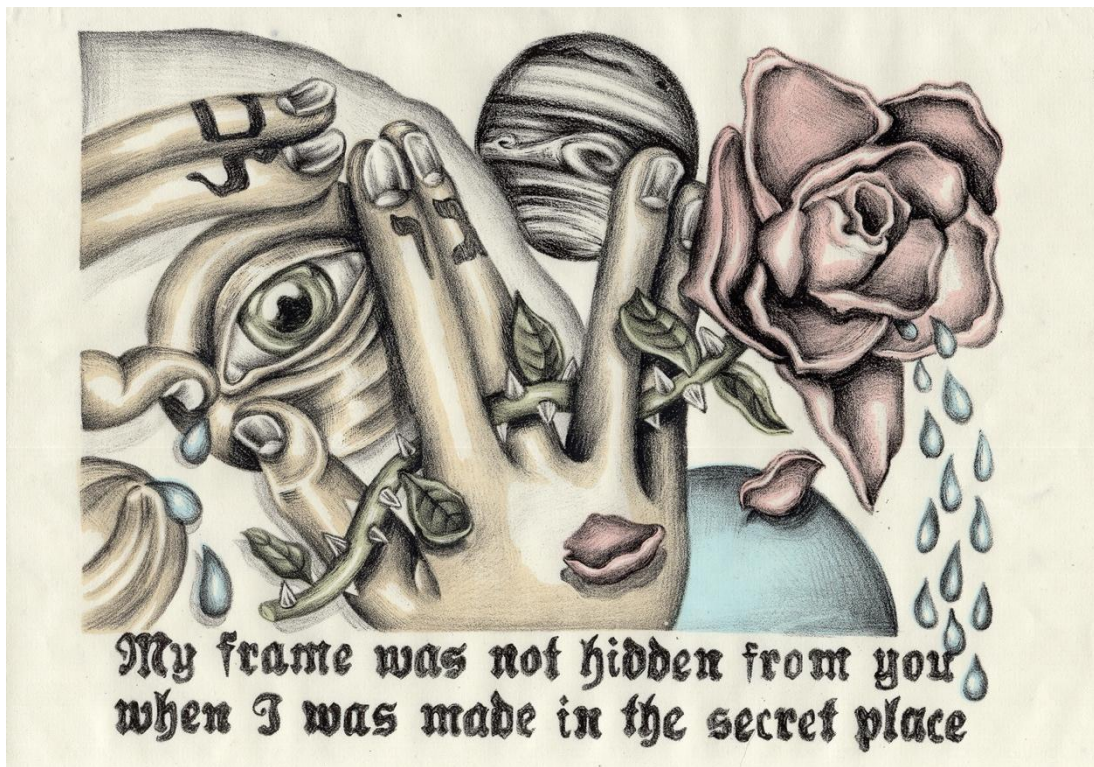


Redeeming the Sparks

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There is a famous debate between Gershom Scholem, the great scholar who founded the academic study of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), and Martin Buber, the philosopher of “I and Thou,” about the true meaning of Chasidus (Hasidic belief and practice). It’s a debate that people still take sides on: did the Hasidic rebbes embrace the physical and natural world with compassion, as Buber claimed? Is that the true meaning of *avodah b’gashmius* (or *gashmiut*) serving God through the materiality of the world? Or were the rebbes really focused on using *avodah b’gashmius* to liberate divine sparks that had been egregiously trapped in the material world – an idea that is decidedly closer to the Gnostic rejection of the created world than it is to embracing the world?



Among aficionados of Chasidus, you can still find advocates of either interpretation, even though most scholars now think Buber was just projecting his own wishful thinking onto Hasidism.

The truth, however, is more complex than either side of this debate. And the truth matters now more than ever, when we face the greatest ecological crisis in human history, a crisis that demands we show the deepest compassion toward the world, simply in order not to destroy ourselves.

REDEEMING THE SPARKS

Hasidism is rooted in Kabbalah, including in the Lurianic myth, which taught that this Creation is formed from broken pieces of a previous Creation that imploded. These fallen pieces or shards, called *klippot*, are imagined as being sharp and potentially dangerous, and each contains a spark of divine light. The first human beings were created to reach the depths of wherever the sparks had “fallen” and to return them to their source – and had they done so, they would have redeemed all of Creation at once. Instead, they drove the sparks further into exile, leaving us, their descendants, to spend the rest of human history searching every existential corner of Creation to find those sparks. Though this myth is strongly tinged with the Gnostic idea that divinity is trapped within Creation, Luria and his followers were optimistic that we could actually complete the mission through our engagement with this world.

