

Attitudes toward the Study of Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah, from the Dawn of Chasidism to Present Day Chabad

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In the contemporary Chabad community, study of the primary texts of Kabbalah is not emphasized. Chabad Chasidic thought (Chasidus) is studied extensively, as are the sermons (*sichos*) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, texts that themselves are rich in citations from, and commentary on, Kabbalistic sources. However, for reasons I will explore in this essay, Kabbalah study from primary texts, such as the Zohar and works of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (*Arizal*), is relatively uncommon in Chabad. This has been noted by the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe himself: “Generally speaking, Kabbalah study was not common, even among Chabad Chasidim.”¹

Is this omission intentional, a matter of principle? Or is Kabbalah study deemed worthwhile by Chabad, but neglected merely due to the priority of other activities?

¹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos 5745 (Vaad Hanachos Labak, 1985)* volume 2, p. 1147. The Rebbe stressed that “Kabbalah study was not common, even among Chabad Chasidim” since, of the various strands of Chasidic thought, Chabad Chasidus is particularly rich in its use of Kabbalistic sources (see below section “Lurianic Kabbalah in Early Chabad”). One might therefore expect that Chabad Chasidim in particular might be inclined to Kabbalah study.

Rabbi Chaim Miller was educated at the *Haberdashers' Aske's School* in London, England and studied Medical Science at Leeds University. At the age of twenty-one, he began to explore his Jewish roots in full-time Torah study. Less than a decade later, he published the best-selling *Kol Menachem Chumash, Gutnick Edition*, which made over a thousand discourses of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe easily accessible to the layman. His 2011 compilation, the *Lifestyle Books Torah, Five Books of Moses, Slager Edition* was distributed to thousands of servicemen and women in the U.S. Army. In 2013, he was chosen by the *Jewish Press* as one of sixty “Movers and Shakers” in the Jewish world. His latest works include *Turning Judaism Outward*, a critically acclaimed biography of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and the multivolume *Practical Tanya*, which has set new standards in the translation of Chasidic thought for contemporary readers.

In other words, has Chabad adopted an *exclusivist* position toward Jewish mysticism, that only the study of Chasidus is to be pursued; or is it more *inclusivist*, seeing value in a broader curriculum of Kabbalah study, while retaining an emphasis on its own particular school of thought?

As we shall see, there are sources that point in both directions. My impression is that, notwithstanding some comments that appear to be strongly exclusivist, the position of contemporary Chabad is, in fact, inclusivist. Before offering my analysis, let us avail ourselves of the relevant statements on this issue.

Zohar study in early Chabad

While there is much internal consistency between the teachings of the seven Chabad Rebbes, some of their positions have shifted over time. An example of this, relevant to our discussion, is a strong emphasis by the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, on Zohar study, which did not persist in later generations.

In *Likutei Torah*, a volume of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's discourses published in 1848, the author recommends that, before prayer one should prepare through:

The study of *mussar* (ethical texts), particularly the words of *mussar* found in the Zohar, a term that means 'illumination.'²

This echoes a similar practice taught by the founder of Chasidism.

The Ba'al Shem Tov instructed people that before each prayer they should study a passage of *Zohar* or *Tikunei Zohar*.³

² Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Likutei Torah* (Zhitomir 1848; new edition Kehos, 2002), *Deuteronomy* 43c.

³ Rabbi Mordechai Twersky of Chernobyl, *Likutei Torah* (Piotrków, 1889) p. 6a. For the Ba'al Shem Tov's interest in the Zohar see: Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome Mintz (trans.), *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* (Schoken, 1970), pp. 42, 49, 165, 244. The Zohar was particularly appreciated by early Chasidic master Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, who commented: "The Zohar sustained my soul." "The Zohar helped me to be a Jew." "In matters of both the spirit and the flesh the Zohar is a guide." "The bitter taste of exile is with me... Only when I immerse myself in the study of Zohar do I find peace." "I achieve inner tranquility only in prayer or in the study of Zohar." "Study the Zohar... then study it even more" (cited in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *In the Circle of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Studies in Hasidism* (Chicago University Press, 1985), p. 5.

In the compendium *Meab Shearim*, published in 1912, a more rigorous program of Zohar study is recommended by Rabbi Shneur Zalman:

A person should conduct himself as follows: Immediately after prayer, he should study Mishnah and *Shulchan Aruch*, i.e., rulings in Jewish law (*halacha pesuka*). Regarding the remainder of his study, the following distinction applies. If a person is primarily a businessman, most of his study should be in the holy Zohar.... A person who is not primarily a businessman should study Gemara with major commentaries (*poskim*).⁴

In the same compendium was also find the following directive:

You should commit yourself to study books of *Mussar* (ethics) **every day...** especially *Sefer Ha-Zohar*. Try to study this when you are at least a little bit inspired with reverence and faith.⁵

In a few sources, Zohar is emphasized by Rabbi Shneur Zalman as a focus for Shabbos study. In one discourse he writes:

You should study a little Zohar every day, and on Shabbos, Zohar the entire day.⁶

The importance of Zohar study on Shabbos is echoed by Rabbi Shneur Zalman's son and successor, Rabbi Dov Ber, in his introduction to *Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav*.

Shabbos is a time for the study of *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, delving a little into its Kabbalistic commentaries, such as those of Rabbi Moshe Zacuto, *Sefer Mikdash Melech*, *Sefer Likutei Torah*, etc.⁷

⁴ Chaim Bichovsky and Chaim Heilman (eds.) *Meab Shearim* (Berdichev 1912; reprint Kehos 2005), p. 50. The passage also appears in *Ma'amarei Admor Ha-Zaken*, *Ha-Ketzarim* (Kehos 1981), p. 571. (Emphasis is added here, and in all further citations, unless noted.)

⁵ *Meab Shearim* p. 40. The authorship of this text is unclear. Multiple sources attribute it to Rabbi Shneur Zalman, though it has also been attributed to Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk and Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch. See note of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, to *Meab Shearim*, Kehos edition, p. 55a; Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine, *Migdal Oz* (Kfar Chabad, 1980), p. 421, note 4*.

⁶ Mondshine, *Migdal Oz* p. 414; *Ma'amarei Admor Ha-Zaken*, *Al-Parshios ha-Torah*, vol. 2 (Kehos 1982), p. 831.

⁷ *Shulchan Aruch Admor Ha-Zaken* (new edition, Kehos 2001), p. 16. Zohar study is suited for Shabbos since it is not typified by disputes, like the Talmud, and is therefore conducive to the restful spirit of Shabbos (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sichos Kodesh* 5740, vol. 3, p. 494).

