Envisioning a Jewish Monastic Community:
Zalman Schachter, Catholicism, and the B’nai Or Fellowship

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Introduction:
Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (d. 2014) was one of the most influential (and often controversial) religious figures in recent North American Jewish history. A person of uncommon curiosity and creativity, he wove together elements of Hasidic and Hippie (and later New Age) culture to establish the Jewish Renewal Movement. He also played a crucial role as a mentor to the founders of Havurat Shalom (Cambridge and Somerville, MA) and the broader Havurah movement. Over the decades, Reb Zalman (a less formal title he preferred) reached a wider swath of the Jewish community (and many non-Jews) through his teaching, public speaking, writing, and his students’ work. In fashioning his Neo-Hasidic, counter-cultural vision, he drew on a broad array of intellectual and spiritual sources, exhibiting what scholars of religions describe as a propensity for “combinative” thought and practice.

Reb Zalman’s approach to Jewish life was deeply influenced by his exploration of other religions. This included both the theoretical study of these phenomena and hands-on engagement with practitioners from several different traditions. Reflecting on his interreligious expeditions, Reb Zalman likened them to different periods in the life of an artist:

… And like Picasso, who had a “blue period,” and this and that kind of period, I had a Catholic period, and I had a Protestant period, and a Hindu period, and Buddhist period, and a Sufi period. And, of course, through this all, I didn’t stop being Hasid and a Jew. It was just as if the flavoring and

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2 This term refers to 20th and 21st 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 Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, editors, A New Hasidism: Roots and Branches [two volumes] (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019).
the accompanying strain—what gave harmony to my melody and gave rhythm to what I was doing—was taken from that other tradition.4

While he saw himself as a “Hasid” and a “Jew” throughout his adult life, the soundtrack of his spiritual journey included musical selections from several other traditions. In meeting with monks, medicine women, and ministers, Reb Zalman had a keen interest in understanding both the spiritual worldviews and embodied practices of the people he encountered. He was also interested in exploring how he might incorporate various teachings and practices from these traditions into Jewish life, and how his non-Jewish interlocuters might adapt various Jewish concepts and rituals into their lives. In his later years, Reb Zalman articulated a robust pluralistic perspective—referring to it as “Deep Ecumenism”5—seeing “sparks” of truth and beauty in many spiritual and humanistic communities. Inspired, in part, by eco-theological writings, he often spoke of the world’s religious traditions as different parts of a global body—“vital organs”—each having a distinct shape and purpose, all interconnected and mutually enriching (when functioning healthfully).6

In this essay, I explore Reb Zalman’s “Catholic period” (c. 1956-1968) and how it shaped his vision of Jewish and interreligious life in the 1960s and beyond. I focus specifically on his encounters with Catholic monks and nuns—the “religious”—including the renowned spiritual writer and social activist, Thomas Merton (d. 1968). As I argue, his engagement with Catholic colleagues and traditions played a decisive role in Schachter’s emerging vision of Judaism and


5 This term was coined by his Christian colleague and friend Matthew Fox. See Fox’s One River, Many Wells: Wisdom Springing from Global Faiths (New York, NY: Tarcher, 2000). On the use of the term “pluralism” (a term used widely in Christian theological circles), and its application to Jewish thought, see Alan Brill, Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 16-30. See, also, Brill’s brief treatment of Reb Zalman’s “mystical pluralism,” pp. 134-137.

6 See, for example, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, “Beyond Jewish Triumphalism,” http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2010/07/beyond-jewish-triumphalism-reb-zalman. Reb Zalman’s use of this metaphor was also influenced by the medieval thinker, Judah Ha-Levi’s (d. 1141) discussion of the world’s religions. One crucial difference is that Reb Zalman rejects Ha-Levi’s theory that the Jewish people are the “heart” of humanity (Kuzari 2, 31:60). See Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi with Rabbi Daniel Siegel, Credo of a Modern Kabbalist (Victoria, BC, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2005), p. 160-161.
religion more broadly. This was manifest concretely in his attempts to create a modern Jewish monastic order, which he called B’nai Or (“Children of Light”). While this project did not emerge as he had originally anticipated, it served as a catalyst and model for the Havurah and Jewish Renewal movements.

In the last several years Reb Zalman has been the subject of number of scholarly studies focused largely on his mature religious thought, the application of his ideas within the Jewish Renewal movement, and the place of Renewal within the broader landscape of American Jewish life and New Age spirituality. Among the most important contributions to this emerging discourse is the work of Shaul Magid, who has explored Reb Zalman’s mystical theology in-depth, situating his ideas within the worlds of Kabbalah, Hasidism, and Neo-Hasidism, as well as pointing out various American intellectual and cultural influences, including Transcendentalism, Pragmatism, Perennial Philosophy, and more. Building on the pioneering work of Magid and others, I turn my attention here to a pivotal chapter in the life of this iconoclastic modern rabbinic figure. This essay is part of a larger project in which I study Reb Zalman’s development as an interreligious practitioner and its implications for his project of Jewish renewal.

**Reb Zalman’s (Re)Introduction to Catholicism:**

Reb Zalman began his interreligious turn in the late 1940’s in Connecticut and continued his explorations in New York and Massachusetts, including a transformative formal educational

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experience at Boston University (1955-1956) with Reverend Howard Thurman⁹ and other Protestant teachers and mentors at the School of Theology. At the time, he was a young HaBaD-Lubavitch rabbi, serving as one of the first shlikhim (“emissaries,” along with Rabbi Shlomo Calebach, d. 1994) of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Scheersohn (d. 1950), and then the seventh Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (d. 1994). Reb Zalman entered the graduate program at BU with the permission of the younger rebbe. Upon completion of his degree in the Psychology of Religion (with a focus on pastoral care), he and his growing family took leave for Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. There, the young rabbi and budding intellectual would serve as B’nai Brith Hillel director and professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Manitoba for almost two decades. He also served on a part-time basis for several years as a rabbi at the local HaBaD synagogue in Winnipeg.

It was at this time that Reb Zalman began to read various Catholic materials carefully. He was particularly attracted to the mystical writings of such medieval figures as Meister Eckhart (d. 1328), Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), and John of the Cross (d. 1591), as well as the modern writers Jacques Maritain (d. 1973) and Thomas Merton (d. 1968). Reb Zalman also began to dialogue with Catholic religious leaders, intellectuals, and activists. While he was deeply moved by his experiences with Thurman and other Protestant teachers and peers in New England and Manitoba, he was particularly drawn to the thick religious lifestyle of Catholics—especially monks and nuns—including the so-called “smells and bells” of Church life. Further, as an evolving Orthodox rabbi and seeker, he identified with their questions about authority and

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tradition as modern practitioners. Reb Zalman still viewed himself in these years as a loyal, if off-beat (or Beatnik), HaBaD Hasid.

Among his most meaningful bridge-building experiences on the icy Canadian plains was forging a relationship with members of the local Trappist community, Our Lady of the Prairies, in St. Norbert, Manitoba (approximately 15 miles outside of Winnipeg). Reb Zalman traced his attraction to the monks back to his first significant encounter with Catholicism as a young adult:

> Ever since I had discovered Eugene Boylan’s inspiring book *Difficulties in Mental Prayer* back in 1948… I had been intrigued by Catholic spiritual insights into prayer. Many of the monks radiated a sense of selfless piety and devotion to God that resonated well with the rabbinic training I had received from Chabad-Lubavitch; participating with the monks in fervently reciting the psalms opened my heart.

Reading the following excerpt from the introduction to Boylan’s slim manual, one can immediately see why it spoke to Reb Zalman and stirred his curiosity about those Catholic women and men who dedicate themselves so intensely to a life of prayer and contemplation:

> Faced with ever-increasing difficulty of leading a holy life on contact with the world… many souls have commenced to examine the state of their spiritual health and to seek means of spiritual advancement. The need for greater spiritual energy has led them to consider especially their prayer, for they have come to realise that prayer is the source of their spiritual strength and the centre of their spiritual life.