How does the Baal Shem Tov, Yisrael ben Eliezer (aka the Besht, d.1760, Ukraine), the founder of Chasidism, employ these ideas? We will explore the Baal Shem Tov’s understanding of the sparks and see where his thinking falls on the spectrum from Lurianic/Gnostic to Nature-loving/Romantic. To use the framework I will develop in this article, we will focus on two questions: Are the sparks that are embedded in things in a state of gestation or imprisonment? And what is the way to liberate or uplift a spark or make it whole? Is it to consume that thing or being that contains the spark—which most often destroys that thing—or are their other paths of liberation that come through a mutual relationship with the object or creature containing the spark?

On the emotional surface, Yisrael Baal Shem, seems to hold a warmer attitude toward the world than one finds in Lurianic teachings. The Besht saw divine purpose in every movement of Nature, in every leaf falling. [1] He taught that divine providence watched over every motion in Nature and every creature—not just every human being—in every moment. This was a uniquely broad position to take. If the Besht thought that the world were simply a matrix that trapped divine sparks, it would be hard to see Nature so thoroughly as a divine instrument.

Such lessons about God’s nature and Nature’s God, however, only tell us how God interacts with the more-than-human world. They do not tell us how humans should act in relation to the beings and materiality of the world. On that level, the Hasid, along Lurianic lines, characteristically understands that the purpose of interacting with the more-than-human world is to “redeem” the divine sparks. This would seem to imply that human compassion was not extended to other creatures *per se*, but rather to the sparks that were found within them – a strike against Buber’s interpretation.

Let’s explore how the Besht describes this process, however, and see whether there might be more going on. Keep in mind that we don’t have the Besht’s own words, but only the reports of his disciples to judge by. (The same is true of Luria, by the way.) As Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye (1710–1784, Ukraine), one of the earliest promulgators of the Besht’s teachings, relates:

Every spark from the silent, growing, moving/living and speaking ones (*domem, tzomei'ach, chai, um'daber* – i.e. mineral, vegetable, animal, human), has in it a *komah sh'leimah* (explained below), drawn from 248 limbs and 365 sinews. [2]

In this passage, the Besht introduces a concept that was never related to the sparks in any work prior to his teaching: the idea that each spark is a *komah sh'leimah*, which means a “complete [spiritual] body.” Unpacking this idea, the phrase “248 limbs (or parts) and the 365 sinews (or connectors)” is a classical rabbinic description of the human body, so this also means that each spark has a potentially *humanly-dimensioned* body. Mineral, vegetable, animal, and human cover all the types of physical beings on this Earth, so sparks are necessarily found in all these categories of being.

Let's look at how *komah sh'leimah* was used in Kabbalah before Hasidism. Calling a particular realm a *komah sh'leimah* means that it is a complete spiritual world that is a full expression of the Sefirot or Tree of Life (the arrangement of God's powers and manifestations, often represented as a diagram of circles connected by lines).

Parallel to this, the meaning of humanity being in God's image for Kabbalah is that, both in body and in soul, we are the image of the Sefirot. [3] Furthermore, one of the important influences on Hasidism, the “Shlah” (Isaiah Horowitz, 1562-1630, Prague/Palestine) [4], said that when we do a mitzvah with a particular body part, the image of God becomes complete in that body part, and when all the parts become complete, that “completes the human-divine body/*komah*”. [5] So saying something is a *komah sh'leimah* is like saying that it represents a fractal of the Sefirot that can unfold to be the image of God. For the Besht, every spark in every being, not just in humanity, has the potential to express the full image of God.

The Besht extended the idea of *komah sh'leimah* in other ways as well. He taught that every thought was a “*komah sh'leimah*” [6] – so much so that pushing away a thought, even one that is distracting a person from praying and devekut or divine awareness, is like “killing a person”. [7] Instead, the Besht counseled that a spiritual adept should lift up any “strange thought” or machshavah zarah and help it find redemption, because that is why the thought came into one's mind. [8] Every word, he taught, is also a *komah sh'leimah*. [9] Along the same lines, the Besht explained that “in every desire of the world, there are sparks of the dimension of human beings (b'ney adam) which are a complete body (*komah sh'leimah*).” [10] Here the Besht directly equates *komah sh'leimah* with the image of God in humanity; logically he is referring to every human desire.