Indeed, we find that this was the practice of Rabbi Shneur Zalman himself from whom:

We heard commentaries and insights on sections of the Zohar every Shabbos night.... And as I heard from his holy mouth, not once or twice, that throughout his entire life, he dedicated Shabbos in particular to Zohar study in great depth (namely, on the night of Shabbos, as we witnessed).⁸

While initially delivered to a small group,⁹ these commentaries were subsequently edited and published by Rabbi Dov Ber as *Biurey Ha-Zohar* (*Commentaries on the Zohar*), a genre that continued to be prominent during the first three generations of Chabad leadership.¹⁰

In addition to these texts recommending Zohar study, we also find that Rabbi Shneur Zalman demanded mastery of the Zohar as an admission requirement for his advanced Torah academy (*cheder*). The criteria for admission were:

Fluency in the Talmud, Midrash, Ikrim, Kuzari and to be knowledgeable in Zohar.¹¹

Perhaps the most far-reaching encouragement of Zohar study appears in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Laws of Torah Study*, where he recommends that every person:

Set aside a small amount of time every day to learn through once the entire texts of: the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, *Mechilta*, *Sifra*, *Sifrei*, *Tosefta*; as well all the Midrashim of Tanaim and Amoraim all of whose words constitute the Oral Torah which was 'given to Moses at Sinai,'¹² such as: most *Midrash Rabah*, *Tanchuma*, the *Pesiketos* etc., and most importantly the Midrash of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. This is in order that a person will complete the entire Oral Law at least once in his lifetime, so as to fulfill the command

⁸ Letter to the Chabad community by Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch, Rabbi Shneur Zalman's son, in his *Biurey Ha-Zohar* (Kapust, 1816 new edition, Kehos 2015), p. 1.

⁹ See *Toras Menachem, Hisvaduyos* 5750, vol. 1, p. 103, note 31.

¹⁰ In 1818, Rabbi Dov Ber authored *Kuntres Ma'amarei Zohar* (printed in *Ma'amarei Admor Ha-Emtzoie, Kuntreism* (Kehos, 1991), pp. 199–220). Zohar commentaries of the Third Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, "Tzemach Tzedek" (1789–1866), are published in *Biurei Ha-Zohar Le-Admor Tzemach Tzedek* (Kehos 1968–1978), 2 volumes.

¹¹ Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, *Sefer Ha-Sichos* 5700 (Kehos 1986), p. 22, note 14*.

¹² See Babylonian Talmud, *Berachos* 5a; Jerusalem Talmud, *Peab* 2:4.

‘You shall carefully guard all the commandments etc.,’ (Deuteronomy 1:22).¹³

Here Rabbi Shneur Zalman instructs us to study the entire Zohar at least once in our lives. As a ruling that appears in a text of Jewish law, it is clearly directed at the general public, and not an elite group, or to Chasidim in particular.¹⁴

The suitability of the *entire* Zohar for study, is stressed elsewhere by Rabbi Shneur Zalman.

In the case of Zohar, study it in order.¹⁵

A few anecdotes from the second and third generation of Chabad have reached us which also paint Zohar study in a positive light.

The assistant of the Mitteler Rebbe (Rabbi Dov Ber, Second Chabad Rebbe) would study both Mishnah and Zohar on a daily basis. The Mitteler Rebbe once asked him, ‘Which gives you more pleasure: Mishnah study or Zohar study?’

He answered, ‘Rebbe, the truth is that with Mishnah study, I have some understanding, but with the Zohar I don’t understand anything. But I still enjoy Zohar study more.’

The Rebbe said to him, ‘The truth is that your soul has more pleasure from Zohar study and your soul does understand it.’¹⁶

Perhaps the most well-known Chabad teaching encouraging Zohar study is a remark of the Third Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (Tzemach Tzedek), which was included in the popular inspirational anthology *Hayom Yom*.

The Tzemach Tzedek once told Reb Hendel (Kugel) in a private audience: ‘Zohar study elevates the soul; Midrash study awakens the heart; (recital of) Psalms with tears ‘cleans the vessel.’¹⁷

¹³ *Laws of Torah Study* 2:10 in Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Shulchan Aruch*, volume 5 (new edition, Kehos 2004), p. 471. See also *ibid.* 2:1, *idem. Likutei Torah, Leviticus* 5d; *Song* 3c and the discussion in *Likutei Sichos* vol. 30, p. 173-4.

¹⁴ The author does preface the passage by stating, ‘It is desirable *according to Kabbalah*,’ but this is a reference merely to the *source* of this practice, namely, that it is not rooted in the Talmudic literature.

¹⁵ Mondshine, *Migdal Oz*, p. 424.

¹⁶ Avraham Chanoch Glitzenstein (ed.) *Otzar Sipurei Chabad* vol. 16 (Kehos 1997), p. 82, citing Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dworkin.

¹⁷ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (ed.), *Hayom Yom* (Kehos, 1942), entry for 16th *Teves*.

Based on all of the above, it seems that Zohar study was vigorously encouraged in early Chabad, without any notable restriction or reservation.

Zohar study in later Chabad

The stress on Zohar study that we find in these early writings is, by and large, not echoed in later Chabad. As generations have passed, the emphasis has shifted almost exclusively to the study of Chabad Chasidus, with little mention of Zohar study.

In fact, even Rabbi Shneur Zalman's instruction to study Zohar before prayer (which was well known, having been published in *Likutei Torah*), was subsequently recast, as the following anecdote illustrates.

Reb Pesach (Malastovker) told my grandfather (Mordechai Yoel Duchman) that when he was in a private audience with Tzemach Tzedek, the Rebbe asked him, 'Pesach! What is your practice before prayer?'

He answered, 'That which is stated' (i.e., what is written in *Likutei Torah: mikveh*, charity and Zohar study).

Tzemach Tzedek replied, 'Charity is a mitzvah all day. As for *mikveh*, don't overly extend yourself. Regarding Zohar study, my grandfather (Rabbi Shneur Zalman) really meant: study Chasidus.'¹⁸

Nevertheless, we do find that Rabbi Shneur Zalman's recommendation was cited *unmodified*, three generations after *Tzemach Tzedek*, by the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn:

Regarding the study of Zohar and Midrash before prayer, etc., this opens up the heart and the mind to be greatly awakened during prayer.¹⁹

Still, we do not find Zohar study encouraged with the same frequency and emphasis as in the early generations of Chabad. Apparently, when the movement was first founded there was a paucity of Chasidic texts available, and as this situation began to change, the community's natural preference was for Chasidus over Zohar—a chasid will naturally be attracted to the teachings of his master, the Rebbe. Also, the Zohar lacks a commentary that renders the text accessible for the non-specialist, and for many it is barely comprehensible. (It is also written in a difficult Aramaic, and a full translation into Hebrew was not available

¹⁸ Shneur Zalman Duchman, *Le-Shaima Ozren* (Brooklyn, 1963), p. 202.

