

MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

RABBI ZALMAN
SCHACHTER-SHALOMI



Essential Teachings

Selected, Introduced, and Annotated by

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Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi: A Life of Renewal



INTRODUCTION

According to legend (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 6b), after the destruction of the second Temple, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai led a small group of Jewish refugees to the town of Yavneh, where they set about rebuilding Judaism for the new realities they faced. Beginning in the mid-1960s, Rabbi Zalman Schachter (better known as Reb Zalman, a less formal title he preferred)¹ argued that it was time for Yavneh II, a deep rethinking of how to be (or do) Jewish today. Indeed, he believed that all religious traditions were in urgent need of updating in the face of dramatic shifts in world events, technology, and consciousness. As he saw it, there was no aspect of human life that was unaffected by such events as the Holocaust; Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Civil Rights, Hippie, and Feminist Movements; and the moon landing. In light of these phenomena, it was humanity's task to consciously build a new world with a renewed understanding of the interconnection and interdependence of all being. This, he insisted, required bold religious and cultural adaptation.

1. He would add the name Shalomi (from *shalom*, peace) later in life to balance his family name, Schachter, which means kosher slaughterer in Yiddish, the family occupation for several generations. The name change was suggested to him by his Sufi friend and colleague, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan. See *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir*, 182. The term *Reb* means Mr. or Sir in Yiddish (as opposed to rabbi or professor).

Because of his commitment to these views and his experimental nature, Reb Zalman was often a controversial figure in his lifetime, beloved by many and dismissed or reviled by others. His students and admirers saw him as a kind and accessible mentor, a creative interpreter of Kabbalah² and Hasidism,³ and a visionary religious innovator. Those who opposed him felt that he had betrayed the values and standards of traditional *Yiddishkeit* (Jewish life) and was too easily influenced by shifting intellectual and cultural trends. However, this opposition diminished significantly in his later years, as many former skeptics and opponents came to appreciate his creativity, learnedness, and demonstrated effectiveness. As he aged, Reb Zalman also honed and steadied his approach to renewal, consolidating various of his experiments and working with colleagues and students to establish the Jewish Renewal Movement and related professional training programs. As part of his *harvest* process, he also (re)produced an array of writings, videos, and audio recordings, sharing his erudition and passion for the tradition, while continuing to call for thoughtful innovation. By the turn of the century, Reb Zalman was increasingly viewed as a significant bridge figure between Eastern European Hasidism and North American Jewish life—a Neo-Hasidic⁴ sage and spiritual innovator. Today, Jews the world over wear the B'nai Or rainbow *tallit* (prayer shawl) he

2. Literally “that which has been received,” this Hebrew term is used to refer to the Jewish mystical tradition as a whole and more technically to the flowering of Jewish mystical activity in medieval Western Europe (beginning c.1150). See Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

3. *Hasidism* (from the Hebrew root word *hesed*, loving-kindness) is a term used for various Jewish pietistic groups throughout Jewish history. In this context, it refers to the Eastern European mystical revival movement that emerged in the late eighteenth-century and continues to flourish today. See *Hasidism: A New History*, edited by David Biale et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

4. This term refers to twentieth and twenty-first century Jewish figures who draw on Hasidic teaching and tradition for religious and/or cultural inspiration but who are not part of a traditional Hasidic community. See

designed, make use of meditative exercises he introduced, and study mystical texts he translated or first shared with close students decades ago. Further, Jewish Renewal rabbis and teachers are at the forefront of contemporary Judaism and its encounter with the changing nature of North American and global society.⁵ ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, the organization he originally founded as B'nai Or Religious Fellowship, continues to serve the core of Jewish Renewal communities around the world; and OHALAH: The Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal, originally begun by rabbis personally ordained by him, meets every year for fellowship, learning, and the ordination of new clergy. While these organizations remain small in comparison to the major North American Jewish denominations, like the Reconstructionist Movement⁶ before it, renewal has had an outsized influence on contemporary Jewish life.⁷

From the earliest days of his career, Reb Zalman was also continually involved in dialogue with leaders and practitioners of other spiritual paths, including Trappist monks, Sufi sheikhs, and Aboriginal healers. These forays into what was then largely forbidden territory led him to jokingly describe himself as a

Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds., *A New Hasidism: Roots and Branches* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019) [two volumes].

5. See Shaul Magid, “Jewish Renewal Movement,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thompson-Gale, 2005), 7:4868–74. See also Magid’s “Jewish Renewal: Toward a New American Judaism,” in *Tikkun* 21, no. 1 (January/February 2006): 57–60.

6. Magid, “Jewish Renewal Movement.” To learn about the Reconstructionist movement—now called “Reconstructing Judaism”—and its founding ideologue, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1900–1983), see Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (Wyncote, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 2000); and Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

7. This is especially the case as it relates to Jewish prayer and ritual, including the use of *niggunim* (wordless melodies); silent meditation; chant (including in English); dance; and drumming. Reb Zalman and his students themselves have blended various Jewish traditions with practices (or spiritual technologies as he referred to them) adapted from other religions.

“spiritual peeping-Tom.” But far from being a mere browser, Reb Zalman became deeply engaged in the theory and practice of these traditions, praying matins, performing *zikhronot*, and sitting in sweat lodges. This personal, hands-on approach to dialogue and learning led to friendships with an eclectic group of leaders and thinkers, including Father Thomas Merton (1915–68); Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (1916–2004); Ram Dass (1931–2019); Ken Wilber; and the fourteenth Dalai Lama. It also led him to develop an “organismic” vision of the world’s religions, with each tradition serving its own constituents and contributing to the vitality of creation as a whole.