We can see that the way the Besht uses *komah sh'leimah* was unique: he applies it not just to spiritual worlds, as Kabbalah does, or to human embodiment, as the Shlah does, but also to every element of human consciousness. However, the Besht's application of the idea of *komah sheleimah* to the sparks was even more radical, because he applied the term equally to sparks within a human being (“speaking ones”), and to sparks in the non-human creatures (“silent, growing and moving”). [11] These sparks represent a kind of image of God embedded in all creatures. The intended universality of this idea is reflected in one of the most radical (and misunderstood) teachings from the Besht:

[We] eat human beings / *b'ney adam* and sit on human beings and use human beings — these are the sparks in those things. Therefore, a person must have pity/*chas* on their

implements and on everything that is theirs, for these [things come to them] because of sparks that are there. [12]

Later teachers interpreted this to mean that sparks of human souls, fragments of human soul-life, had reincarnated into an animal or plant in order to be healed, to achieve tikkun. [13] But this interpretation, while common to many stories about the Besht, is not part of this teaching about sparks at all. In fact, I believe it was an idea imposed on the Besht in order to tame him and make his teachings easier to fit into our anthropocentric view of reality. [14]

Rather, as we saw in the Besht's teachings about desires, what he means is that every spark is an image of God and therefore, like a human being, it has the potential to represent or instantiate divinity in this world. The human role in making this possible is to have pity or compassion, *chas*, on all these sparks, which can enable them to reach this potential.

Of course, when we refract these ideas through Buber, seeing the trace of divinity in the other, the *komah sh'leimah* in the spark, is a perfect ground for establishing an I-Thou relationship. As Buber explains, "in every You we address the eternal You". [15] So if one could discern and bring forth the divine image in every creature, for Buber that would also necessarily entail a relationship of compassion and mutuality with that creature. The Besht too says that *chas* should be evoked by one's connection to everything one possesses.

The next point to ponder is whether *komah sh'leimah* could have a special significance for the Besht that parallels how it must have resonated with Buber.

IMPRISONMENT OR GESTATION?

This brings us to the central question: did compassion for the sparks entail compassion for the creatures that held them? Did the presence of sparks in other creatures imply that the other creatures have intrinsic value? Did compassion toward the sparks necessarily translate into compassion towards the world?

According to the passage from Yakov Yosef, we are enjoined to redeem the sparks we encounter because they are imprisoned in the other creatures and in the material world:

When [a spark] is found within the silent or the growing being (rock/mineral or plant), it is in the prison house, for it cannot spread out its hands and its legs or speak, for "its head [is] on its knees and gut" (Exod. 12:9). And one who is able through the goodness of one's thought to raise the holy spark to living or speaking brings it out to freedom, and there is no greater redeeming of captives (*pidyon sh'vuyim*) for you [to accomplish] than this, as I heard from my teacher (the Besht).

Redeeming the sparks, according to Yakov Yosef's picture, meant releasing these "captives" from the prison of the natural world. Such a view can easily inspire the opposite of compassion towards the world.

This makes it hard to characterize the Chasidic view of Nature. [16] The metaphor of imprisonment may not have been part of the Besht's original teaching. But whether it was or not, this formulation became normative, and is problematic from the vantage point of ecology or ecotheology. However, there is a transformative image embedded in the verse Yaakov Yosef quotes in the name of the Besht. If you imagine a spark whose "head is on its knees and gut," who cannot

spread out its hands and legs or speak, this does not conjure the image of a prison at all, but rather the image of a fetus in the womb, awaiting birth.

Even though one could imagine the womb as a place of confinement, and therefore a kind of prison, it is so only for the moments or hours between the breaking of the waters and a baby's birth. For the rest of a fetus' maturation, the womb is the source of all life and preserver of all wholeness. Chasidism for our time, neo-Chasidism, can lift up that image of gestation, and choose to look at the world around us as a world awaiting birth into a state of redemption. [17]

Of course, it would be human arrogance to imagine that this birthing process rests entirely in our human hands, but it is a birth that with grace we can help midwife.

CONSUMPTION OR CONNECTION?

On the question of Buber and Chasidus, we find that there was and is a tendency in normative Hasidism to focus on redeeming the sparks by consuming the food in which they are found. For example, Aharon (Arele) Roth (1894–1947, Hungary/Palestine), Rebbe of the Shomer Emunim/Toldos Aharon community, introduced the teaching from Yakov Yosef with these words:

My beloved brother, when some bit of food is brought before you, or drink, you must imagine...that here there is a spark crying out and seeking and pleading to you that you would have mercy on her...and not push her away, God forbid. [18]

This is quite distant from Buber and from encountering Nature in its own terms, especially since the requirement to consume any spark and incorporate it into oneself in order to “raise it to the human level” means one must destroy (that is, kill and eat) the creature in which the spark is trapped.