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10 I refer to this section of the study as “Reb Zalman’s (Re)Introduction to Christianity” because in his memoir he recalls that among his lasting positive childhood memories was going with his Catholic babysitter to a local church in Vienna (c. 1930). See Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir*, with Edward Hoffman (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), pp. 10-11. Sadly, in an interview I conducted with his sister, Devorah (Schachter) Keifer (December 30, 2018), she stated that this same babysitter became a Nazi sympathizer just a few years after the incident described by her older brother. Reb Zalman does not mention this development in his memoir. I think he omitted this piece of the story because as an advocate of interreligious engagement, he did not want to taint the narrative about his childhood attraction to Christianity by including the darker epilogue about his caretaker’s betrayal.

11 One issue I wish to explore in a future study is the extent to which Reb Zalman shared his experiences in Catholic contexts with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, with whom he was still in ongoing contact for much of this time period.


Though Boylan, an Irish Trappist monk, certainly did not have Reb Zalman or other Hasidim in mind when he wrote these words in 1943, the young rabbi felt an immediate sense of kinship with the author and the Catholic practitioners the writer was addressing, particularly as Reb Zalman commenced his Jewish outreach efforts in New England after many years of more cloistered life in the HaBaD community. Now, more than ever, he would need to fortify his prayer life and strengthen his relationship with God as he sought to mentor young Jewish students in the immediate years following the devastation of the Holocaust. Fueled by messianic fervor within the HaBaD community, Reb Zalman carried out his work with great urgency and longing.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Reb Zalman still viewed his rabbinic work largely through what he later termed a “restorationist” lens. He viewed it as his mission to restore as much of the lost or vanishing world of Eastern European Hasidism as was possible on American soil. However, through his interreligious encounters, he became increasingly interested in exploring how Jews and Judaism might be enriched, and enrich others, through interactions with practitioners and sources from various religious and cultural communities. In time, this shift in consciousness (or “paradigm shift” as he later referred to it) would cause him to fundamentally rethink his understanding of the relationship of Judaism to Christianity and to the world as a whole. This was a cornerstone of his mature thought and leadership.

As Reb Zalman notes, part of his attraction to the Trappists was based on the fact that they did not simply engage in disciplined ritual lives, but like the Hasidim dedicated significant time and energy exploring their inner lives—the mysterious relationship between the human soul, the Divine, and the world—and the ways in which prayer and other contemplative exercises can serve to inspire, guide, and renew the devotee’s relationship with God and creation. As Reb

15 Boylan’s quotation could be described as a Catholic “restorationist” statement, as he emphasizes the difficulty of maintaining a life of holiness in the modern secular world. In fact, one could characterize the rabbi’s initial reading of this manual as a textual encounter between a Jewish and a Catholic restorationist.
16 Throughout the 1960’s, 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 towards sexuality and gender in contemporary North American culture. His move towards a liberal devotional lifestyle gained greater momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
Zalman writes, the brothers “radiated a sense of selfless piety and devotion to God” that grew out of, and further nurtured, their prayer lives. Commenting on the life of the Trappist monk, a later abbot of Our Lady of the Prairies, Dom Marcel Carbotte, writes: “It is in preferring nothing whatever to Christ that the monk finds happiness and makes him persevere in a life that is ordinary, obscure, and laborious.” This devotional posture, which emanates from tefilah (prayer) and infuses all of one’s daily activities—sacred and profane—was similar to the Hasidic notion of avodat Hashem (worship of and service to God) the rabbi sought to embody as a HaBaD devotee. In both communities there is a fundamental understanding that one’s “mental” state is determinative in shaping a life of holiness.\(^\text{17}\) Though life may be “laborious” or worse at times, the spiritual seeker can discover God’s renewing (or saving) presence in the midst of the struggle.

In relation to this subject, Reb Zalman shared the following source of Catholic textual inspiration:

> By this time [c. 1960], I was also well acquainted with the writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola—especially the “Loyola Method” for inner development, as presented in his classic book *Spiritual Exercises*…\(^\text{18}\) The story that most impressed me about his life was this: A new pope was installed in Rome after Ignatius had founded the Jesuit Society in 1540, approved by the late Pope Paul III—and there was a danger that it might be disbanded. So someone asked him, “Ignatius, what will you do if they disband the Jesuit Society?” He swiftly replied, Fifteen minutes in the oratory, and it’s all the same to me.”\(^\text{19}\)

For the rabbi, this story was a powerful model of how an experienced devotee can develop an awareness of the Divine through prayer and contemplation (whether in an oratory or shiteibel) that can carry him through good times and bad, “no matter what happens in this conflicted world.”\(^\text{20}\) This story immediately reminded the rabbi of the biblical phrase, “I place God before

\[^{17}\] For a sampling of such texts, see Or N. Rose with Ebn D. Leader, translators and editors, *God in All Moments: Mystical & Practical Spiritual Wisdom from Hasidic Masters* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Press, 2003).

\[^{18}\] St. Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556) was a Spanish Basque Catholic priest and co-founder of the Society of Jesus—the Jesuits—becoming its first leader in 1541. He is remembered as a gifted spiritual director. He recorded his method in the classic treatise *Spiritual Exercises* (1548), which includes prayers, meditations, and exercises.


\[^{20}\] Ibid.
me always (Psalm 16:8),” which Hasidim commonly utilize as a focal point for meditation during prayer and at other times.\textsuperscript{21}

In this context it is important to take note of the word “Difficulties” in the title of Boylan’s book. Hasidic literature includes many teachings about \textit{mahshavot zarot}, “alien” or distracting “thoughts” that impede a person from serving God with proper intention and attention. As Joseph Dan writes,

Hasidim believe that evil thoughts (\textit{mahashavot zarot}) and inclinations that haunt a person, especially during worship, contain spiritual energy that originally emanated from the divine realms of goodness and were disfigured in the lower world. The task of the Hasid is neither to ignore this energy nor to overcome it, but rather to elevate it to its source and transform it back into goodness, thus strengthening the powers of good and weakening those of evil.\textsuperscript{22}

Like the Hasidim, Catholic monks and nuns spend much of their energy examining their thoughts and emotions—both in prayer and in daily life—seeking to align their hearts and minds with the will of Christ.

Reb Zalman was both impressed and shocked to learn that there were non-Jews interested in exploring the psycho-spiritual dimensions of the religious life (including the obstacles), because the only Jews he knew who were deeply engaged in such matters were Hasidim, and among Hasidim it was the HaBaD community, he believed, that did so in the most nuanced ways.\textsuperscript{23} If that was the case within the Jewish community, how could it be that there were non-Jews who

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\item One can find artistic representations of this verse and accompanying symbolic imagery (often with mystical and magical associations) on wall-hangings and plaques in synagogues as well as in prayer books. See, https://magnes.berkeley.edu/collections/shiviti-plaques.
\item See, Joseph Dan, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hasidism/Teachings_and_Literature#id0bkr. Italics added for emphasis.
\item From its inception the HaBaD school was envisioned as an intellectually-rigorous form of Hasidism with a sophisticated set of teachings on theology, worship, and spiritual development. See, Naftali Lowenthal, \textit{Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the HaBaD School} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and Rachel Elior, \textit{The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism} (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993). Its post-Holocaust evolution into a mass movement, including an aggressive outreach agenda, represents a significant ideological shift. While HaBaD mushroomed under the leadership of Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson (d. 1994), the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, it was his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn (d. 1950), who first initiated the outreach campaign. See Samuel Heilman, \textit{Who Will Lead Us}, pp. 228-237.
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were dedicated to discussions of *hitbonenut* (contemplation), *devekut*, ("cleaving” or intimacy with God), and *mahashavot zarot*?24 This question remained with Reb Zalman for many years and played a key role in his development as a religious pluralist. In an interview I conducted with him on the occasion of his eightieth birthday (2006), he described his shifting theological perspective earlier in life as follows:

Here I believed in the workings of Divine providence as Hasidism taught it—*hashgakhah prait*, specific providence—in which even the fall of a leaf is ordained by God. And now I had to face a providential power that produced a Buddha, a Lao Tzu, great souls who were no less *neshamot klaliyot* [inclusive or root souls] than our *rebbe*. Were they an accidental “oops” of God? What about those Nazarene Hasidim who followed Jesus? Didn’t the Bratslav Hasidim also believe in a *rebbe* who no longer lived on earth?25

As Reb Zalman notes, his encounters with compelling texts and practitioners from both Western and Eastern traditions—beginning with Father Boylan’s prayer manual—caused him to rethink the spiritual worth of these phenomena. It is interesting to see how the young rabbi was trying to address this challenge using Hasidic and other classical Jewish theological constructs: Did God, in His providential workings, intend for these diverse religious developments across space and time? Were the founders of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity truly gifted spiritual masters—*rebbe*—in their own right? Might certain manifestations of Christianity—“Nazarene Hasidism”—and Judaism actually hold theological similarities?26 He did not ponder these questions alone but chose to explore them in relationship with non-Jewish devotees, both through dialogue and shared practice. As he mentioned in a quotation cited above, he found it particularly meaningful to join the Catholic religious in chanting psalms, as it is a staple of both Jewish *and*

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26 The early Bratslav circle was derided by various opponents for its fierce loyalty to their *rebbe* after his passing. In fact, this small group was known scathingly as the “dead Hasidim.” To this day, Nahman is the one and only tzaddik in the history of the community, with many adherents awaiting his future messianic return. See Ada Rapoport-Alpert, “Bratslav Hasidism,” in *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Eastern Europe*, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bratslav_Hasidism](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bratslav_Hasidism). See, also, Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), in which he explores theological affinities between various Christian and Hasidic thinkers, including Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.
Christian devotional life, and thus could serve as a liturgical bridge between the two communities. In fact, in his memoir he describes the following psalms-centered encounter as a crucial moment in his development as an interreligious practitioner:

Call it serendipity. It must have been around 1960. I had just completed a stimulating ecumenical weekend at a college in Northridge, Minnesota, after visiting my friend Max Ticktin, the Hillel rabbi at the University of Wisconsin, Madison… As I was boarding my airplane, I noticed a nun getting on before me; back in that era, they typically traveled in pairs, but this one was alone. Once we were aboard the airplane, as the attendant ambled by my seat, I handed her my calling card and said, “Could please ask the sister if I may talk with her?” The flight attendant agreeably did so, and after our takeoff, the sister invited me to come over—and we talked.27

As it turns out, the nun, Mother Claudia, was a senior figure in the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion in Western Canada. This order was originally founded by the French siblings Theodor and Alphonse Ratisbonne (19th-century), who were converts from Judaism to Catholicism, and who actively sought to convert Jewish children. Recognizing the origins of this order, and that in this “pre-Vatican II era”28 the Catholic Church was still “officially praying for the conversion of world Jewry,” he was very uncomfortable—“I could have pulled the ejector seat.” Nonetheless, he entered into conversation with Mother Claudia. Soon, it was time for the nun to perform her Office,29 and she began to recite the appropriate section of psalms. Without missing a beat, Reb Zalman took out his siddur (prayer book) and began chanting in Hebrew with her! His instincts

28 The Second Vatican Council (or Vatican II) was convened by Pope John XXIII on October 11, 1962 and was drawn to a close by Pope Paul VI on December 8, 1965. Among the most significant outcomes of these historic deliberations was the Church’s dissemination of the document Nostra Aetate (“In Our Time”), which proclaims the need to foster “mutual understanding and respect” between Christians and Jews; denies that the Jewish people is responsible for the death of Jesus Christ; condemns the notion that Jews are “rejected or accursed by God”; and “decries” all forms of “anti-Semitism.” Taken together, these statements reflected a profound change in Church doctrine over the centuries. See the official English translation of Nostra Aetate here: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html. See, also, John Connelly, From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews (1933–1965) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), and Charles L. Cohen, Paul F. Knitter, and Ulrich Rosenhagen, editors, The Future of Interreligious Dialogue: A Multireligious Conversation on Nostra Aetate (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).
29 The Divine Office (Latin: Officium Divinum), often referred to as the Breviary, is the official set of daily prayers in the Roman Catholic Church (and observed in different ways in other Christian communities). It consists primarily of psalms and is supplemented by hymns, readings and other prayers. See, http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgy-of-the-hours.
for interreligious communication had clearly developed through his earlier interactions with Howard Thurman and other “technicians of the spirit.”

As a result of this unusual travel experience, he reports that “there and then we became friends.” Clearly, the experience of finding liturgical common ground and engaging in meaningful conversation with a leader from an order that had once been dedicated to converting Jews was deeply moving to Reb Zalman. In this interaction he saw a glimmer of hope for Jewish-Catholic relations based on a new ethos of mutual respect and opportunities for dialogical engagement, including specific forms of shared worship. Exactly how long it took for this friendship to blossom or how close the two became I do not know, but it did mark the beginning of a long-standing relationship between Reb Zalman and the Sisters of Sion in Winnipeg.

Interestingly, in 1962 Merton wrote to his Jewish friend about how powerful—“hair-raising”—it was for him to sit on the porch of the hermitage at Gethsemani and sing “chapters and chapters of the Prophets in Latin out over the valley.” In response, upon his next visit to the monastery Schachter-Shalomi asked Merton to sit together on that same porch and recite the psalms in Latin and Hebrew.

I wish to add that part of what led Reb Zalman to seek out friendships with Catholic colleagues in Winnipeg is that in his role as Hillel rabbi and professor at the University of Manitoba he spent much of his time engaging young people in Jewish life (social, intellectual, and spiritual). And as the rabbi at the one small Lubavitch synagogue in the city, he served a community of mostly unlearned, non-Hasidic Jews, seeking to inspire, teach, and support them pastorally. While he had cordial relationships, including some friendships, with the half dozen or so other local rabbis, these men (all men at the time) were not interested in or capable of engaging in discussion about the spiritual and psychological subjects that he was pursuing so energetically at

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30 An expression Reb Zalman often used to describe outstanding non-Jewish religious practitioners and leaders.
31 Ibid., p. 108.
32 Ibid., pp. 107-108. My father, Rabbi Dr. Neal Rose, Schachter-Shalomi’s younger colleague in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, taught several of the nuns for decades. In fact, among my earliest (inter)religious memories are Sabbath and Passover meals at which the Sisters joined us in our family home (mid-1970’s), engaging with my parents and older siblings in long conversations about the symbols and practices of our respective traditions.
the time. This led him to strike up friendships with local Jesuit, Trappist, and other Christian practitioners who were also knowledgeable and passionate about issues of theology; religious experience; ritual practice; and human development. Had he been living in a larger, more sophisticated Jewish community, he may have turned to other rabbis and Jewish intellectuals for support and friendship (as he did from a distance with colleagues and mentors from HaBaD, Hillel, and the academy). Still, given his growing interest in and appreciation for other religions and interreligious dialogue, it is more than likely that he would have sought out non-Jewish religious companions wherever he found himself. His location in this somewhat remote Midwestern Canadian city intensified his need for spiritual companionship.35

A “Dialogue of Devotion”: Schachter & Merton
Between 1960-1968, Reb Zalman developed a close friendship with the renowned Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton (d. 1968). The two men communicated largely through an exchange of personal letters and published and unpublished writings, as well as several in-person meetings.36 The primary point of connection for these religious leaders was a shared belief in the power of contemplative practice—prayer, meditation, chant, etc.—to help one cultivate an intimate relationship with God and refine her character. Both were intense spiritual seekers and gifted autodidacts with a passionate desire to share their insights and guide others in their quest for the sacred. While Merton and Schachter were deeply engaged in their respective religious traditions, they met during a time when each was also intensely involved in interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue and study. In fact, their friendship could not have blossomed a decade earlier, since both the monk and the rabbi were still intensely focused on their growth as practitioners and leaders within their particular communities and were not yet interested in or prepared for significant engagement with the religious other. However, by the time the two met face-to-face for the first time in 1962, they each had developed meaningful relationships with religious devotees from several different traditions, as well as with secular intellectuals, artists, and therapists. Further, while both men were critical of various aspects of contemporary

35 My thanks to Carol Rose for her insights on this matter.
American culture, they also saw great promise in it, especially within the emerging
counterculture of the day. The following statement by Shaul Magid about Merton applies equally
well to his younger rabbinic colleague:

His assessment of modernity is not apocalyptic—he doesn’t see modernity
as the darkness which precedes the eschatological dawn. Rather, he sees the
awakened sparks of holiness around him, in the civil rights and anti-
Vietnam War movements, in democracy, in… Haight Ashbury and
Greenwich Village and in the spiritual renaissance from the East as all
bearing the potential of a new era.  