¹⁹ Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, *Sefer Ha-Ma'amarim* 5682-3 (Kehos 1987), p. 236.

until relatively recently.) This in contrast to Chabad Chasidic texts which go to great lengths to make mystical concepts relatable through parables and psychological insights.

It appears, then, that Zohar study became less prominent in Chabad largely because its role as an inspirational text was gradually replaced by Chabad Chasidus. As the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe stressed in a sermon in 1960:

Before Chasidus came to light, the inner teachings of Torah were elusive. There was the practice of studying, or merely reciting the Zohar, and various works encourage this practice, even when ‘a person doesn’t understand what he is saying.’

Even when Kabbalah was understood, its real meaning remained elusive, except to a few elevated souls, since there was a lack of illustrative parables and examples from the human experience; the commentaries chose to focus on debating technical terms. Afterwards Chasidus demonstrated the meaning of the inner teachings of Torah... it explained them in a way that everyone can find relatable.²⁰

It is not surprising, then, that while the Seventh Rebbe promoted Chabad Chasidus vigorously, he rarely encouraged Zohar study. Chasidus, he felt, had adapted Zohar (and other teachings of Kabbalah) to a format that was more accessible, relevant and inspirational.

The point was made emphatically in a talk from 1953, referring specifically to Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s recommendation to study Zohar before prayer.

Before prayer there is the requirement to study Zohar and *Reishis Chochmah*; but the Rebbes and senior Chasidim have taught that (for this goal) the necessary parts of Zohar and *Reishis Chochmah* have been included in Chasidus.²¹

However, that is not to say that the Rebbe was *opposed* to Zohar study, which he would sometimes encourage in public sermons. For example, on *Rosh Chodesh Av* 1980, the first of nine days of intense mourning for the Temple, the Rebbe proposed:

Each day of the ‘nine days’ everyone ought to add in the three areas of Torah, worship and acts of kindness. In Torah: Additional

²⁰ *Toras Menachem* vol. 27, p. 152.

²¹ *Sichos Kodesh* 5713, p. 316 (Yiddish). In a Hebrew rendition of this sermon, “necessary” is rendered “necessary for a person’s worship” (*Toras Menachem* vol. 9, p. 17).

study, more than the regular study carried out each day, primarily in the study of halachah, and also in the study of Zohar.²²

Similarly, on *Lag B'Omer*, the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's passing, in 1988 he suggested:

It would be a good idea for there to be more study of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's Torah, particularly the Book of Zohar.²³

In 1991 when the Rebbe introduced a campaign to study Torah passages relating to redemption, he suggested looking for sources in:

Scriptures and the Oral Law: Talmud, Midrashim, and especially the inner parts of Torah, beginning with the Book of Zohar.²⁴

The Rebbe also demonstrated a generally positive attitude to the publishing and dissemination of the Zohar. To one author, who had compiled teachings of the Zohar on the weekly Torah portion, the Rebbe wrote:

Regarding your comment that I am not happy with your book 'Le- ket Shmuel,' anthologized from the Zohar according to the order of scripture—naturally, this has no basis. On the contrary, every effort to publicize the inner part of Torah is extremely desirable.²⁵

To another author who wished to produce a compendium of easier Zohar passages, the Rebbe initially expressed concern that a superficial rendition of the text is, perhaps, not a publishing priority, as it is not especially nourishing for the reader. But then he concluded:

However, since every effort at disseminating Torah is so important, I do not, G-d forbid, wish to express an opinion to the contrary.²⁶

²² *Sichos Kodesh* 5740, volume 3, p. 690. In this, as in most other instances below, the Rebbe suggested to supplement the Zohar study with commentaries from Chabad Chasidus. He likewise encouraged (non-Chabad) students of the Zohar to avail themselves of Chabad Chasidus to enhance their understanding of the material (see, for example, *Igros Kodesh* vol. 4, p. 331).

²³ *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos*, 5748, volume 3, p. 314.

²⁴ *Sefer Ha-Sichos* 5751, volume 2, p. 501.

²⁵ Letter to Rabbi Shmuel Kinpes (1883–1979), dated 3rd *Shevat* 5718. The Rebbe had previously declined to offer his approbation to the book (letter dated 9th *Shevat* 5717), which had led Rabbi Kinpes to believe that the Rebbe was “not happy” with the book. In reality, the Rebbe had declined as it was not his custom to endorse published works. See also *Igros Kodesh* vol. 17, p. 165.

²⁶ *Igros Kodesh* vol. 17, p. 165. The Rebbe therefore recommended to the author to seek the advice of senior rabbis in Jerusalem.

On another occasion, the Rebbe assisted Rabbi Simcha Ashlag in securing a substantial donation (from Rabbi Joseph Gutnick) for the printing of his grandfather's multi-volume *Zohar im Perush ba-Sulam*.²⁷

We also know of an instance where the Rebbe offered his blessing to a Zohar study group, and responded to their questions.²⁸

While he generally did not favor the “magical” use of Zohar, we do find two letters where the Rebbe recommends reading the Zohar as a supernatural remedy for vision problems.²⁹

As for the restrictions on Zohar study which, due to its esoteric nature, have been aired in Rabbinic literature over the centuries, the Rebbe was quite explicit.

While the Zohar is categorized as ‘secret (sod),’ i.e., from among the esoteric sections of the Torah, nevertheless, subsequent to the printing of the Zohar anybody can learn from it, so it is now considered exoteric.³⁰

In summary: While Zohar study was encouraged in early Chabad, in more recent generations the emphasis has shifted toward the study of Chasidus. We do not, however, find any restrictions attached to Zohar study emanating from Chabad, and there were occasions when the Rebbe encouraged it.

Lurianic kabbalah in early chasidism

While the attitude to Zohar study in Chabad is, overall, a positive one, the same level of openness cannot be said with regard to the study of Lurianic Kabbalah. This is not a uniquely Chabad phenomenon, and is based on a concern voiced by the founder of Chasidism, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* himself.

The following citation, found in *Tz'emach Tzedek's* popular compendium of discourses *Derech Mitzvosecha*, is well known in Chabad circles.

And it was for this reason that the Ba'al Shem Tov instructed not to learn works of Kabbalah. For if a person does not know how to strip away the concepts (in Kabbalah) from their physical context,

²⁷ The story is recounted by Rabbi Ashlag at https://youtu.be/-Q8_jyqpVgG.

²⁸ Unpublished letter in my archive (from 1951).