LIFE SPECTRUM

On August 17, 1924, Meshullam Zalman Schachter was born in Zolkiew (Galicia) Poland, to Shlomo and Hayyah Gittel Schachter. Due to rising anti-Semitism, the Schachters moved with their young son to Vienna, Austria, in 1925. His parents were both from traditional Hasidic families associated with the Belz dynasty.⁸ The couple, however, fashioned a more modern religious life for themselves and their offspring. This included educating their oldest son in religious and secular schools and youth groups, including socialist-Zionist and Orthodox anti-Zionist groups. Among young Zalman’s passions were chemistry, German novels about the American old West, and music.⁹ While his boyhood religious and educational experiences were somewhat dizzying, they helped him learn to hold a broad range of ideas and perspectives at an early age. This would be a hallmark of Reb Zalman’s mature intellectual and spiritual life.

8. As the Hasidic movement spread throughout Eastern Europe, various charismatic preachers and teachers formed courts and dynasties that were subsequently led by their sons, other family members, or close disciples. One such dynasty was founded by Rabbi Shalom Rokeah (1783–1855) in the second decade of the nineteenth century in the town of Belz, located in eastern Galicia.

9. *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 13–17.

In 1938, when he was just fourteen, his family (including three younger siblings) began a long and harrowing flight from Nazi oppression through Belgium, France, North Africa, and the Caribbean, until they finally landed in New York City in 1941. This painful journey involved time in two internment camps in Vichy, France. While Reb Zalman was an ebullient and future-oriented personality, this upheaval understandably threw the teenager into a crisis of faith. Perplexed by the depravity of the Nazis, the enthusiastic or tacit support of so many other Europeans (including former friends, teachers, and neighbors), and the seeming absence or indifference of God, the young man was angry and existentially adrift.

In 1939, while still in Belgium, Reb Zalman joined an unusual circle of HaBaD Hasidim¹⁰ who cut and polished diamonds in Antwerp. Together, they worked and sang Hasidic *niggunim* (melodies), studied Jewish sacred texts, and discussed works of modern European philosophy and literature. This association not only served as a much-needed balm for young Zalman's soul but also opened him to a more mature engagement with Jewish spirituality and thought.¹¹ While most HaBaD groups are not involved in the study of non-Jewish textual materials like the Antwerp circle, the dynasty has a long history of intellectual rigor and sophisticated teachings on prayer and meditation.¹²

10. This well-known dynasty was founded by Rabbi Shneur Zalman (1745–1812) of Liadi in White Russia in 1775. HaBaD is an acronym for *Hokhmah* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Understanding), *Da'at* (Awareness), the intellectual-spiritual ideals of this sect (based on earlier Jewish mystical teachings). Lubavitch is the town where the founder's offspring established and grew the community for a century. The two names (one conceptual, the other geographical) are used in tandem or separately. Members of the contemporary movement often use the English spelling "Chabad." See Naftali Loewenthal, "Lubavitch Hasidism," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010), https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lubavitch_Hasidism.

11. See "The Diamond-Cutter Hasidim" in Chapter 6 of this volume.

12. See "Chabad," in *Hasidism: A New History*, 125–36. See also Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy*

It also places great emphasis on the inner development of the devotee (the Hasid), in addition to the role of the *rebbe* (Hasidic leader) as spiritual guide and intercessor.¹³ A chance encounter with Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), who would later become the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, also deeply impressed young Zalman.¹⁴ And so, after arriving in the United States with his family, working for a brief period, he enrolled in the HaBaD yeshiva (religious academy), Tomhei Temimim, in Brooklyn. The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson (1880–1950, Menahem Mendel’s father-in-law), not only welcomed Reb Zalman into the HaBaD yeshiva but also arranged for the schooling of his younger siblings and helped his family find housing and set up a small furrier business in their apartment.¹⁵

Reb Zalman had great respect and love for his *rebbe*. In addition to the elder rabbi’s acts of *hesed* (loving-kindness) toward many recent émigrés, Reb Yosef Yitzhak was a brave and determined man who had endured tremendous pain and suffering while leading his flock in Eastern Europe, including imprisonment by the Soviet government, the rising tide of Nazi persecution, and significant health issues.¹⁶ Reb Zalman greatly admired

of Habad Hasidism, translated by Jeffrey M. Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

13. From the outset of the movement, Hasidic *rebbe*s (also called *tzaddikim*, righteous ones) were believed to be endowed with unusual spiritual power, including the ability to intercede with God on behalf of their community members. See Green and Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*, 220–21, including the quotation from Reb Zalman about his attraction to HaBaD. See also Arthur Green, “The Zaddik as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 45, no. 3 (September 1977): 327–47.

14. See *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 45–48.

15. *Ibid.*, 53–62.

16. See Samuel Heilman, *Who Will Lead Us: Five Hasidic Dynasties in America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 228–37.

his mentor's combination of intellectual and emotional sophistication, his devotional intensity, and steadfast commitment to rebuilding traditional Judaism in his new homeland.¹⁷ Beginning in the mid-1940s, the rebbe began sending out HaBaD rabbis and educators to kindle the hearts of young Jews in postwar America. The effort was shot through with messianic yearning, following the unfathomable losses suffered by the Jewish community in the *Shoah* (Destruction, Hebrew term for the Holocaust). Reb Zalman was deeply honored to be among the first members of this educational vanguard. Even before receiving rabbinic ordination from Tomhei Temimim in 1947, he began outreach and teaching work in New Haven, Connecticut.