The pathos of redeeming “imprisoned” sparks was magnified in later explanations of the Besht's teaching like this one. More than this, later teachings emphasize that redemption does not even happen through the act of eating itself, but only through the use of that food's strength to serve God by studying Torah or doing a mitsvah. This idea might further distance the Hasid from any encounter with other creatures as beings-in-themselves with intrinsic value. [19]

According to Yaakov Yosef's report in the same passage, however, redeeming the sparks “is the purpose of a Jewish person's service in Torah and mitsvot”, and not just the purpose of eating or consumption. The spark contained in a tool or vessel could also be redeemed by using that implement or thing to do a mitsvah, which does not consume that thing.

I further believe that the Besht's meaning was broader than this. The passage from Yaakov Yosef emphasizes that it is “through the goodness of one's thought” that the encounter redeems the sparks. Redemption was therefore effected not primarily by consuming something, nor by using it for a holy purpose, but more fundamentally, by encountering that thing or being with good intention. [20]

If we combine this idea with what we saw earlier, that one is encountering humanity—that is, divinity—in the sparks found in everything, we have an understanding of the sparks that, while complex, is grounded in compassion and reverence towards the world. This is much closer to Buber's conception than not.

OTHER PRECEDENTS

This idea that our intention is what sanctifies and redeems the sparks we encounter, and not our consumption, can be found outside of the Hasidic tradition. The best example I know of is the prayer from the first published Tu Bishvat seder, the P'ri 'Ets Hadar, first published in 1728. This prayer does not call on us to eat the fruit of the seder in order to free sparks from the physical world. Rather, the purpose of the seder is to strengthen the Tree of Life to bring shefa', abundant divine energy, to the fruit trees and to the physical world. By doing so, we support the trees to joyfully make more fruit. [21] Thus, the liberation that the P'ri 'Ets Hadar focuses on is the liberation of chiyut, life-force, rather than sparks, and our eating is a divine encounter not with the fruit, but with the trees themselves.

Where the P'ri 'Ets Hadar focuses on sparks, these sparks are trapped by our sins, rather than by the world:

[M]ay all the sparks scattered by our hands, or by the hands of our ancestors, or by the sin of the first human against the fruit of the tree, return now to be included in the majestic might of the Tree of Life.

The depth of *tikkun* imagined by this prayer goes back to the Garden of Eden. It suggests an encounter that can bear all of history, and possibly change all of history, at a single stroke. The goal of that change is to strengthen the Tree of Life so that it becomes as strong as it was at the beginning of Creation. In Kabbalah, this tree is the Sefirot, but for us, the Tree of Life is also the web of all living beings over the course of all evolution.

The *P'ri 'Ets Hadar* can provide a template for how we interpret and apply the Besht's teachings in our time. Redeeming the sparks was described by the Baal Shem Tov as a process that could reveal the divinity that was concealed in everything. The Besht used code words to allude to this concept, describing each spark as a "human being" or a *komah sh'leimah*, a "complete [spiritual] body," meaning a potential image of God. [22] It is this exact significance of *komah sh'leimah* that has been missed in most scholarly assessments of Hasidic philosophy. [23]

In a Neo-Hasidic theology of Nature, we would seek to understand all the avenues by which the sparks in each being, and in Being as a whole, can reach their potential—whether or not that being provides humanity with tools or food, whether or not we interact with that being directly.

For the needs of our time, we could add one more element not native to the Besht's thought: when we assist in birthing sparks in other beings of this world into personhood, we will also find that the other beings – not just human, but also animal or plant or soil or ecosystem, or any other lifeforms or elements – assist in birthing the sparks from within ourselves.

As we saw, the Ba'al Shem Tov applied the term *komah sh'leimah*, "complete form," to the human psyche and to the sparks found in physical reality. We also saw that the Besht's intention, perhaps lost to his disciples, was that the sparks in all things have the potential to express the divine image. But *komah sheleimah* means much more than this. Yakov Yosef quotes the Besht as saying that "the totality/*kelalot* of the world is a single unity, a *komah sh'leimah*." [24] This does not mean that the whole of Creation yearns to reach its full stature, but rather that it always already expresses this full stature. This fullness is more than *gashmius*, more than materiality. It means

encountering the world not as substance but as presence, as subject. *Avodah b'gashmiut* means service that pierces through the illusion of materiality to the spiritual unity of Life and Being.