²⁹ Together with reading *Tanya*. See *Igros Kodesh* volume 5, letter 1360; vol. 7, letter 2137.

³⁰ *Toras Menachem*, volume 50 (1967), p. 23.

the study will make his (conception of G-d) far too physical.... This is notwithstanding the fact that the words of Arizal are reliable and true.³¹

The *Ba'al Shem Tov* certainly did not question the authenticity of Lurianic Kabbalah, which he deemed “reliable and true.” There is also no doubt that the *Ba'al Shem Tov* himself studied Lurianic Kabbalah and that his teachings were consistent with it.³² He was, however, concerned that Lurianic Kabbalah might be misinterpreted by the general public, and therefore instructed not to study it.³³

Tz'emach Tzedek identifies one such concern: a confusion about the identity of the ten *sefiros* (Divine energies/attributes). Kabbalah associates each of the *sefiros* with different Divine names (*E-l, Elokim etc.*). The *Ba'al Shem Tov's* concern was that, in associating a Divine attribute with the name of G-d, a practitioner may fail to realize that the particular *sefirah* itself is not G-d, but a tool/energy through which the infinite G-d acts. He may fail to “strip away the concepts from their physical context.”³⁴

³¹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (*Tz'emach Tzedek*), *Derech Mitzvosecha*, (Poltava 1911; new edition, *Kehos* 1991), p. 115b.

³² See Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Igros Kodesh* p. 86.

³³ *Tz'emach Tzedek* initially writes that “the *Ba'al Shem Tov* instructed not to learn works of Kabbalah” which, at first glance, might be understood as applying to *all* works of Kabbalah, even the Zohar. However, from all the citations below it will become clear that his objection was aimed specifically at Lurianic Kabbalah. In fact, this very passage makes the point clear, “This is notwithstanding the fact that the words of *Arizal* are reliable and true.” (We have also seen above that the *Ba'al Shem Tov* had a positive attitude to Zohar study.)

This is an important distinction that is sometimes lost in Chasidic circles, where the *Ba'al Shem Tov's* “instruction” is mistakenly interpreted as applying to *all* texts of Kabbalah.

A comparable distinction is also made in Rabbi Meshulam Feivish Heller of Zabriz (1742–1794), *Yosher Divrei Emes* (Munkatch 1905), p. 25b: “Concerning study of the writings of Arizal: I know that you will not study it without someone greater than you are, and you are unable to find someone. But you can study *Sharei Orab, Ginas Egoz* and, primarily, the Zohar and *Tikunei Zohar*.”

The more “dangerous” nature of Lurianic teachings was also recognized in the ban against Kabbalah study by the sages of Brody in 1757 (as part of their struggle against Frankism), which forbade Zohar (and Kabbalah of Rabbi Moses Cordovero) to those under the age of thirty, and Lurianic Kabbalah to those under forty.

³⁴ The same concern is mentioned, in the name of the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Likutei Torah* (*Leviticus*, 51c). See also *Tz'emach Tzedek's* remarks in his *Ohr Ha-Torah, Exodus* pp. 106 and 849.

In one of his discourses, Rabbi Shneur Zalman indicates that the *Ba'al Shem Tov's* concern is particularly relevant to the Lurianic doctrine of *tzimzum*, the withdrawal of Divine light that preceded creation.³⁵

“The concept of *tzimzum* of the Infinite Light mentioned in *Etz Chaim*...³⁶ needs to be understood well and thoroughly stripped from any physical connotation, for the *Ba'al Shem Tov* protested against those who studied Kabbalah and did not know to interpret (its symbols) non-physically.”³⁷

Who were the students of Kabbalah to whom the *Ba'al Shem Tov* “protested” and “instructed not to learn works of Kabbalah,” who “did not know how to divorce the concepts from their physical context”?

If we bear in mind that the *Ba'al Shem Tov* lived at a time when Sabbateanism and Frankism continued to pose a major threat to the traditional community, and that these movements were propelled by Kabbalistic teachings, it is not hard to imagine why conservatism with the public teaching of Kabbalah was recommended. This concern was in fact articulated explicitly by the *Ba'al Shem Tov* in a citation that has reached us from Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz “the Seer” of Lublin, through his student Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Eichenstein.

I heard my master, of blessed memory (the Seer of Lublin), say of those followers of the sect which made a desecration of G-d's name in an event that occurred in the days of the Taz³⁸—it was because they desired to have revelations of Elijah, Divine inspiration and prophecy through *yichudim* (mystical practices) using (Divine) names. But they did not refine their character or humble their material selves, so they were unworthy... they performed *yichudim* without refining their material natures. They pictured heavenly forms under the ‘chariot’ (in a physical way) with the result that thoughts of adultery got the better of them—Heaven forbid—and what happened happened—Heaven spare us. This is what my master said.

³⁵ See discussion in Rabbi Chaim Miller, *The Practical Tanya*, volume 2 (Kol Menachem, 2017), pp. 99ff.

³⁶ A primary source text of Lurianic Kabbalah, authored by *Arizal's* foremost student Rabbi Chaim Vital.

³⁷ Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Ma'amarei Admor Ha-Zaken, Inyanim*, vol. 2 (*Kebos*, 2015), p. 484.

³⁸ Rabbi David *ba-Levi* Segal (1586–1667), author of *Turei Zabav*, an important commentary on the Code of Jewish Law. The “sect” refers to the followers of Shabbatai Tzevi (1626–76).

And he said in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, that these fools studied this wisdom without the capacity of reverence and fear of Heaven. That is why they took it all in a physical sense and, as a result, they went astray.³⁹

The explicit symbolism of Lurianic Kabbalah, which is filled with references to the “intimate union” of gendered energies, was inappropriate for individuals who had not tamed their passions and “*humbled their material selves.*” As a result, when they “*pictured heavenly forms*” it ignited their passions and led to the lewd behavior that characterized the Sabbatean and Frankist movements.

The point is made more clearly by a passage from Chasidic master Rabbi Tzadok of Lublin, who writes that Sabbateanism was caused by:

Their immersion in the wisdom of Kabbalah while the heart was filled with earthly passions, strengthening their material side. When they read descriptions of cohabitation, embracing, and kissing (of the Divine attributes, in Lurianic Kabbalah) etc., it gave them adulterous thoughts, may G-d spare us, to the point that they sinned greatly.⁴⁰

In such a climate, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* was strongly opposed to any public teaching of Lurianic Kabbalah. This is corroborated from the following anecdote which has reached us from the notes of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740–1809), an important disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch and colleague of Rabbi Shneur Zalman.

Once the Ba'al Shem Tov spoke with him (the Maggid) and rebuked him for expounding on the Kabbalah in public.