Merton and Schachter each searched for the sacred in idiosyncratic ways, seeking to integrate
insights from these different realms into their evolving visions of Judaism and Christianity.

While neither of these men were assigned by their order or sect to engage in interreligious
initiatives, they both felt compelled to do so for their own personal growth and for the healing of
their communities and the wider society. This was, of course, shaped in part by the recent horrors
of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the unfolding Cold War, as well as the long history
of Jewish-Christian animus. But they were also both deeply curious individuals, with abiding
interests in religious thought and praxis. Over the course of several years, Schachter and Merton
developed a friendship rooted in a common desire to live intensive and intentional devotional
lives as modern Western practitioners and guides. This included discussion of sacred practice,
human development, theology, and social and political life. As Edward Kaplan has noted, as
their relationship deepened their correspondence was marked by greater intimacy and comfort
sharing their struggles with “self-transformation” in service of God and community.  

In describing his friendship with Merton, Schachter wrote that he and Father Louis (as he was
called by his fellow monks) were both interested in “the upaya (Sanskrit, literally meaning
“means to an end”)—the ‘skillful means’ that people use for their transformation.” Using Jewish
and Christian terminology, the rabbi adds that they sought to better understand what would help

37 Shaul Magid, “Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thomas Merton: Heretics of Modernity,“ Conservative Judaism,
38 See, Edward K. Kaplan, “Personal Bridges, Spiritual Communities: The Correspondence of Thomas Merton
with tikkun ha’midot (“repair” or refinement of one’s traits) and conversatio morum (“fidelity” to or a deepening of one’s monastic vows), with the fundamental question being, “How do I move from my ‘is’ to my ‘ought’?”

In Merton’s first letter to Reb Zalman, he wrote the following about the struggle to make this existential shift:

*The First Step* [Schachter’s early meditation manual] seems to me to be very practical and well done, and I especially like the work of Rabbi Nahman and his message of fervor and hope. Too often today the idea of “hope” is presented in a totally untheological and secular form, as a kind of pious optimism that “everything will be all right,” presumably because it is the nature of things to be all right. But as we know, it is not exactly the nature of things to be all right, since man has a way of following his sinful will in strange directions, and causes have effects.

Given the vicissitudes of the human spirit, both men felt that prayer and contemplative practice were essential tools for personal and communal transformation.

Merton gives eloquent voice to the urgent need for such disciplines in the face of a world suffering from violence and warfare:

> Prayers and sacrifice must be used as the most effective spiritual weapons in the war against war, and like all weapons they must be used with deliberate aim: not just with a vague aspiration for peace and security, but against violence and against war. This implies that we are also willing to sacrifice and restrain our own instinct for violence and aggressiveness in our relations with other people. We may never succeed in this campaign, but whether we succeed or not, the duty is evident. It is the great Christian task of our time. Everything else is secondary, for the survival of the human race itself depends upon it.

While less politically-oriented, among Schachter’s highest priorities as a religious leader was to

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open people, including those new to or on the margins of Jewish religious life, to the transformative power of prayer and other forms of Jewish sacred practice. As Arthur Green writes,

Zalman understood and taught that Hasidism was primarily a devotional mysticism, and he made sure that neo-Hasidism was that as well. Its focus, and his, was all on worship. Abstract truths, theological formulations, were all well and good. But then Zalman would ask: “But can you *daven* (pray) it?” By this he meant two things. First: Do you really mean it? Are you saying it with your whole heart? But beyond that: Does it have a devotional quality to it? Can you say it in a worshipful way? Can you serve God with it?  

Throughout his long and storied career, Reb Zalman undertook a wide variety of liturgical experiments to help people discover and/or express their truths and strengthen their relationship to Judaism. One example that emerged directly from his encounters with monastic peers were his innovations at Camp Ramah in Connecticut in the summer of 1962. In his capacity as “religious environmentalist,” Schachter introduced several Catholic-inspired activity centers, including a “scriptorium” for making mezuzah inserts, a “tallissarium” for making tallitot, and a “hermitage” where campers could retreat with a siddur and a “spiritual journal.”

It is no surprise, therefore, that in his first in-person meeting with Merton in 1962, the rabbi engaged his host in a conversation about contemplative practice:

The first topic I wanted to discuss concerned the real differences between meditation and contemplation. Nowadays, thanks to the New Age movement of the 1980s, everything involving the mind is simplistically dubbed “meditation” … But in those days, especially among Catholics, the religious language was precise and clear. Meditation was discursive reflection, and contemplation was something that moved away from words…”

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43 See, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, p. 141. As Reb Zalman notes, this began a long series of “do-it-yourself” Jewish sacred art projects with youth and young adults. This eventually helped inspire the creation of the *Jewish Catalogue* series.

44 Ibid., p. 157. For a helpful discussion of these matters in Merton’s thought, see the entry on “Contemplation” in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, pp. 79-84.
Interestingly, while Reb Zalman wished to discuss with Merton the differences between these modalities, Father Louis was careful to remind his students not to become overly fixated on their contemplative techniques, but to attune their hearts and minds to God’s presence in their lives. Paul Quenon, a Trappist monk and writer who was a novice under Father Louis at Gethsemani, wrote the following about his mentor:

The most important thing he taught me was how to love God and how to be true in the presence of God. Not to fake it, just to be yourself… Mostly he taught by example… We [monks] live in a sort of Montessori school. You have a conditioned environment and then out of that grows spontaneous reflection, meditation, gratitude, prayer.  

Because Merton and his fellow monks lived in a highly structured and intentional religious environment—a Catholic “Montessori school”—he wanted to make sure that his students (and readers, more broadly) did not lose sight of the aim of these practices: namely, to open themselves to the Holy Spirit. We see this same sensibility on display in the following 1965 letter from Merton to Abdul Aziz, a Muslim (Sufi) interlocutor with whom he corresponded many times between 1960-1968:

Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love… it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension and realizing Him as all. My prayer tends very much to what you call fana [self-negation]. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God… If I am still “myself” this I recognize as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle.