In 1949, Reb Yosef Yitzhak sent Reb Zalman and another talented young rabbi, Shlomo Carlebach (1925–94), to visit Jewish students on college and university campuses. He and Carlebach were both well suited for this work, sharing with students the riches of traditional Jewish religious thought and practice with warmth and charisma. Knowing they had to meet these young folks “where they were,” the rabbis used Hasidic music and storytelling to open their hearts and minds. At the same time, these young rabbis were deeply moved and influenced by the students they encountered, who helped initiate them into the emerging counterculture of the age. While Reb Zalman and Reb Shlomo (he, too, preferred to be addressed informally) began their outreach efforts as faithful HaBaD *shelihim* (emissaries, informal educators), over the next decade they would become leading figures in the development of Neo-Hasidic culture in North America, attracting Jewish seekers from across the denominational spectrum.¹⁸

17. *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 53–56.

18. See Natan Ophir (Offenbacher), *Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: Life, Mission, and Legacy* (Jerusalem, Israel: Urim Publications, 2014). After Carlebach's death, several women came forward with reports that he acted toward them in sexually inappropriate and/or abusive ways. Since that time, there has been extensive discussion in Jewish circles about how to deal with his legacy, including both the many positive contributions he made and his

Between 1952 and 1956, Reb Zalman served three small pulpits in Massachusetts and New York (as well as working as a kosher slaughterer). With a growing family and very limited funds available for HaBaD *shelihim* (the organizational infrastructure was still quite small in those days) he had to find gainful employment. While these were challenging professional experiences (he had little organizational or administrative training), Reb Zalman deepened his understanding of the realities of North American Jewish life, and he began to meet and work with non-Jewish clergy (mostly Protestants). Inspired by several positive interfaith experiences and a growing desire to work more extensively with Jewish college students, he enrolled in an MA program in the Psychology of Religion, with a focus on pastoral counseling, at Boston University (1955–56).¹⁹ This experience was both intellectually and spiritually eye opening, as it was the first time Reb Zalman studied Christianity formally or studied religion with non-Jewish faculty and fellow students. Further, unlike in yeshiva, his graduate studies included the use of modern historical–critical methods. Reb Zalman’s most significant mentor at Boston University was the Reverend Howard Thurman (1899–1981), Dean of Marsh Chapel, and a towering African American preacher, pastor, and writer.²⁰ The young rabbi was deeply impressed by Thurman’s creative pedagogic methods, modern mystical vision (including his emphasis on

damaging behavior. See, for example, Sarah Imhoff, “Carlebach and the Unheard Stories,” *American Jewish History* 100, no. 4 (2016): 555–60; Neshama Carlebach [Reb Shlomo’s daughter], “My Sisters: I Hear You,” <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/my-sisters-i-hear-you/>; and Shaul Magid, “Shlomo Carlebach: A Transnational Jew in Search of Himself,” in Green and Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Branches*, 339–56.

19. He did so with the permission of his *rebbe*, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

20. To learn more about Thurman, see Louis E. Smith, Jr., ed., *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006). See also Or N. Rose, “Howard Thurman’s Mentorship of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi,” in *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from a Field*, edited by Hans Gustafson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020).

contemplative practice), and passionate commitment to interracial and interreligious dialogue; he lovingly referred to the Christian minister as his “Black Rebbe.”²¹

In 1956, Reb Zalman moved with his wife (Feigel Resnick, 1922–2002) and children to Winnipeg, Canada, where he became the director of the University of Manitoba’s B’nai Brith Hillel Foundation for Jewish student life and a professor of Judaic studies. Inspired by his time with Dean Thurman, he implemented a variety of innovative religious and educational projects, working closely with students both in the classroom and in informal settings. With the blessing of the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, in 1958 he wrote and privately published *The First Step: A Primer of a Jewish Spiritual Life*, one of the first booklets on Jewish meditation in English. Lengthy excerpts from this work were later published in the popular, do-it-yourself book, *The Jewish Catalog*.²² This little meditation manual would be read by a generation (or more) of North American Jewish seekers and by individuals as diverse as President Zalman Shazar (1889–1974) of Israel and the Christian monk and writer, Thomas Merton. During this same time, Reb Zalman became friendly with other Hillel professionals, scholars, and rabbis of different denominations, increasingly traveling to speak, teach, and lead retreats on campuses and in synagogues throughout North America. In 1959, he made his first trip to Israel as part of a contingent of Hillel directors. During his visit to the Holy

21. See “Trusting the Holy Spirit,” describing Reb Zalman’s first meetings with Dean Thurman, in Chapter 7 of this volume. See also Shawn Israel Zevit’s brief reflection in *Wisdom from Reb Zalman: Embracing the Jewish Spirit*, edited by Goldie Milgram and Shohama Weiner with Carola de Vries Robles and Robert Esformes (New Rochelle, NY: Reclaiming Judaism Press, 2018), 67–68.

22. Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld, *The Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 296–318. The editors printed Reb Zalman’s text as the concluding chapter of the volume. The layout is designed to emphasize the contemplative nature of the piece, with fewer words and more white space on each of the final pages.