(The Maggid) responded, ‘Why then, master, do you expound Kabbalah in public?’

The Ba'al Shem Tov replied, ‘My style, in public sermons, is to convey the esoteric world of Etz Chaim, as understood through parallels to human experience in this world. So I render the physical, spiritual.’

³⁹ Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Eichenstein of Zidichov (Ziditshoyv), *Depart from Evil and Do Good* (Lublin 1912, new edition Jerusalem 1997), p. 93. See also Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Epstein, *Ma'or Va-Shemesb* (Warsaw, 1877), p. 34.

⁴⁰ Rabbi Tzadok of Lublin, *Divrei Sofrim* (Lublin 1939), p. 64. Curiously, Sabbatai Zvi himself was critical of Lurianic writings for focusing too much on symbolism while not making its meaning clear. He is quoted as saying, “*Arizal made a wonderfully beautiful chariot, but did not say who was riding in it*” [Avraham Cardozo, *Raza de-Razjn* cited in Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton, 1973), p. 904].

But you, sir, cite the esoteric symbolism verbatim, so you render the spiritual, physical.⁴¹

Lurianic Kabbalah (*Etz Chaim*) is dominated by very physical and anthropomorphic symbolism. We learn of the Divine “mother” and “father” and limbs of the Divine “body,” and spiritual phenomena are depicted by spatial analogies such as “lines” and “circles.” The *Ba'al Shem Tov* was concerned that if this material was cited verbatim in public to lay audiences, the physical connotation of these metaphors might be taken too literally. This would “render the spiritual (concepts in *Etz Chaim* overly) physical.”

The danger is therefore twofold: 1. The *theological* error of understanding the symbolism too physically. 2. The *behavioral* deviance that may result, when individuals who are not sufficiently refined, are immersed in the explicit imagery of Lurianic Kabbalah.

The *Ba'al Shem Tov's* “style”—which we would now call “Chasidus”—was to emphasize the *inner meaning* of Lurianic teachings with illustrations from the human experience, minimizing (or perhaps excluding completely) the physical symbols of *Etz Chaim*, which could easily be misinterpreted.⁴² Using examples from human psychology to illustrate

⁴¹ *Dibros ha-Maggid Mi-Mezritch Mi-Ksav Yad (Machon Genuzim 2018)*, p. 397. The same anecdote is found in *Ohr Ha-Emes: Imrei Tzadikim* (Zhitomir 1900), p. 72, but with the Maggid rebuking an unnamed preacher.

⁴² Since Lurianic Kabbalah rarely reveals the inner meaning (*nimshal*) of any one of its symbols (*mashalim*), it is a matter of controversy whether it is possible for anyone to discern it. The prevailing view among Sefardic Kabbalists (in Teiman, Iraq and North Africa) is that the *nimshal* is not available to us; we must simply learn Kabbalah as it has been revealed, as a sacred wisdom. As contemporary author Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Hillel writes, summarizing the position of the leading Sefardic Kabbalist, Rabbi Shalom Sharabi (1720–1777): “There is no possibility whatsoever to grasp the inner ‘*nimshal*’ hidden in the text and its symbols. Ask yourself: Is it possible to interpret a riddle without first knowing the whole of the riddle itself, in all its detail? That is why our master Rabbi Shalom Sharabi—and following him, the works of most early and later Kabbalists—set their primary goal to study the teachings of Arizal, to know with as much clarity as possible, the stated symbolism (*mashal ha-chitzon*).... This is our primary task” [Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Hillel, *Ahavas Shalom* (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 124].

The first to propose a framework for understanding the underlying *nimshal* of the Lurianic system was Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Ramchal* (1707–46), see idem. *Choker u'Mekubal* 3a; *Adir Ba-Marom* 2a-b. Later on, attention to the *nimshal* became a hallmark of the commentaries on Lurianic Kabbalah authored by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag (1885–1954). Rabbi Ashlag, whose upbringing was Chasidic, was dismayed when he encountered the Sefardic Kab-

spiritual phenomena, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* “rendered the physical, spiritual” taking a familiar aspect of physical life and disclosing the spiritual energy that it embodies.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman once expressed the same idea to one of his followers more succinctly:

The Alter Rebbe said to Zalman of Koritz, ‘*Etz Chaim* is a book of *mussar* (ethics).’⁴³

We find an identical observation from Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, who said that:

Recently he had completed the *Etz Chaim* and saw that it was all *mussar*.⁴⁴

balists in Jerusalem, who were opposed to elucidating the *nimsbal* of the Lurianic system, as the following incident (which he shared) illustrates.

“I asked them, ‘Do you have a teacher who knows the inner meaning of this material?’

“They replied to me, ‘Heaven forbid! There is no inner meaning beyond what is stated in the text that has been transmitted to us! Nothing more, G-d forbid!’”

“I asked them, ‘Do you think Rabbi Chaim Vital knew the inner meaning?’”

“They replied, ‘He certainly didn’t know any more than we know.’”

“I asked what they thought of Arizal himself. They replied, ‘He certainly did not know of any inner meaning. Everything he knew, he told his student Rabbi Chaim Vital, and it has reached us.’”

“I laughed at them very much. ‘If so how could have Arizal composed the text if he didn’t understand it?’

“They replied, ‘He received the composition from Elijah, who knew the inner meaning, because he was an angel.’”

“*At this point I became furious with them. I lacked the ability to tolerate them.*” [Letter of Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag reproduced in Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Goteib, *Ha-Sulam* (Jerusalem, 1997), p. 61].

It is important to note, however, that *Ramchal*, Beshtian *Chasidus* and Ashlagian Kabbalah all offer different interpretations of the Lurianic *nimsbal*, each following its own path. They do, however, all share a conviction in the value of the *nimsbal* and an optimistic viewpoint concerning our ability to discern it.

The Vilna Gaon was of the view that the *nimsbal* can be discerned, and cited *Ramchal* as a precedent [see letter printed in Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, (Chaim Friedlander, ed.), *Da’as Tevunos* (*Bnei Brak* 1975) vol. 1, p. 236]. This theme is developed in the works of his disciples, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov and Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Chaver (and later on, Rav Kook). Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv, however, emphasized the elusiveness of the *mashal*, like the Sefardic Kabbalists.

⁴³ Rabbi Shmuel Grunem Esterman, *Ramach Osios in Kisvei Ha-Rashag Esterman* (Israel 2015), sec. 69 (p. 294).

Obviously, *Etz Chaim*, which deals exclusively with Kabbalistic theosophy, is very far from being a *mussar text*. With these remarks, Rabbi Shneur Zalman and Rabbi Nachman apparently meant to say that the onus is on the student of *Etz Chaim* to *render it into* a practical text, to find parallels and lessons in human experience.