This description of the quest for unio mystica, of unity with God, is by no means a simple matter, but Merton’s description of this process does not involve a complicated set of practices (chanting, breathing, physical movement, etc.). Rather, the devotee humbly and passionately reaches out to the Infinite, acknowledging that only God, through an act of grace, can usher the

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46 Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 63-64.
human seeker across the threshold into an experience of oneness.\(^{47}\)

While Reb Zalman certainly identified with this mode of contemplative prayer—using such Jewish mystical terms as *bittul ha-yesh* (self-nullification) and *Ayin* (“Infinity,” Nothingness) in his own teaching and writing\(^{48}\)—he was also excited to compare and contrast various exercises in greater detail with his new colleague and friend. I think this was especially important to him because the rabbi was no longer living in a highly structured religious environment, as he once did as a yeshiva student. Further, relative to other Hasidic streams, the HaBaD school developed a complex set of teachings on prayer and contemplation.\(^{49}\) While Reb Zalman certainly valued his freedom, he also craved spiritual companionship and the opportunity to explore spiritual methods with other seasoned practitioners. It seems that Merton also valued this aspect of their friendship, particularly since he, like Reb Zalman, spent a good deal of time guiding beginners along the spiritual path. Father Louis actually invited the rabbi to address the novices when Reb Zalman visited Gethsemani in August 1962. Appropriately, one of the topics he spoke about in his informal (and elliptical) presentation on holiness was the relationship between fixed liturgy (*keva*) and personal intention (*kavannah*) in Jewish prayer.\(^{50}\)

Reb Zalman and Merton did not carry out their friendship in a vacuum but interacted at the very same time as the historic Second Vatican Council was unfolding in Rome (1962-1965). Just as the monk and the rabbi were discussing questions of liturgical tradition and innovation, so were the hundreds of Catholic officials involved in Vatican II, and many others leading up to and following this historic convening. In an effort to be more responsive to modernity, Catholic leaders in the United States and elsewhere were experimenting with a number of changes. The most significant, perhaps, was reciting the Mass in the vernacular instead of upholding the longstanding tradition of doing so only in Latin. As part of their private discussions, Reb Zalman and Merton spoke about the various liturgical changes unfolding in the Catholic Church. One

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\(^{47}\) Interestingly, Merton does not mention Jesus Christ at all in this description of his prayer practice. This may have been a conscious decision—like his use of the Arabic term “*fana*”—based on his desire to connect with his Muslim companion, for whom Christological language might have been off-putting.

\(^{48}\) See, for example, Reb Zalman’s “The First Step,” which he self-published in 1958.


\(^{50}\) My thanks to Netanel Miles-Yépez for sharing this private recording with me.
development that concerned them was a decreased focus on the personal practices of lay people. As the rabbi states,

... [N]ow, post-Vatican II (1963), the church in the name of modernism had stripped away the little sancta (holy practices) that... ordinary people used to have. Hardly anyone was doing the rosary anymore, there weren’t novenas, everything had been turned into the “Big Bertha”—the Mass—and even that had lost its splendor and greatness.

It is not surprising that these two men, both deeply attentive to the role of spiritual exercises in the formation of an individual, were concerned that these “little,” but potentially powerful rituals were falling out of use. Reb Zalman adds that Father Louis was hopeful that nascent efforts by Catholic monks to share lesser-known contemplative practices with clergy and laity might be helpful in these changing times. Inspired by Vatican II, Merton’s writings, as well as the teachings of earlier Christian devotees, three Trappist monks from St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts—Fathers William Menninger, Basil Pennigton, and Thomas Keating—developed the Centering Prayer movement over the next few generations, reaching large numbers of Christians and other seekers. In good rabbinc fashion, Reb Zalman suggested to Merton (and later to his friend Father Keating) that the Trappists consider creating a “lay tertiary order” (in addition to vowed Cistercian men and women) that would develop “home rituals.”

While the specific suggestion is predictable coming from a HaBaD educator (however unconventional) who was working creatively to engage more Jews in ritual life, it was highly unusual that a rabbi—from any branch of Judaism—would be both knowledgeable and invested enough in the spiritual wellbeing of the Catholic community to engage in such a discussion. Reb Zalman was also a refugee from Nazi-occupied Europe, where the Catholic Church did far too little to stand against Hitler and his killing machines. Nonetheless, this unusual Jewish seeker felt that there was substantive, potentially redemptive, work to be done by Jew and Christians willing

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51 The Rosary is a string of beads used for counting a fixed set of prayers related to the Christian revelatory story (the fifteen “mysteries). Novenas are nine days of prayer focused on a specific intention emerging from the nine days of concentrated prayer between the Ascension of Christ and the Descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 1:2).
52 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Merton and Judaism: Holiness in Words, p. 305.
53 For an overview of the development of this movement, see: https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/history-centering-prayer.
54 Ibid, p. 306.
to engage in dialogue, study, and action.

While Merton and Reb Zalman were both spreading their interreligious wings when they began to correspond in the winter of 1960, it is important to point out that each did so with deep roots—knowledge and lived experience—in their respective traditions, and a clear sense that they were entering the interreligious sphere as a Jew and as a Catholic. This is different than those seekers who do not necessarily feel attached to a particular tradition—identifying, for example, as “spiritual, but not religious”\(^{55}\)—or who feel a part of more than one community—holding “dual” or “multiple” belonging.\(^{56}\) One such example of this rootedness, is Schachter humorous, but poignant recollection of his first visit to Gethsemani to meet his spiritual “pen-pal”\(^{57}\):

In early 1962, I had eagerly finalized plans to visit Merton at Gethsemani in the upcoming summer. I will [always] remember that August day… It was already evening [when I arrived] and the gate was officially closed… To my dismay, the entrance bell announcing visitors was attached to a rope with a cross at its end. As a Hasidic rabbi, I really didn’t want to grasp the cross, but it was necessary to pull the rope in order to ring the bell. After a moment’s thought, I grabbed the rope above the cross and yanked. The bell instantly rang! Suddenly a Trappist monk emerged from the shadows, where he had obviously been standing silently all along. Striding over, he opened the gate for me and said, smiling, “An interesting solution to a problem of conscience.”\(^{58}\)

As this text demonstrates, while Schachter was excited to make this interreligious pilgrimage, standing at the front gate of Gethsemani he bumped up against a personal religious boundary as a

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\(^{56}\) See, for example, Catherine Cornille, editor, *Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010).

\(^{57}\) Jerry Steinberg, Schachter-Shalomi’s undergraduate student from the University of Manitoba (and future colleague), helped pave the way for the rabbi’s meeting with Merton. At Schachter-Shalomi’s suggestion, Steinberg enrolled in the rabbinical program at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Cincinnati, Ohio. Once Steinberg arrived at HUC-JIR, Schachter-Shalomi recommended that he visit Merton, since the monastery was only a three-hour drive from the campus. Steinberg reports that he was further motivated to make the trip to Gethsemani by his positive experiences studying with members of a Christian fellowship program at his seminary that included several Catholic priests. In a diary entry from November 24, 1960 Steinberg writes that while visiting with Father Louis, he spoke about his beloved spiritual mentor from Winnipeg and said he would send Merton a copy of Schachter-Shalomi’s “First Step” [which he did soon after his visit]. See, Jerry Steinberg, *Rogue Rabbi: A Spiritual Quest—from Seminary to Ashram and Beyond* (Toronto, ON, CA: ECW Press, 2012), pp. 163-168.

\(^{58}\) Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, p. 15
Jew. To be sure, his borders would shift dramatically over time, but on that summer night in 1962 this evolving Hasidic rabbi had to figure out a creative response to a “problem of conscience.”

In his eulogy for Reb Zalman, Arthur Green made the following observation:

The years in Vienna, Antwerp, and Brooklyn had all given him a deep sense that Yiddishkeyt, Judaism, thoroughly belonged to him and he to it. Because of this sense that he had both feet firmly planted in the soil of Jewish tradition, he felt able to stretch, lean forth, and experiment in all sorts of directions without ever fearing he would lose his own sense of self or authenticity.59

This does not mean that he entered the interreligious sphere without anxiety or uncertainty—as the Gethsemani gate story indicates. In fact, many years later the rabbi reported to his student Netanel Miles-Yépez that when he first visited the monastery, he worried (impishly) that should he die while on retreat there, he would cause a minor scandal (shande) in the Jewish world when the hevra kadisha (Jewish burial society) of Cincinnati came to collect his body!60 While spoken with obvious humor, this anecdote demonstrates that Schachter was actively thinking about questions of personal boundaries and communal norms as he ventured deeper into interreligious engagement.61

Interestingly, there has been ongoing discussion among Merton scholars about the intensity with which Father Louis explored Eastern spiritual paths, especially Zen Buddhism, in the last years of his life. Was Merton still, in fact, a faithful Christian? Was he contemplating leaving the monastery? Where would his explorations of other religions lead him next?62 In his memoir, Reb Zalman states the following about his friend’s religious identity in the mid-1960’s:

60 Personal correspondence with Miles-Yépez, January 10, 2019.
62 See, for example, the responses to this question by several of Merton’s colleagues and mentees in Soul Searching, pp. 130-136.

