic language that can be quite difficult to decipher. However, this should not deter anyone for whom reading them in the original might present a problem from exploring these texts: over the past several decades an increasing number of mystical books have become available in English. These translations, which are often accompanied by a helpful commentary and explanatory notes, are an indispensible resource for any leaders wishing to teach kabbalistic texts in their synagogues or schools to an audience whose command of Hebrew may not otherwise be sufficient. However, selecting the right translation (and the right primary source) must be done carefully, since the quality of the work can vary widely. Some tend to be over-literal to the point of unintelligibility, while others are clearly literary recasting or summaries only loosely based on the original text. Yet a substantial number of the contemporary translations strike a careful balance between these poles, and are extremely valuable for the English-reading sector of our religious community.

Many literary treasures of the Hassidic library have been translated, at least in part, although there are still many others waiting to be rendered into English. Scholars such as Louis Jacobs,[xviii] Norman Lamm[xix] and Joseph Dan[xx] have collected and translated anthologies of Hasidic thought along with their own commentary and analysis, and the great variety of the selections in these books demonstrates the thematic and conceptual breadth of Hasidic literature. In addition to a smaller collection of Hasidic sources on the subject of prayer, Arthur Green has published several volumes of English translations that are each taken entirely from the works of a single Hasidic master.[xxi] Similarly, many important teachings from the mystically infused works of Rav Kook have been rendered into an aesthetically pleasing English that authentically reflects the original writings.[xxii] It is interesting to note that the Chabad and Breslov Hassidic groups have both undertaken the task of creating bilingual editions of their own mystical works clearly intended for a broader audience; though certainly not unbiased, the translations are often very helpful.[xxiii] Finally, Daniel Matt is in the process of translating the entire Zohar, and while even in English this text remains difficult to study without a teacher, Matt's poetic translation grants the reader access to much of the linguistic beauty and interpretive creativity that characterize the original Aramaic.[xxiv][xxv]

Mystical literature has much wisdom to offer that will neither threaten nor supersede faithfulness to halakhic study. Indeed, Kabbalah will compliment this by providing us access to an altogether different mode of religious experience and discourse. Let us make room within the variegated spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy for individuals devoted to both halakhic observance and the earnest quest to encounter God's presence in this world. These are, after all, the core values to which we are committed.

[i]Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar and Eros" *Alpayim*—A Multidisciplinary Publication for Contemporary Thought and Literature 9 (1994), p. 67–119, esp. the section "Zohar and Creativity."

[ii]Moshe Haim Ephraim, *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* (Jerusalem, 1976) p. 5.

[iii]Genesis 5:1.

[iv]Leviticus 10:16.

[v]*Kiddushin* 30a.

[vi]*Makkot* 22b.

[vii]*Sanhedrin* 99a.

[viii]Israel Hapstein, *Avodat Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1995) p. 102.

[ix]*Tanna deVei Eliyahu*, Chapter 10.

[x]Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 298–299.

[xi]Proverbs 31:23.

[xii]Ezekiel 3:12.

[xiii]Psalms 113:4.

[xiv]Psalms 57:12.

[xv]Zohar, *VaYera* 1:103a/b.

[xvi]Song of Songs 3:2.

[xvii]Shimon ibn Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, ad loc.

[xviii]Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Thought* (New York: Behrman House, 1976); Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993).

[xix]Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commetnary* (Hoboken: Yeshiva University Press, 1999).

[xx]Joseph Dan, *The Teachings of Hasidism* (New York: Behrman House, 1983).

[xxi]Yeudah Aryeh Leib Alter, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger*, trans. Arthur Green (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Upright Practices: The Light of the Eyes*, trans. Arthur Green (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

[xxii]Abraham Isaac Kook, *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*,trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot*, trans. Bezalel Naor (Spring Valley: Orot, 2004).

[xxiii]See, for example: *Likutei Amarim: English and Hebrew* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publishing House, 1984); *Likutei Moharan: English and Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1986), 13 vols. to date.

[xxiii]*The Zohar*, trans. Daniel C. Matt, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 5 vols. to date.

[DEA1]Please set all notes in Arabic numerals.