If these lessons are of such importance, why did *Arizal* himself neglect them?

The following visionary exchange has reached us from Chasidic Master Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Yehudah Yechiel Eichenstein of Safrin, in his mystical diary, *Megilas Setarim*.

Our master Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov once asked our master the Arizal: 'Why did you speak of the secrets so openly and not in the path of worship?'

(Arizal) answered him that if he had lived two more years, everything would have been fixed.⁴⁵

In this view, *Arizal's* lack of attention to "the path of worship" (*i.e.*, to *mussar*), which *Ba'al Shem Tov* deemed so problematic for the unlettered public, is to be seen as a tragic consequence of *Arizal's* short life. (*Arizal* died from a plague at the age of 38, a few years after he began teaching Kabbalah in Tzefat.)

Another attempt to explain why *Arizal* was not concerned about using very physical symbolism in reference to the Divine, is found in Rabbi Shlomo Lutzker's introduction to *Maggid Devarav Le-Ya'akov*, an early compendium of the Maggid's teachings.

Arizal... was not able to expand more upon the non-corporeality and abstraction of G-d, and furthermore he didn't need to, because he only revealed this (material) to his holy students who were already full of wisdom and profound understanding and had learned from the holy books of Rabbi Moshe Cordevero.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Chayei Maharar 2 (Shivchei Maharar)*, *Ma'alos Toraso u-Seferav*, sec. 22, p. 14a.

⁴⁵ Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Yehudah Yechiel Eichenstein of Safrin, *Megilas Setarim* (Jerusalem, 1944), 17a.

⁴⁶ Rabbi Shlomo Lutzker (ed.), *Maggid Devarav Le-Ya'akov* (Koretz 1781; new edition, Kehos 2004 p. 3-4). He continues: "But some of them thirstily drank the words of the Arizal only in the sense of their plain meaning... Until, thanks to G-d's pity on us, the light of Israel gleamed, that is the divine holy Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. His holy disciples reveled in the dust of his feet, thirstily drinking in his words, the words of the living G-d. With every gesture, movement, word and action, he revealed the precious source of the glory of this wisdom" (translation by Moshe Rosman).

The Kabbalistic system of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (*Ramak*) is more simple than that of *Arizal*, and devotes significant attention to the theological implications of Kabbalah, helping the reader not to err in any issues relating to Divine unity and corporeality.⁴⁷ *Arizal*'s students were well grounded in the Kabbalah of *Ramak*, which is why *Arizal* was comfortable using very corporeal symbolism, without much clarification. This, however, could not be said of the general public, from whom *Arizal*'s Kabbalah must be withheld, unless accompanied by Chasidic teaching.

In another exchange that has reached us through *Tzemach Tzedek*, the *Baal Shem Tov* is depicted as finally coming to terms with the corporeal nature of *Arizal*'s teachings and even justifying them.

The Ba'al Shem Tov used to say that Rabbi Chaim Vital made Kabbalah too physical.

Once when (Ba'al Shem Tov) practiced soul ascent, (he saw) Rabbi Chaim Vital, who gave him a pen and said, 'Why don't you write something better?'

The Ba'al Shem Tov (later) explained that a symbol must be from something physical and there simply is no other physical example⁴⁸ than the cohabitation of man and woman.⁴⁹

After a heavenly encounter with Rabbi Chaim Vital, who had passed away over a century earlier, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* accepts the necessity of Lurianic imagery, which provides the most accurate symbolism possible for Kabbalistic truths. However, this does not mean to say that the *Ba'al*

⁴⁷ For an anthology of teachings of *Ramak* on these topics see Shmuel Yudaikin (ed.), *Ha-Melech Hakadosh* (Bnei Brak: 2001).

This was, of course, a controversial position since Rabbi Chaim Vital delegitimized all Kabbalistic authors from the time of Nachmanides until *Arizal* (see introduction to *Etz Chaim*), including Rabbi Moshe Cordovero. However, here we see that Maggid's school took a more inclusive approach to Cordoverian Kabbalah, which was still viewed as less authoritative than that of the *Arizal*, but not disqualified completely. As a result, *Ramak* is cited extensively in Chabad Chasidus. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Ma'amarei Admor Ha-Zaken al Ma'amarei Ra'zal* (Kehos, 1984), p. 456; Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igros Kodesh*, vol. 11, p. 157; idem., *Sichos Kodesh* 5741, vol. 3, p. 22. For a contemporary example of an inclusive approach to Cordoverian Kabbalah see Rabbi Daniel Frisch, *Sha'arei Zohar* (Jerusalem 2005), pp. 195–205.

⁴⁸ For the Kabbalistic principle of *yichudim*, the merging of polar opposite energies.

⁴⁹ Notes of Chaim Meir Hilman (1855–1927) author of *Beis Rebbe* (Berditchov, 1902), in Mondshine, *Migdal Oz*, p. 372.

Shem Tov changed his mind about the *public* teaching of Lurianic Kabbalah, a position from which he did not retreat.⁵⁰

(It is no surprise, then, that the use of Lurianic *kavanos* during prayer—mediations based on a complex array of Kabbalistic symbols and Divine names—was also discouraged by the early leaders of Chasidism.⁵¹)

The *Ba'al Shem Tov's* approach, to “convey the esoteric world of *Etz Chaim* as understood through parallels to human experience in this world,” was perceived as successfully “correcting” the dangers implicit in public Lurianic discourse. As Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira (1783–1841), author of *Bnei Yisasschar*, writes:

People did not know how to approach the study of (Kabbalistic) wisdom, to learn a path in Divine worship from it, and they became corrupted by it... until G-d sent us the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, who enlightened the world how to study this material and to learn from (Kabbalistic) wisdom a worship that is whole and sincere.⁵²

A similar picture is drawn by Chasidic Master Rabbi Aharon Horowitz of Staroselje (1766–1828), an important disciple of Rabbi Shneur Zalman.

In the writings of Arizal, profundities of (Kabbalistic) wisdom are disclosed... in a wondrous way; he revealed this (Kabbalistic) wisdom more than all those who preceded him. Nevertheless, he veiled it thickly, with cryptic analogies that cannot be understood. That is why many later Kabbalists took his words almost literally, in a very physical sense, may G-d forgive them....