Draft—11/25/2019
NOT FOR CITATION
Do I think Merton was in danger of losing control of his interest in other religions at the end of his life? My answer is a decisive no. The person who is at the growing edge of something—if he has a direct connection to the trunk of the tree—is safe. The trunk is mostly dead wood, but it gives structure to the tree. The growing edge gives life to the tree, and the two of these must be together. I had the sense that Merton did not want to wreck that balance.63

While I agree with Schachter on this point, his response is not surprising given his commitment to the Jewish renewal and his understanding of the need to live on the “growing edge” (a term he adapted from his mentor Howard Thurman) of one’s tradition. As mentioned above, in the last decades of his life the rabbi began to speak of the relationship of the world’s religions in “organismic” terms, describing each tradition as a different part of the body of the planet. For Reb Zalman this meant that each community must maintain its distinct identity (“roots”), while also sharing “nutrients” and working cooperatively (“branches”) for the health and wellness of the planet. Not surprisingly, he felt his interactions with Thomas Merton were vital to his development of this worldview.64

**B’nai Or/Qumran USA:**

As Reb Zalman delved deeply into Catholic thought, cultivating relationships with monks and nuns, he began to dream of the creation of an intentional Jewish community in which prayer and related contemplative activities could serve as the focal point of the group. Just as the Trappists spend many hours a day chanting, singing, and meditating, so would the members of this new group. Further, Reb Zalman hoped that participants would live together in a shared home or in adjoining homes that could be opened (through connected basement doors) for shared events and closed when people desired more privacy. When working in the house on artistic and other “hands-on” projects (including the crafting of various ritual objects) he imagined people dressed in khaki or denim work clothing like the Trappists, but with one important addition: these Jewish garments would include *tzitzit* (fringes). He also speaks of the power of donning a *tallit* (prayer

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64 One matter on which these two men apparently disagreed was the use of psychedelic drugs. Reb Zalman (who fist experimented with LSD in 1963 with Timothy Leary) was at the time an outspoken proponent of the “sacramental” use of the substance, while Merton was skeptical of its spiritual value. I discuss this issue in greater depth in my unpublished article, “The Skillful Means”: Zalman Schachter, Thomas Merton, and Contemplative Practice.”
shawl) and tefillin (prayer boxes or phylacteries) for as much of the day as possible when involved in prayer, meditation, and study.65

In his original manifesto—circulated privately beginning in 1961 and published in the periodical *Jewish Tradition* in 1964—he briefly sketches some basic guidelines for the new collective. In so doing, he references the traditional vows or “evangelical counsels” taken on by those by the Catholic religious: namely, poverty, chastity, and obedience.66 As one might expect, however, he interprets each of these through an idiosyncratic Jewish lens. The most fundamental innovation is that he invites men and women to participate together in the community.67 Regarding poverty he writes, that the goal is for each member of the group to earn enough money to support himself and his family, while reserving several hours each day for *avodat Hashem* (Service to God). Reb Zalman also proposes the creation of a “common treasury”—*hekdesh—for communal needs.68 As for chastity, Reb Zalman explains that when applied in a Jewish context in which procreation is commanded and sexual pleasure widely affirmed by religious authorities (both within the bounds of heterosexual marriage),69 chastity cannot mean “total sexual abstinence.” Rather, it requires that all matters related to sex be carried out “in a manner befitting God’s continual, ever more intense Presence” in a couple’s life.70 Finally, in reference to obedience, the rabbi states that in addition to the usual *halakhic* (Jewish legal) norms of Jewish orthopraxy, the group may

65 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, p. 130. While most traditional Jews only wear these ritual objects during the morning prayer service, there are groups that wear them for longer periods of time during daylight hours. *Tefillin* are only worn on weekdays and not on *Shabbat* and holidays.
66 These three vows were first made in the twelfth century by St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) and his followers, while based on earlier monastic teachings, including St. Benedict’s (d. 547) *Rule of St. Benedict*.
67 While still in his “restorationist” phase, Reb Zalman was beginning to rethink issues of gender, Jewish praxis, and communal norms (law and custom). He would continue to do so for the next several decades, including the ordination of women as rabbis starting in 1981 (Rabbi Leah Novick, [https://ohalah.org/uncategorized/rabbi-leah-novick-founding-member-of-ohalah-to-be-honored-at-boulder/?doing_wp_cron=1390924800.4812979698181152343750](https://ohalah.org/uncategorized/rabbi-leah-novick-founding-member-of-ohalah-to-be-honored-at-boulder/?doing_wp_cron=1390924800.4812979698181152343750)). As Schachter-Shalomi stated repeatedly in my personal conversations with him, his choice to mentor and collaborate with many younger students and seekers required him to engage in ongoing discussion of contemporary religious, social, and political issues. This included regular challenges from these interlocuters, who often pushed him to reconsider his views and behaviors.
also take upon itself other communal responsibilities and restrictions and that “the ultimate arbiter” of such takkanot (legislative enactments)\textsuperscript{71} will be an “overseer chosen by secret ballot by full members of the community.”\textsuperscript{72} Aware of the potential power abuses in this hierarchical arrangement, Reb Zalman closes this section of the proposal by adding that “the overseer’s rule will, God helping, not be a capricious use of power,” and that this person must understand that they are “accountable to God and the community.”\textsuperscript{73}

Interestingly, his vision for this Jewish monastic community was also inspired by the newly-discovered Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran (along the Dead Sea) and related research on the ancient Essene community.\textsuperscript{74} In fact, he took the name B’nai Or from one of the writers of the Scrolls, who saw themselves as bearers of God’s light (or) in a world ensconced in sin.\textsuperscript{75} As Reb Zalman writes, “Although the Trappists, of course, differed from the Essenes in many ways, both groups shared from my perspective an intense commitment to prayer as the foundation of spiritual life.”\textsuperscript{76} For Reb Zalman this devotional focus was already a core part of his religious identity as a Hasid. In fact, part of what made Hasidism such an innovative and controversial movement in the eighteenth-century was the insistence of its founders that prayer was the beating heart of the religious life.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{72} Here, too, he uses Catholic terminology to distinguish between “full members” and “postulants.”
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p. 123.
\textsuperscript{74} The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 11 caves near the Dead Sea site of Khirbet Qumran in 1947. The scrolls date between 250 B.C.E. and 68 C.E. and comprise some 850 Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts in countless fragments. Early scholars contended that the Scrolls were written by an ascetic-mystical Jewish sect living in a settlement at Qumran. Researchers identified them as the Essenes based, in part, on the ancient works of Philo, Josephus, and the Roman writer, Pliny the Elder. There are ongoing academic debates, however, about the authorship of the Scrolls, the nature of the settlement at Qumran, and the relationship of this group and of the texts to Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. See, See, Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).
\textsuperscript{75} Among the texts found in Qumran Cave 1 in 1947 was a manual called The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness, also known as War Rule, Rule of War and the War Scroll. It describes an apocalyptic war in which the Sons of Light do battle against and ultimately vanquish the Sons of Darkness. See, Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls, pp. 368-371. Below, I briefly discuss how Schachter-Shalomi viewed this part of the legacy of the Qumran community in light of the Cold War.
\textsuperscript{76} Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, My Life in Jewish Renewal, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{77} As Arthur Green observes, In early Hasidism, worship, particularly in the form of contemplative prayer, came to be clearly identified as the central focus of the Jew’s religious life. Both the ecstatic outpourings of ordinary people and the highly sophisticated treatments of devotional psychology in the works of the Hasidic masters bear witness to this new and unique emphasis upon the inner life of prayer.
Not surprisingly, early in his rabbinic career as a HaBaD emissary, Reb Zalman decided that American Jewry was in urgent need of a contemporary prayer revival. His time with Merton and other Catholic monks and nuns and contemporaneous scholarly discussions about the ancient Essene community at Qumran—envisioned at the time as a proto-monastic group—strengthened this conviction. As he writes,

I began to realize that mid-twentieth-century American Judaism had much to learn from the ancient community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. It seemed clear that something was truly lacking in… all denominations from Reform through non-Hasidic Orthodox. What specifically? An attention to prayer. It was precisely this attention that the Trappists demonstrated so convincingly to me.