Land Reb Zalman met, among others, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the leading Jungian psychologist, Erich Neumann (1905–60), and the Jewish philosopher, Shemuel Hugo Bergman (1883–1975).²³ He also visited several Hasidic communities, including the new HaBaD settlement (Kfar Chabad, established in 1949) in the center of the country.

Over the next several years, Reb Zalman became deeply engaged in the study of Catholicism. He was particularly attracted to the mystical writings of such medieval figures as Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328), Teresa of Avila (1515–82), and John of the Cross (1542–91), as well as the modern writers Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and Thomas Merton. Reb Zalman also began to dialogue with Catholic religious leaders, intellectuals, and activists. He was especially moved by the devotional intensity of the monks and nuns he met, and their grappling with issues of authority, tradition, and modernity. These were challenges Reb Zalman was facing himself as an evolving Orthodox rabbi and seeker. While in Winnipeg, he befriended members of a local Trappist community, Our Lady of the Prairies, located on the outskirts of the city. In late 1960, he struck up a friendship with the aforementioned Merton, writing letters back and forth, and sharing published and unpublished books and articles. Reb Zalman also visited his spiritual *pen pal* a few times at Merton's monastery, Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Bardstown, Kentucky. The monk and the rabbi developed enough trust over the years

23. *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 113–20. Reb Zalman mentions that he briefly contemplated emigrating to Israel to study with Scholem and Neumann. He also indicates that one of Bergmann's associates translated *The First Step* into Hebrew. Elsewhere, Reb Zalman credits Bergmann for drawing his attention to the writings of the Neo-Hasidic writer, Hillel Zeitlin (1888–1942), whose vision of a modern Jewish spiritual community would serve as an important model for him. See *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*, selected, edited, and translated by Arthur Green; prayers introduced and translated by Joel Rosenberg; foreword by Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012). See also note 26.

to discuss a number of sensitive theological and personal matters. Their relationship was anchored in a shared passion for contemplative practice and spiritual development.²⁴

In 1964, inspired by his Trappist colleagues, the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls,²⁵ and Eastern European Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism, Reb Zalman issued a call for the creation of an intentional Jewish community he called B'nai Or (Children of Light) and began experimenting with a small circle of students in Winnipeg.²⁶ While Reb Zalman's dream of building a full-time residential community never came to fruition, this experiment in Neo-Hasidic counterculture served as a model and precursor to both the Havurah and Jewish Renewal Movements.²⁷

24. See "My Friend Thomas Merton" in Chapter 7 of this volume. See also "An Interview with Zalman Schachter-Shalomi," conducted by Edward Kaplan and Shaul Magid (November 19, 2001), in *Merton and Judaism: Holiness in Words*, edited by Beatrice Brodeur (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), 301–23.

25. Discovered in the middle of the twentieth century, the Dead Sea Scrolls date from the third century BCE (mid-Second Temple period) to the first century CE (before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE). The most well-known texts among the Scrolls are the religious writings found in a series of eleven caves at Qumran. Reb Zalman was fascinated by the devotional intensity and communitarian idealism expressed in these sources; so much so, that he often referred to B'nai Or as "Qumran USA." See *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 121–32. For an introduction to the Scrolls, visit the Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/home>.

26. As mentioned above, another important influence on Reb Zalman's vision of B'nai Or was the Eastern European, Neo-Hasidic writer and journalist, Hillel Zeitlin (1888–1942). Zeitlin dreamed of creating a new spiritual movement inspired by Hasidic and modern socialist ideals. At the center of this movement, he envisioned a core group of devotees forming an intentional community he called Yavneh (drawing on the rabbinic legend we mentioned in the opening of this chapter). See Zeitlin's Yavneh documents (from the 1920s) in Green and Mayse, *A New Hasidism: Roots*, 15–32, 343–51; compare these with Reb Zalman's call for the establishment of B'nai Or (1964) in the same volume, 240–56, 388.

27. See Arthur Green, "Renewal and Havurah: American Movements, European Roots," in *Jewish Renaissance and Renewal in America: Essays*

During this time, Reb Zalman began a gradual move away from Orthodoxy, both ideological and practical. This was spurred by several factors, including his study of the history of religions; a deep appreciation for the wisdom of non-Jewish religious traditions; exposure to impressive non-Orthodox rabbis, academics, and Hillel professionals; and shifting attitudes toward sexuality and gender in contemporary North American culture. His move toward a liberal piety gained greater momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In reflecting on his religious evolution, Reb Zalman would later describe it as a movement from restoration to renewal, a fundamental change from working for the restoration of traditional Eastern European Hasidism in North America to the renewal of contemporary Jewish life in open dialogue with a variety of religious and other wisdom (humanistic and scientific) traditions.

In 1968, Reb Zalman completed his Doctor of Hebrew Letters from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, writing a dissertation on Hasidic forms of counseling, reading these traditions in dialogue with modern forms of psychotherapy and pastoral care. The fruits of this project led to the eventual publication of two books: *Sparks of Light* (1983) and the larger, more scholarly volume, *Spiritual Intimacy* (1990). It was during this same phase of life that the Lubavitcher hierarchy effectively separated itself from Reb Zalman.²⁸ The most significant issue was his open and enthusiastic experimentation with psychedelic drugs. In the summer of 1963 he met Timothy Leary (1920–96) by chance while visiting an *ashram* in Cohasset, Massachusetts.²⁹ A week later, he engaged in an LSD trip with the Harvard researcher, finding the experience utterly transformative. He reported feeling

in Honor of Leah Levitz Fishbane, edited by Eitan P. Fishbane and Jonathan D. Sarna (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 145–64.