Until G-d sent us the light of Israel... the *Ba'al Shem Tov* who, utilizing the prophetic spirit given to him from heaven, began to explain (Arizal's) holy words. He explained the deeper meaning of this wisdom... introducing many analogies from the soul-body re-

⁵⁰ In more private settings the *Ba'al Shem Tov* would certainly have studied Lurianic Kabbalah with his disciples. See letter of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook in *Igros Ha-Rayah*, volume 2 (Jerusalem 1946), p. 69. The *Ba'al Shem Tov's* personal *siddur* (prayer book) also indicates that he prayed with Lurianic *kavanos*. [For a description of the *siddur* see Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine's essay in *Kovetz Sifsei Tzadikim*, issue 7 (Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 72ff.]

⁵¹ See *Tzava'as Ha-Ribash* sec. 117; Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Ohr ha-Meir* (Koretz 1798), p. 12a, 34a, 109b; Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, *Sichos Ha-Ran*, sec. 75; Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch, *Imrei Binah* (Kapust 1821) introduction; Rabbi Benjamin of Salositz, *Turei Zahav* (Mohilev, 1816), p. 57c. See also *Hayom Yom*, 11 Adar 1.

⁵² Notes of Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech to Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Eichenstein, *Depart from Evil* p. 7.

lationship, in the spirit of the verse ‘From my flesh I perceive G-d’ (Job 19:26). He began to save Israel... enabling a person to carry out wholesome worship through these holy insights.⁵³

In the eyes of early Chasidic masters, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* had provided a necessary “correction” to *Ariṣal’s* teachings which were too obscure, too open to misinterpretation and too removed from practical application. Lurianic Kabbalah lacked necessary parallels to human psychology that render familiar experiences as a guide to understanding spiritual truths, “*From my flesh I perceive G-d.*”

From the above citations one might get the impression that the teachings of the *Ba'al Shem Tov* and his disciples are filled with commentaries on the Lurianic Kabbalah. In reality, however, Lurianic citations in Chasidic works are relatively sparse. Beshtian Chasidism devotes itself vigorously to clarifying modes of worship, and it is certainly *based* on Lurianic teaching, but the connection is not always made. The vast majority of Chasidic literature is composed as commentary on the weekly Torah reading, and Kabbalistic citations are more of an occasional “spice” rather than the actual “meat” of the discourse.

Chasidic literature did do a very good job of making some Lurianic ideas known to a very wide audience; but it did this while discouraging the actual study of Lurianic Kabbalah. Chasidic disciples were exposed to Lurianism, and its core concepts formed a central feature of their world view, but many of them had probably never learned a page of *Etz Chaim*.

Summary: From its outset, Beshtian Chasidism was strongly opposed to the public teaching of Lurianic Kabbalah. The *Ba'al Shem Tov* felt that due to *Ariṣal’s* extensive use of physical symbolism to describe Divine processes, without significant attention to the non-physical meaning of these symbols, Lurianic Kabbalah could easily be misconstrued by the unlettered public. Instead, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* and early Chasidic masters emphasized what they felt was the inner message and practical relevance of Lurianic teachings, while employing Lurianic symbolism only sparingly. Early Chasidism could be typified as a *non-Lurianic Lurianism*.

⁵³ Rabbi Aharon Horowitz of Starosselje, *Sha'arei Ha-Yichud Ve-ha-Emunah* (Shklov 1820; new edition, Jerusalem, 2016), p. 4b-5a. He continues to describe how this process then unfolded through the Maggid and then through his master, Rabbi Shneur Zalman.

Lurianic kabbalah in early Chabad

The conservatism regarding Lurianic teaching in early Chasidism becomes all the more apparent from the exceptional case of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. For reasons that are not fully clear, Rabbi Shneur Zalman gradually developed a style of Chasidic teaching that incorporated Lurianic Kabbalah to a far greater degree than his colleagues.

I have set out only to explain the words of the Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, and of his disciples, according to Lurianic Kabbalah.⁵⁴

The approach was a departure from the norm in Chasidic circles, and eventually erupted in a public controversy surrounding the publication of his *magnum opus*, the *Tanya*.⁵⁵ Rabbi Shneur Zalman's principle critic, Chasidic Master Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk, wrote:

I do not approve... that you have taken the words of our holy Rabbi of Mezritch, which are the words of our holy Rabbi, the Ba'al Shem Tov, and mixed them together with the holy words of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria.⁵⁶

From another of Rabbi Avraham's criticisms we are given a clear indication why most Chasidic masters avoided more than a minimal reference to Lurianic ideas.

⁵⁴ *Tanya, Igeres Ha-Kodesh* chapter 25.

⁵⁵ See my comments in Rabbi Chaim Miller, *The Practical Tanya, Volume 1: The Book for Inbetweeners* (Brooklyn: Kol Menachem, 2016), p. xviii-xxi. For a discussion of attitudes to Kabbalah in early Chabad see Rabbi Nochum Greenwald, *Ha-Chasidus ve-Toras ha-Kabbalah* in *Mayanosecha*, issue 24 (Nisan 2010), pp. 20–27. For the overall development of Chabad ideology see Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago University Press, 1990).

⁵⁶ Ya'akov Barnai (ed.), *Igros Chasidim Me-Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzchak Ben Zvi, 1980), p. 239. The dispute was not purely ideological, and also centered on the fund-raising efforts of Rabbi Shneur Zalman on behalf of Rabbi Avraham.

The Lurianic content of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's public discourses was also considerably expanded after his release from imprisonment by the Russian authorities in 1798. According to tradition, Rabbi Shneur Zalman saw his release as a sign that his approach to teaching Chasidus had been ratified in heaven, and he subsequently pursued the path more vigorously. See *Likutei Sichos*, volume 30, pp. 170–5; Rabbi Nachum Greenwald (ed.) *Harav* (2015), pp. 387–431.

Too much oil may, G-d forbid, cause the light to be extinguished...
With almost all their Chasidim, our teachers took great care with their words, speaking only ethical teachings (*mussar*), striving to bring them faith in the Sages.⁵⁷

Even in his new system, Rabbi Shneur Zalman certainly did not present Lurianic teachings in their full complexity, as they are found in the writings of Rabbi Chaim Vital.⁵⁸ If overt citations to Lurianic material represented, to give a crude illustrative estimate, two percent of general Chasidic teaching, Rabbi Shneur Zalman raised that number to perhaps twenty percent. While that represents a sharp increase, the flavor of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's writings is still distinctly Chasidic, filled with parables, metaphors and illustrations from the human psyche. His works do not read like a commentary on Lurianic Kabbalah; in fact, when he was once asked to compose a commentary on *Etz Chaim* his response was:

You want from me Chasidus on *Etz Chaim*! What does Etz Chaim speak of? The chain of spiritual worlds (*bishtalshelus*). But I, thank G-d, am speaking higher than that, much higher.⁵⁹

In one of his letters, Rabbi Shneur Zalman explains more precisely the relationship between his approach to Chasidic teaching and Kabbalah.