As a response to this spiritual crisis (outside of Hasidism according to his early diagnosis), Reb Zalman envisioned the creation of a prayer-centered community that would serve at once as a “laboratory” (following in Howard Thurman’s footsteps) and fraternity for its members, and as a model and resource for the broader community. As he writes in his leaflet,

Time and time again we must consciously and deliberately center down to our main calling, which is the service of God in prayer. There are Torah Kolelim who organically represent the head—the “apostolic” shock troops, representing the mouth and language—but we must be the heart.

See, Arthur Green, “Hasidic Prayer,” https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hasidic-prayer. This brief article is adapted from Green and Barry W. Holtz’s book, Your Word is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1977). As Green and Holtz note, the Hasidic emphasis on prayer was part of a larger ideological claim that while Torah study and other commandments remained crucial (they were not antinomian as some of their opponents claimed), prayer was the most effective way for the seeker—learned or untutored, rich or poor—to cleave to God (or to the tzaddik who uplifts the person). For tefilah (prayer) provides one the opportunity to focus one’s entire being on coming closer to God (devekut), to the immanent divine Presence flowing through and animating all of life. Having experienced the reality of the entwinement of one’s soul with the Creator during tefilah, the devotee attempts to carry this mystical awareness into the rest of life.

It is likely that Reb Zalman read the work of the Israeli archeologist (and military and political leader), Yigal Yadin (d. 1984), including The Message of the Scrolls (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1957). His friend and colleague, Rabbi Lou Silberman (d. 2005), a longtime professor of Jewish Literature and Thought at Vanderbilt University, also did early scholarly work on the Scrolls. Silberman actually accompanied Reb Zalman on a visit to Gethsemani in the summer of 1962. While at the monastery Silberman lectured to the novices on the Psalms; he returned in 1963 to present on the Dead Sea Scrolls. See his brief tribute to Merton in Merton and Judaism, pp. 212-215.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, My Life in Jewish Renewal, p. 110.

Ibid., p. 123.
While the *kolel* (informal association for Talmud study) served an important function in Jewish life, Reb Zalman wanted to create prayer “troops” who would dedicate themselves to this heart-centered service. This would include up to eight hours a day of prayer and contemplative practice, as well as communal observance of *Shabbat* and of the Jewish calendar cycle, as well as study sessions and retreats.

While he intended the group to spend significant time together, he also believed that it must remain connected to the larger Jewish community, offering alternative worship and study opportunities as well as spiritual guidance. This would serve as the primary context in which the members of B’nai Or would work and generate income, when not involved in their own contemplative or creative activities. Reb Zalman was especially interested in outreach to the many young Jews who would not step foot in a synagogue or other Jewish religious spaces. Borrowing from the Christian Scientists, he proposed the following:

> In short, a reading room\(^{81}\) in a downtown area may supply this need. People are reluctant to sit down in the sanctuary of a synagogue simply to relax for a while, away from their pressing cares and burdens. A chapel in conjunction with a reading room would make this possible for them (and ultimately serve as a model for synagogues). The chapel would also serve as a laboratory for classes to be conducted in the reading room.\(^{82}\)

As he notes, these efforts would not only benefit unaffiliated seekers, but could also serve as a different model for existing synagogues that were failing to reach these people. Part of what pained Reb Zalman was that growing numbers of Jewish seekers who were drawn to other spiritual traditions, not knowing that Judaism had anything substantive to offer them. As he states, “It is our hope that at least some of them will find their way to the reading room or chapel.”\(^{83}\)

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81 First established in the late 1890’s under the leadership of Mary Eddy Baker (d. 1910), founder of the Christian Science movement, these spaces are designed for study and contemplation of the Bible and of Christian Science literature.


83 Ibid. This remained a concern of his for decades to come. While he was obviously open to learn from and collaborating with non-Jewish partners, he felt that the riches of Jewish spiritual life must be made more readily available to young seekers, who were looking elsewhere for such nourishment.
His vision of “Qumran USA,” as he sometimes referred to it, involved another critique of both mainstream Jewish and North American secular culture:

We are basically dissatisfied with the “world.” Our dissatisfaction stems mainly from the fact that as well-adjusted members of it, we would have to live as ardent consumers of goods that we do not really need and that in fact inhibit our best possible functioning in terms of shlemut ha’avoda [“complete or perfect service to God”] … We are dissatisfied not only with the secular world but with the “religious” world at large. That world lives under the same consumer compulsion as the secular world… [Producers of] kosher goods are as relentless in driving us to consume them as are others… [As a result,] one consumes without having any time left for Avodath Hashem.84

One hears in this criticism an echo of yet another important intellectual-spiritual influence on him: the interwar Polish Jewish writer, Hillel Zeitlin (d.1942). A prolific Hebrew and Yiddish journalist, essayist, and poet, Zeitlin was a lifelong spiritual seeker who attempted to craft a new vision of Hasidism for moderns. In doing so, he drew on a wide range of non-Jewish literary and philosophical sources as well as Eastern religious thought. Raised in a traditionally-observant home with strong ties to HaBaD, Zeitlin went through various intellectual and spiritual phases, gradually returning to a life of orthopraxy after World War I. However, he did not rejoin any Hasidic community, finding the contemporary movement far too conservative both intellectually and politically. At the same time, he worked passionately to convey to secular Eastern European Jews the beauties of classical Hasidic (and Kabbalistic) thought and its relevance for twentieth-century life. An idiosyncratic modern mystic and fiery social commentator, Zeitlin was greatly pained by the ongoing mistreatment of Jews by gentiles in Poland and elsewhere throughout the world, and at the same time he was highly critical of those Jews who zealously engaged in post-industrial economic life, working in professions that he deemed unethical and oppressive.85

In response to these various tensions, Zeitlin dreamed of the creation of a Jewish spiritual revival movement that would include various Hasidic and socialist elements. He was particularly

84 Ibid.
interested in reaching young disaffected Jews yearning for such a creative synthesis. As Arthur Green and Ariel Mayse write,

Zeitlin longed for a rarified and spiritually regenerated Judaism, one based on his idealized vision of early Hasidism… But his romantic vision of a glorified neo-Hasidic community was one that very much belonged to Poland of the 1920s. The values of socialism, including supporting oneself by the dignity of one’s own labor and disdain for commerce as a form of exploitation, are very much part of the rules he composed for the community he sought to create. This idealistic religious community was to serve as a beacon for alienated Jewish youth, presenting Judaism to them as a highly moral and profoundly spiritual way of life.\(^86\)

At the center of this imagined movement would stand a small intentional community that would serve as its nerve center. Zeitlin often referred to this inner circle as Yavneh, thus connecting it to Talmudic lore (see, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a–b) about the importance of this small, southern coastal town in fashioning Rabbinic Judaism following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.\(^87\) Alas, Zeitlin’s dream never came to fruition; it seems that he was a much more capable writer than community organizer. As Green notes, “there is no evidence that these groups ever organized beyond perhaps a single small circle that met in Zeitlin’s home.”\(^88\) Still, his writings were read by many in the Hebrew and Yiddish speaking communities in Eastern Europe, the United States, and Israel during and after his lifetime.