28. See Reb Zalman's account of this painful public affair in *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 175–76.

29. Although Reb Zalman occasionally ascribed these events to the summer of 1962, archival research has clarified that they took place in August 1963.

a powerful sense of the unity of life and the inadequacy of all philosophical or theological mappings to capture this reality. He was so moved by this and subsequent hallucinogenic experiences that he wrote about and lectured on the topic. He dared ask if LSD trips could be compared to the “soul ascents” spoken of by the Ba’al Shem Tov (1700–1760)³⁰ and other mystical voyages. If so, why not make use of the drug sacramentally like other mind-expanding substances and techniques used by traditional seekers and adepts?³¹

Despite his painful falling out with HaBaD, Reb Zalman continued on as an independent Hasid, teaching and lecturing to diverse Jewish and interfaith audiences throughout North America. In 1968–69, he took a sabbatical from the University of Manitoba and spent the year as a postgraduate fellow at Brandeis University studying ancient Semitic languages. That same year, he served as an informal mentor and honorary participant in Havurat Shalom in Cambridge (and later Somerville), Massachusetts. His teaching and modeling inspired members of this impressive group, several of whom went on to play major roles in contemporary Jewish life. This included the group’s founders, Rabbi Arthur Green and Kathy Green (1944–2017), as well as

30. Israel ben Eliezer, The Ba’al Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name), was a mystical healer, teacher, and prayer leader in the Ukrainian town of Mezibozh. His shamanic talents (including the use of divine names in incantations and amulets) attracted both common folk and members of the elite. Several of his associates and disciples formed the nascent Hasidic movement, crediting him as the inspiration for their activities. To this day, the BeShT (acronym for Ba’al Shem Tov) is viewed by Hasidim as the founding father of the movement and by Jews the world over as a major religious personality. See Moshe Rosman, “Ba’al Shem Tov,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010), https://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Baal_Shem_Tov.

31. *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 141–54. As noted there, this account was edited for a general audience. The original version (available through the Reb Zalman archive at the University of Colorado) includes many more Hebrew and Yiddish terms and allusions. See also Reb Zalman’s essay, “Conscious Ascent of the Soul,” in Ralph Metzner, ed., *The Ecstatic Adventure* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 96–123.

the editors of the *Jewish Catalog*, Richard Siegel (1947–2018), Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld.³²

Reb Zalman’s last several years in Winnipeg were difficult. In addition to his experimentation with LSD, in the mid-1960s he divorced his first wife (an arranged marriage), entered a short-lived marriage with a former employee from the University of Manitoba,³³ and continued to explore his fledgling identity as a countercultural spiritual figure. All of these changes created tension between Reb Zalman and members of the local Jewish establishment. When he arrived in this quiet midwestern city in the mid-1950s, he was a creative, but traditional HaBaD Hasid; over the course of a decade or so, he grew to become a much more independent and experimental—some would say radical—seeker and teacher.³⁴

In the early 1970s, Reb Zalman continued to travel and speak, particularly enjoying his visits to the West Coast, where he imbibed the flowering Hippie culture in Northern California. This included a growing interest in the Human Potential Movement, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. He developed relationships with members of the Universalist Sufi community in the Bay Area, leading to close friendships with Pir Moineddin

32. As Reb Zalman notes, the editors actually experimented with the design and contents of the Catalog in a course he taught at Brandeis that year and were influenced by his earlier informal educational work, including his time as a “religious environmentalist” at Camp Ramah in Connecticut. *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 166–67 (see also “Bringing *Shabbos* to Life” in Chapter 4 of this volume). The book was modeled after the iconic *Whole Earth Catalog* (first published in 1968).

33. Complicating matters further, his second wife, Mary Lynn Patterson, was a convert to Judaism, and Reb Zalman was a *kohen* (from the priestly line rooted in the biblical figure of Aaron the High Priest); according to traditional Jewish law *kobanim* are not allowed to marry converts. See Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 46a, <https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.46a.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.

34. Interviews (July 5, 2018) with Rabbi Jerry Steinberg and Rabbi Neal Rose, both colleagues of Reb Zalman’s at the University of Manitoba during this period.

Jablonski (1942–2001) and Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan. As a sign of his respect and admiration for Reb Zalman, Pir Vilayat initiated the rabbi as a *sheikh* in 1975.³⁵ This unusual ritual took place only one year after Reb Zalman ordained his first rabbi, Daniel Siegel, who went on to play a central role in the development of the Jewish Renewal Movement.³⁶ That same year (1974), Reb Zalman helped found the Aquarian Minyan in Berkeley, California, which was an important context for further Jewish liturgical innovation and community-building.