Coming into this understanding requires that we come into a spiritual and ethical relationship with what is other, with the more-than-human. This totality is already a *komah sh'leimah*, whether or not we realize or acknowledge it. Therefore, experiencing it as such does not unite or redeem the sparks of the outward Creation, which are already united. Rather, the experience unites the sparks within ourselves, so that we too can embody the height of this reality, which is the stature and body of the divine.

Footnotes

[1] *Keter Shem Tov*, §179, *Hashgachah Pratit*. A late version of this teaching depicts the Besht pointing to a particular falling leaf and explaining to his students that it fell in order to give shade to a worm that was suffering from the heat (*Raza D'uvda* [Eliezer Ze'ev of Kretshnif, Jerusalem, 1970] *Sha'ar Ha'otiyot, Ma'amar Hashgachah Pratit*, p.127, quoted in David Sears, *The Vision of Eden: Animal Welfare and Vegetarianism in Jewish Law and Mysticism* [Jerusalem: Orot, 2003], p.15). However, this story seems to be an amalgamation of the Besht's teaching that every leaf or piece of straw that falls or is blown by the wind is helping to fulfill some divine purpose in Creation, and a story about the Rhyzhiner and his son based on this teaching, which describes them using a magnifying glass (!) to find a worm under the leaf. (*Heichal Yisra'el* [Yisrael Frankfurter, Jerusalem: Ma'ayan Chokhmah, 1967], in his commentary titled *Orchot Yisrael* on *Orchot Chayyim* §27 – with thanks to Victor C. Steinberg and Elly Moseson for helping me find these texts).

[2] *Ben Porat Yosef* (Pieterkov Poland, 1884) 74a. In *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov (SBST)*, a widely-available compendium of passages from Hasidic literature that quote the Besht, this teaching can be found in *Mikeitz*, §116.

[3] In the Zohar, parts of the human body like the hand or the face, and not just the whole body, can also be in God's image and in the image of the Sefirot. See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* (Cambridge 2015), pp.197-201,

[4] Shlah stands for the title of his most important work, *Shnei Luchot Habrit*. The section discussed here, titled *Masekhet Yoma*, is found in vol.1:2.

[5] See *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 290-292.

[6] *Tsava'at Harivash*, §34.

[7] *Magid D'varav L'Ya'akov*, 10b (*SBST*, *B'rei'shit* §97).

[8] *Ben Porat Yosef*, 50a–b (*SBST*, *B'rei'shit* §116). For example, one should take a step back from crushing on someone to whom one is sexually attracted, and connect to the divine image that is the

source of that person's beauty. This stance toward "alien thoughts" strongly demarcated Hasidism from contemporaneous Jewish thought.

[9] *Tsava'at Harivash*, §34.

[10] Yitzhak Aizik Safrin, *Notser Chesed 'al Masekhet Avot*, ch. 3 (*SBST*, *B'rei'shit*, §157).

[11] *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 288-92.

[12] *Keter Shem Tov*, vol.1, §218.

[13] See e.g. Sears, *The Vision of Eden*, p. 153. This revision of the Besht's teaching was so strong that versions of this passage in *Tzava'at Harivash* §109 was rewritten to say, "we sit with human beings".

[14] This has led to many misinterpretations, both traditional and scholarly, of what the BeSHT meant. See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 298–299.

[15] *I and Thou*, p. 57.

[16] On the debate about the value of the natural world in Hasidism, see Seth Brody, "Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (July–Oct. 1998): 3–44. While people like Scholem thought that Buber misrepresented Hasidism, there is more validity to Buber's interpretation than most scholars would allow.

[17] Perhaps it will occur to the reader that "lifting up" this image of gestation is a way of redeeming the spark held within this teaching about redeeming sparks. The academic question would be whether this is authentic. The existential question would be whether this engenders more life.

[18] *Shulchan Hatahor* (Jerusalem, 1996), ch. 2, p. 165.

[19] *Keter Shem Tov*, §218, pp. 124-125.

[20] We might consider that this "goodness" is parallel to Kant's idea that the only thing intrinsically good is good will towards another – and that this good will is manifest by treating that other as an end-in-itself with intrinsic value and purpose.

[21] As it says, " 'Then the trees of the forest will sing out' (Ps. 96:12) and the tree of the field will raise a branch and make fruit, day by day."

[22] *Kabbalah and Ecology*, pp. 288-92.

[23] See *Kabbalah and Ecology*, p. 299.

[24] *Ketonet Passim* (Jerusalem, 1985), *Metsora* 90.

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