Reb Zalman learned about Zeitlin’s call for Yavneh in 1959 while traveling to Israel for the first time with a contingent of North American Hillel professionals.\(^89\) In addition to Zeitlin’s

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\(^88\) Arthur Green, Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era, p. 21

\(^89\) Schachter-Shalomi reports that it was the Israeli scholar Shmuel Hugo Bergmann (d. 1975) who introduced him to Zeitlin’s writings on Yavneh. See, Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era, p. xv. Yet another influence on Schachter-Shalomi vision of B’nai Or was the kibbutz movement in Israel. In reflecting on this heady experiment, my parents, who were a part of the original Winnipeg contingent in the mid/late 1960’s, spoke of a dream of creating an “urban kibbutz.” Personal correspondence with Neal and Carol Rose, May 10, 2019.
provocative blend of spiritual insight and social criticism,\textsuperscript{90} part of what attracted Schachter to this vision was that it reminded him of a powerful experience he had as a teenager in Antwerp with an unusual group of HaBaD diamond cutters and polishers (as he and his family sought to escape the Nazis):

Reading Zeitlin’s call for Yavneh took me back to my association with these wonderful people... That group was steeped in Habad-style study and prayer. But its members were also avid readers of modern writers on the inner life, including the Danish Anker Larsen and Romain Rolland. Their parallel to the mood of Yavneh and the other works of Zeitlin stands out quite clearly to me.\textsuperscript{91}

As Schachter-Shalomi notes, it was in Antwerp that he began a process of intensive “spiritual formation” that would shape his adult life. “In that group my emerging ideals found the soil in which to take root. With its support I was able to transcend the robot-like fulfillment of my religious obligations and allow the longing of my soul to find expression.”\textsuperscript{92} Not only would the experience soon lead him to join the Lubavitch community in New York, but it would serve as a touchstone for the trailblazing rabbi well beyond his HaBaD years.

Importantly, in recalling the spiritual vitality of Zeitlin’s writings and of the Belgian Hasidic circle, Reb Zalman explains that part of his intention in creating B’nai Or was for the core members to dedicate themselves to learning and preserving the prayer traditions (\textit{nuskhaot}) of various Jewish communities decimated by the Holocaust as well as from other far-flung places (Cochin, Baghdad, etc.) that were in danger of being lost.\textsuperscript{93} Tragically, Hillel Zeitlin and many of the members of the Antwerp group were murdered by the Nazis.\textsuperscript{94} Not surprisingly, Reb Zalman

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., \textit{Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era}, p. xv.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, \textit{My Life in Jewish Renewal}, p. 129. This is, of course, reflective of his larger project of restoration.
\textsuperscript{94} According to eye-witnesses, Zeitlin, aged 71, was murdered by the Nazis during the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto in September 1942. He is reported to have gone to his death wrapped in a \textit{tallit} (prayer shawl), donning \textit{tefillin} (phylacteries), and carrying a copy of the Zohar under his arm. See, Green, “Biographical Introduction,” \textit{Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin}, pp. 31-32. Reb Zalman did have the opportunity to reconnect with one of the leaders of the Belgian circle, Baruch Merzel, in Israel at some point (date
adds that living in the midst of the Cold War (in which Jews were suffering under yet another oppressive regime) also gave him an “extra” sense of “the Battle of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness” that is described in the Dead Sea Scrolls.95

Like Zeitlin’s Yavneh, Qumran USA did not emerge as Reb Zalman had originally conceived of it. However, his experimentation in Winnipeg and his mentorship of and collaboration with other Jewish seekers throughout North America helped to catalyze both the Havurah and Jewish Renewal movements. As Reb Zalman writes, “Although Qumran USA never came to be, Arthur Green gathered another kind of Yavneh in Cambridge [MA, in 1969] and founded the matrix, the first of many havurot, Havurat Shalom.”96

Reb Zalman participated in the inaugural year of Havurat Shalom as an honorary member, serving as an informal mentor to Green and the other members of this pioneering collective. A few years later (1974), he helped establish the Aquarian Minyan in Northern California,97 and then founded B’nai Or in Philadelphia, where he relocated from Winnipeg in 1975.98 From his base in Philadelphia, he and his students began to develop a national Renewal network (1978). And so, Zeitlin’s vision was not lost after all. In a fascinating turn of events it ultimately helped to inspire the development of the Jewish religious countercultural movement in North America. Like Zeitlin, Reb Zalman, Green, and their colleagues and students were inspired by the many of the teachings and traditions of Hasidism, but simply could not live authentically within the “four ells” of the Ultra-Orthodox world.99 Consequently, they undertook various Neo-Hasidic

97 To learn more about this group, visit: http://www.aquarianminyan.org/History.
98 With a growing feminist sensibility, Schachter-Shalomi and his colleagues renamed the organization P’nai Or (“Faces of Light”) in 1985. Today, it is known as Aleph: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal, https://aleph.org, and includes a variety of initiatives, including a program for rabbinic ordination.
99 For the most comprehensive history of Hasidism, including its evolution into an ultra-Orthodox movement, see Hasidism: A New History, edited by David Biale, et al.
experiments in prayer, study, fellowship, and communal living.\textsuperscript{100} For Reb Zalman, this included the creative adaptation of insights, techniques, and models from Catholic teachers and peers.

**Postscript: Reb Zalman’s Reflections on Renewal & Monasticism**

In November 2001, Edward Kaplan and Shaul Magid interviewed Reb Zalman about his relationship with Thomas Merton and the Trappist order. When asked what monasticism might have to contribute to contemporary Judaism, the aging rabbi replied, “One of the problems plaguing Jewish Renewal is that everyone wants to be a rebe. But they haven’t been Hasidim long enough to live under discipline.”\textsuperscript{101} By “discipline” he had at least two matters in mind: one is that he wanted his students to spend more time living as serious Jewish practitioners before attempting to lead others. In this context, he speaks of the power of an intentional community living the rhythms of the Jewish calendar year. Thinking back to his original B’nai Or vision he states, “I’m still hoping and dreaming that in my lifetime there will be a resident community that will live a liturgical year, fully.” He continues by explaining that “unless you root yourself in the totality of that liturgical year, you don’t understand the possibilities for renewal, because it will be coming to you only from the outside.”\textsuperscript{102} The second issue he raises is of the power of discipline to help keep one’s ego in check. As he states, even “unreasonable obedience, does something important for you.” He adds that in most monastic communities, “a novice would have to do menial things” to inspire “ego reduction.”\textsuperscript{103}

This response offers us a window into Reb Zalman’s thinking as he entered the “harvest” season of his life (he was 77 at the time). As he looks back on his interaction with Merton and other Catholic monastics and his original vision for B’nai Or, he offers a twofold critique of the

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\textsuperscript{101} “An Interview with Zalman Schachter-Shalomi,” conducted by Edward K. Kaplan and Shaul Magid, in *Merton and Judaism: Holiness in Words*, p. 311.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p. 112.
movement he created. The majority of Jewish Renewal leaders (and other non-Orthodox clergy) do not come to their work with extensive Jewish life skills or experience in traditional (hierarchical) religious communities. In his estimation they need to make a deeper commitment to what one might call “discipleship” in terms of both applied knowledge and obedience to a system larger than themselves. And so, Reb Zalman suggests that in their severity, the Trappists offer progressive Jews valuable insights into these matters.\textsuperscript{104}

As I have argued in this essay, Reb Zalman’s engagement with the Catholic religious during the 1950 and 1960’s played a critical role in his development as a Jewish and interreligious thinker and leader. Not only did it influence his evolving theological worldview and strengthen his commitment to dialogue and other collaborative activities, but it also led him to experiment with new forms of Jewish communal life. A deeply curious person, Reb Zalman would continue to explore other religious and humanistic traditions for decades to come. Each of these excursions would contribute in specific ways to his mature vision. To better understand his evolving spiritual vision, we need to study how he wove together the various strands (including the “loose ends”) of his multi-colored tapestry.

\textsuperscript{104} While he only mentions Merton and the Trappists in this context, he is also clearly thinking about his experience in HaBaD and other orthodox communities (Jewish and non-Jewish) in making these recommendations.