Married for a third time, to Elana Rappaport in 1975, Reb Zalman relocated to Philadelphia, where he became professor of Jewish Mysticism and Psychology of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia. He would remain in that academic post until he took early retirement in 1987, when he was named professor emeritus. Reb Zalman also established a B'nai Or community, drawing on his experimentation in Canada. The Schachters' home in Mount Airy became a laboratory for Jewish and interreligious innovation, including prayer, study, and meditation. Faculty members and students from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) and other nearby religious and academic institutions were attracted to the neighborhood, leading it to become a hothouse of progressive Jewish life. Reb Zalman taught on a part-time basis at the RRC (where his friend Arthur Green served as dean and then president between 1984 and 1992) at different points in his years in Philadelphia, and several graduates of the school played key roles in the development of the national Jewish Renewal Movement. This included renaming the growing organization P'nai Or (Faces of Light) Religious

35. See Netanel Miles-Yépez, "Foreword: The Merging of Two Oceans," in Gregory Blann, *When Oceans Merge: The Contemporary Sufi and Hasidic Teachings of Pir Vilyat Inayat Khan and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi* (Rhinebeck, NY: Adam Kadmon Books and Monkfish Publishing, 2019), xiii–xxxiv.

36. Reb Zalman's first female ordinee was Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb who received *semikhah* (ordination) in 1981. Rabbis Everett Gendler and Shlomo Carlebach were the other members of her ordination committee.

Fellowship in 1986 (at the urging of feminist colleagues), until it took the name ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal in 1993. Among Reb Zalman's close students and colleagues in Philadelphia was the writer and activist, Rabbi Arthur Waskow. In fact, Waskow's Shalom Center merged with P'nai Or to form ALEPH, formally bringing together the spiritual and activist arms of the Renewal Movement under one banner for over a decade.³⁷

In 1984, Reb Zalman took a forty-day retreat at the Lama Foundation in New Mexico and emerged with a new teaching about spiritual eldering, which later developed into his popular book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*,³⁸ and the national Spiritual Eldering Institute. At the age of sixty he came to realize that he could no longer maintain the same frenetic pace at which he had lived for so many years. During this same period, Reb Zalman and his fourth wife, Eve Ilsen, established an adult education initiative called the Wisdom School, influenced by the work of their friend and colleague Dr. Jean Houston, a popular New Age author and leader in the Human Potential Movement.³⁹ This, too, served as an important laboratory for Reb Zalman's

37. While Reb Zalman taught and mentored a number of Jewish political activists, including Waskow and Rabbi Michael Lerner, founder of *Tikkun* magazine, he did not regularly engage in organizing campaigns or protests. He largely expressed his social and environmental concerns through liturgical and homiletical creativity, as well as his pastoral work. In this regard, he was similar to his mentor, Reverend Howard Thurman (who pastored such figures as Bayard Rustin, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Vernon Jordan). In 2007, ALEPH and the Shalom Center decoupled due to differences in political strategy, especially on how to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Reb Zalman was, at that point, retired and living in Boulder, Colorado.

38. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Roger Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older* (New York: Warner Books, 1995).

39. See Jean Houston, *The Possible Human: A Course in Enhancing Your Physical, Mental, and Creative Abilities* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1997). See also Jessica Grogan, *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture, and the Shaping of the Modern Self* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

still-unfolding psychospiritual thought and life review.⁴⁰ These developments led Reb Zalman to gradually hand over the day-to-day work of building the Renewal Movement to students and colleagues. As part of this process, in 1990 Reb Zalman began working with Rabbi Marcia Prager (a graduate of RRC and privately ordained by Reb Zalman) to create more formal structures for the ordination of rabbis (and later other programs in Jewish leadership), eventually leading to the establishment of the ALEPH Ordination Program in 2002.⁴¹

In 1990, Reb Zalman participated in a historic meeting in Dharamsala, India, between the Dalai Lama and his senior associates and Jewish leaders from North America and Israel. The Tibetan leader, himself entering his golden years, urgently wanted to discuss how Jews had survived their exile for two thousand years. After fleeing the oppressive Chinese regime beginning in 1959, the Tibetan exile community was deeply concerned about the future of their people. How could they best shape a vibrant and lasting diasporic culture? This dialogue, and Reb Zalman's prominent role in it, became the focus of a best-selling book by Rodger Kamenetz called *The Jew in the Lotus*.⁴² The book quickly became a catalyst for Jewish–Buddhist dialogue and the delicate issue of why so many American Jews were involved in Buddhist and Hindu spiritual life. It also helped raise Reb Zalman's profile as a gifted religious teacher and interreligious practitioner.

Within a few years, Reb Zalman was invited to take up the World Wisdom Chair at Naropa University (where he had

40. See Dana Densmore, *Reb Zalman Gathers Figs* (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 2013), which is a study of Reb Zalman's teaching of various biblical texts in the Wisdom School retreats.

41. Email correspondence with Rabbi Marcia Prager, Director and Dean of Ordination Programs for ALEPH (September 17, 2019). See also <https://aleph.org/history-of-the-aleph-ordination-program>.

42. Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994). See, more recently, Kamenetz's introduction to *Wisdom from Reb Zalman*, 13–21.

previously taught as visiting faculty in 1975), the only accredited Buddhist-inspired university in the Western Hemisphere. Naropa University (then the Naropa Institute) became Reb Zalman's new teaching home. By the time of his retirement in 2004, he had influenced thousands of students and spiritual seekers from different backgrounds and commitments. He also became a beloved figure in the Boulder Jewish and interreligious communities, praying at several of the local synagogues (of different affiliations), teaching and mentoring clergy, and participating in various cultural and civic events. Reb Zalman (dubbed the Cyber Rebbe in the 1990s) also made extensive use of digital communication to teach and counsel people around the world.⁴³

In 2004, Reb Zalman also participated in the Vancouver Peace Summit, where he dialogued with Nobel laureates, the Dalai Lama, and Bishop Desmond Tutu. That same year, he cofounded the Inayati-Maimuni Order with his student and coauthor, Netanel Miles-Yépez, reviving the medieval Sufi-Jewish teachings of Rabbi Avraham Maimuni⁴⁴ (1186–1237), and bringing the Hasidic lineage of the Ba'al Shem Tov into dialogue with the universal Sufi lineage of Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927).⁴⁵ The following year, Reb Zalman made a pilgrimage to Eastern Europe with his youngest son, where they visited the graves of several of the early Hasidic masters, including the Ba'al Shem Tov. There, the aging rabbi prayed that the Neo-Hasidic

43. A futurist with a lifelong love for machinery, Reb Zalman regularly tinkered with computers and related gadgets, and used digital metaphors in his later teachings.

44. On this fascinating medieval figure, see Elisha Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

45. See Miles-Yépez's reflection on this experience, in "Foreword: The Merging of Two Oceans." Hazrat Inayat Khan was the founder of the lineage of universalist Sufism, as well as the Sufi Order (1918) and the Sufi Movement (1923). He initially came to the West as an Indian classical musician.

activities he and his students undertook would be grafted onto the Hasidic tree rooted in this legendary healer and leader.⁴⁶

As Reb Zalman grew older, it became increasingly important to him and his students and supporters to both preserve and disseminate his many teachings. This led to an intensive period of writing, editing, and cataloging of his work. With the aid of several cowriters and editors, he published numerous works in English and Hebrew in the last two decades of his life. In 2012, he was awarded the National Jewish Book Award for *Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer* (written with Joel Segel), and the University of Colorado (Boulder) established a multimedia archive and exhibit dedicated to his life and work.⁴⁷

In 2012, Reb Zalman was also awarded an honorary doctorate from the Starr King School for the Ministry in Oakland, California, and gave a popular series of lectures on the “Emerging Cosmology” as a part of the school’s inaugural symposium, “Living in the Differences.”

In 2014, he was again awarded an honorary doctorate, this time by Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts.⁴⁸ Shortly thereafter, he traveled to Connecticut to lead a *Shavuot* (Feast of Weeks or Pentecost) retreat at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. After this retreat, he fell ill with pneumonia. He recovered sufficiently to return home to Boulder, Colorado, where he passed away peacefully in his sleep on Thursday, July 3, 2014. Reb Zalman was survived by his wife and teaching partner, Eve Ilsen, eleven children, and many grandchildren and great grandchildren.

46. See Reb Zalman’s reflection on this experience in “Grafting to the Ba’al Shem Tov’s Tree,” in Chapter 6 of this volume.

47. <https://archives.colorado.edu/repositories/2/resources/1661>. Materials in the collection were previously gathered by Naropa and Temple Universities, with the support of the Reb Zalman Legacy Project of the Yesod Foundation.

48. Arthur Green is the founding dean of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School; several other members of its faculty and student body studied with or were mentored by Reb Zalman.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

As editors we faced several challenges in assembling this volume. How were we to present the essential teachings of a spiritual polymath with broad and evolving interests to a diverse multi-faith readership? Compounding this matter was the challenge of presenting an oral master and associative thinker in writing. Like many of his Hasidic forbears, Reb Zalman felt more comfortable sharing his *Torah* in the presence of an audience, using his sharp mind, quick wit, and interpersonal sensitivity to connect with those he was addressing. Further, while he produced a rather large written corpus, the quality of his writing was uneven, and he worked with a number of different cowriters and editors over several decades. Given the diversity of the material and differences in style, how were we to find one cohesive voice to present?

In the end, we attempted to identify those ideas, stories, and lessons that were either foundational to, or most prominent in, his work. Further, we favored accessible and relatively brief texts or extracts that convey big ideas or that highlight unique aspects of Reb Zalman's thought and life journey. We also tended to choose pieces he produced or reproduced in the last decades of his life, when he spent increased time focusing on his written legacy.

To help the reader ground her exploration of a given topic, we begin each chapter with a thematic introduction and, in some cases, a few questions for reflection. We also include brief introductions to individual pieces that we thought might otherwise be difficult for the general reader to navigate. Finally, there are many footnotes throughout the volume, including suggestions for further reading, and a glossary of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Yiddish terms. Our objective is to provide a compelling introduction to Reb Zalman's core teachings, appealing to a variety of readers. We seek to present the insights of an imaginative and nonlinear religious thinker (who was *also* attracted to various mystical and psychological mappings), with a gift for

synthesizing a broad range of sources and ideas. The eight chapters in this volume, therefore, focus on both the theoretical and practical dimensions of Reb Zalman's expansive vision for contemporary Jewish and spiritual life.

The first chapter, "Our Changing Relationship with God," is dedicated to an exploration of Reb Zalman's reflections on theology, including his advice to contemporary seekers who find God-talk to be frustratingly abstract or rigidly dogmatic. Rather than give up on the enterprise, he invites the reader to enter into the discussion humbly and creatively, knowing that it will always involve more questions than answers. Further, he encouraged the seeker to think of their own life experiences as a sacred source for such deliberations alongside those of past theologians, philosophers, and poets.⁴⁹ In so doing, Reb Zalman shares his own attempts to name the ineffable reality he experiences, with acute awareness of the limits of language and cognition.

Chapter 2, "The Spiritual Path and the Terrain of the Soul," features Reb Zalman's views on spiritual development, including his insights from both Jewish mystical and modern psychological sources. As a spiritual counselor and mentor, Reb Zalman had an abiding interest in helping guide people in the search for meaning and purpose, whether they were beginners or more advanced seekers. Throughout his career he worked to refine his

49. As previous scholars have noted, Reb Zalman's prioritization of subjective human experience and his suspicion of grand theological systems are characteristic of many postmodern thinkers. Scott Kommel Meyers offers a helpful summary of recent scholarly discussions about Reb Zalman's thought in the context of New Age and postmodern thought, as well as the influence of American pragmatism. See Scott Kommel Meyers, "Religion of Reason in the New Age: Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Hermann Cohen, and Messianic Politics" (MA thesis, 2017), *Religious Studies Graduate Theses & Dissertations*, #45, 4–11, https://scholar.colorado.edu/rilst_gradetds/45. As Reb Zalman notes in various writings, he was also influenced in this regard by various Jewish mystical sources on the unique spiritual makeup of the individual (including the origin of one's soul). See, for example, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1990), 316–18.

craft as a contemporary *rebbe*, weaving together old world and New Age knowledge and practice.

In Chapter 3, “The Sacred Work of Prayer and Meditation,” we turn to Reb Zalman’s reflections on *davvenology* (*davven* is Yiddish for prayer) as he called it, including his teachings on the setting of intentions (*kavvanot*), musical selections, liturgical creativity, and different meditative techniques (ancient and modern) to be used during the traditional hours for prayer and at other times. Given the centrality of this subject to Reb Zalman’s life and work, this chapter is among the longest in the collection.

Chapter 4 is an extension of this discussion about religious devotion, as Reb Zalman, like so many of his mentors, believed that one of the primary goals of *tefillah* (prayer in Hebrew) is to help the devotee live prayerfully, with devotional focus in the world. It is for this reason that we named this chapter “Sacred Living: Time, Space, Person,” using the nomenclature of the ancient mystical tract, *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Formation) to explore Reb Zalman’s insights on fashioning a holistic Jewish life.

In Chapter 5, entitled “Jewish Renewal and Paradigm Shift,” we take a step back, as it were, to see how Reb Zalman understood his work as both an inheritor and an innovator. Beginning in the mid-1960s he began to feel the need to adapt and update the Jewish tradition based on the shifting tides of history, technology, and human consciousness. In addition to the several more theoretical pieces on Renewal, we also include a few concrete examples of his approach to Jewish life in the new (or emerging) paradigm. These pieces complement and bookend the selections on praxis in Chapter 4.

Chapter 6, “Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism,” features Reb Zalman’s reflections on his experiences with and understanding of the world of Eastern European Hasidism. This includes recollections from his days in HaBaD, interpretations of Hasidic homilies and tales, and his thoughts on the relationship between Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism. By exploring these texts, the reader can see how his formation as a *HaBaDnik* both shaped him as

a religious devotee and moved him to develop his vision of Jewish Renewal. This involved a complicated process of embracing and wrestling with the teachings of his mystical forbears and the spiritual and social norms of contemporary Hasidic life.

While in Chapter 6 we turn inward to explore Reb Zalman's relationship to Hasidism, in Chapter 7, "Deep Ecumenism and the Interreligious Encounter," we move outward to chronicle his journey as an interfaith practitioner and leader with over fifty years of experience in the field. This includes several of Reb Zalman's stories (some of which read like Hasidic tales) about his encounters with people, texts, ideas, and rituals that helped shape (or reshape) him as a seeker and rabbi. Just as Reb Zalman's spiritual hunger led him to HaBaD as a teenager, so too did it lead the young HaBaD rabbi to search for wisdom in other religious traditions beginning in the mid-1940s. His interactions with non-Jewish holy men and women convinced him of the need for ongoing dialogue, study, shared ritual, and joint action in the world.

In the eighth and concluding chapter of the book we turn to Reb Zalman's pioneering work on "Spiritual Eldering." In these selections, the seasoned *rebbe* shares with us what it is like for him to grow old, and his insights about how one can thoughtfully embrace the challenges and possibilities of the "winter" months of one's life. This work is not only addressed to seniors but to *all* readers who wish to be more intentional in thinking about the human life cycle.

We are delighted to open and close this volume with personal reflections from four distinguished religious leaders and scholars, all of whom knew Reb Zalman well and interacted with him in different and overlapping contexts. Because he was such a warm and outgoing person, we felt compelled to include these testimonials alongside Reb Zalman's teachings and reflections. Given his passionate commitment both to Jewish renewal and interreligious dialogue, we invited writers from Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist communities.

Like many other creative and pioneering figures, Reb Zalman grew and changed significantly over his long and fertile career—sometimes gradually and sometimes in faster bursts. A charismatic and passionate teacher, he was able to tap into the needs and interests of a generation of seekers yearning for a creative shift in consciousness. His curiosity and creativity led him to explore an array of intellectual and spiritual sources and experiences. At the same time, he was deeply committed to utilizing and sharing the treasures of the Jewish tradition, reformatting them, when necessary, for contemporary use. In many ways, this was his particular genius, to build the spiritual technology of the future using the wisdom of the past. —O. N. R. & N. M-Y