And let nobody suspect that I myself have stripped away the physical symbolism of Arizal's teachings, fathoming their meaning. My intent is only to clarify the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, of blessed memory, and his disciples, according to Arizal's Kabbalah... as I have heard from my masters.⁶⁰

As we have seen, *Arizal* did not explain the inner meaning (*nimshal*) of each physical metaphor (*mashal*) that he employs. In his discourses, Rabbi Shneur Zalman often presents a Lurianic idea along with its *nimshal* and practical application. He makes clear to us here that it is not he who fathomed the *nimshal*, but the *Ba'al Shem Tov*. However, since the *Ba'al Shem Tov* often cited the lesson (*nimshal*) without reference to its

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 240.

⁵⁸ Rabbi Shneur Zalman did permit some study of *Etz Chaim* directly from the text. "One may study Etz Chaim, Gate 7, provided one is careful to take from there some lesson in worship" (cited in Mondshine, *Migdal Oz*, p. 424. See note 11 *ibid.*).

⁵⁹ Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneersohn, *Toras Shalom* (Kehos 1957), p. 256.

⁶⁰ Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Tanya, Igeres Ha-Kodesh*, section 25.

Lurianic symbol/source (*mashal*), Rabbi Shneur Zalman took upon himself the task of bringing the two together.

To put it succinctly: *Arizal* taught the *mashal* without the *nimsbal*. The *Ba'al Shem Tov* stated the *nimsbal* without its (Lurianic) *mashal*. In what became known as the *Chabad* school, Rabbi Shneur Zalman realigned the *nimsbal* and *mashal* together, taking the *Ba'al Shem Tov's* words and demonstrating their Lurianic underpinnings.

This is perhaps why Rabbi Shneur Zalman felt he was doing something “higher” than merely commenting on *Etz Chaim*. Such a commentary would only give clarity to the *mashal*; Rabbi Shneur Zalman's focus was on “marrying” the *nimsbal*, which had already been identified by the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, with its Lurianic *mashal*.

The relationship was summed up by the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber (Rashab) in these words:

People think that Chasidus is a commentary on Kabbalah, which is a mistake... Actually, Kabbalah is a commentary on Chasidus.⁶¹

The relationship between *mashal* (signifier) and *nimsbal* (signified), is that the former explains the latter. If Chasidus, the teachings of the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, represent the *nimsbal* of the Lurianic *mashal*, then “Kabbalah (*mashal*) is a commentary on Chasidus (*nimsbal*).” This is despite the fact that Chasidus was a body of teaching developed after Lurianic Kabbalah, and appears, superficially, to be a layer of commentary imposed upon it.⁶²

⁶¹ *Toras Shalom* p. 172. See at length the discussion in Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *On the Essence of Chasidus* (Kebos 2003) p. 49; *Likutei Sichos* vol. 26, p. 388; *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos* 5744, volume 4, p. 2417.

⁶² Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber explains the idea in more depth in a 1908 talk: “In the writings of *Arizal*, the Divine realm is described using symbols from the human body. So the foundation of Kabbalah is the verse ‘Above on the (Divine) throne was a figure like that of a man’ (Ezekiel 1:26; depicting how Divine energy appears in human garb). “But the foundation of Kabbalah is the verse ‘Let us make man in our image’ (Genesis 1:26; depicting how Divine energies are mirrored in the human)... The approach of Chasidus is ‘undressing’ the human faculties, understanding Divine energy from your own psyche... that from your powers of ‘keser,’ ‘chochmah’ and ‘binah,’ you understand ‘chochmah’ as it is above (as a Divine energy), through ‘undressing’ the powers (as they are within you, since they are created in the Divine image)... “Kabbalah represents a containment (*bagbalah*) of Divine energy (in a limited symbol), whereas Chasidus is its unveiling (*hafshatah*)... Because when you

In summary: Rabbi Shneur Zalman developed a more overtly Lurianic approach to Chasidism, including far more references to Kabbalah than his contemporaries.⁶³ This came to be known as *Chabad Chasidus*. Rabbi Shneur Zalman did not feel he had violated the *Ba'al Shem Tov's* prohibition against the public teaching of Lurianic Kabbalah, because he had fused Chasidus and Lurianic Kabbalah in such a way that the *Ba'al Shem Tov's* concern (of presenting physical symbols for the Divine without proper clarification) was averted. Chabad therefore represents a more openly Lurianic strand of Beshtian Chasidus.

Lurianic kabbalah in contemporary Chabad

The above sources, which reflect a conservative approach to Lurianic teaching, are echoed frequently in the teachings of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994). A few examples should suffice.

As cited at the beginning of this essay, the Rebbe observed that Kabbalah study has not been a focus in Chabad.

Generally speaking, Kabbalah study was not common, even among Chabad Chasidim, whose knowledge of Kabbalah was from material cited and explained in Chasidic discourses, not because they studied Kabbalah.⁶⁴

In numerous letters and *sichos* (sermons), this conservative attitude toward Kabbalah study is attributed to the *Ba'al Shem Tov* (as transmitted through *Tzemach Tzedek*). Chasidus is recommended as the “safer” alternative. The following is typical:

learn about Divine energy from your own faculties, then those faculties become (unveiled as) Divine” (*Toras Shalom*, pp. 255-6).

⁶³ Rabbi Nachman of Breslav’s teachings are also typified by an increased emphasis on Lurianic Kabbalah, as merged with Beshtian teachings. See the survey of Rabbi Nachman’s views in Rabbi David Shapiro, *Isb Teyunah Yidlenah* (Jerusalem, 2014) pp. 20–32.

Chasidic Master Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Eichenstein, and the Rebbes of the Komarna school who followed after him, taught Lurianic Kabbalah without any filter or insistence on synthesizing it with the teachings of the *Ba'al Shem Tov*. For Rabbi Eichenstein’s attitudes to Kabbalah study see his *Sur Mera*. He was also critical of Chabad for being too “philosophical.”

⁶⁴ *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos* 5745, volume 2, p. 1147. Again the Rebbe stresses here *Tzemach Tzedek's* remarks in the name of the *Ba'al Shem Tov*.

There is a view cited in Rishonim (Medieval authorities) that one should not study Kabbalah before the age of forty.⁶⁵ We also have the conservative position of the Ba'al Shem Tov about Kabbalah study, cited by Tzemach Tzedek....

However, these limitations applied only to Kabbalah study, but since Chasidus is now available... any Jewish person below the age of forty can and must study Chasidus.⁶⁶

On one occasion, when asked about the study of *Arizal's Etz Chaim*, the Rebbe replied:

You write that someone has suggested you ought to study Etz Chaim. Obviously this would be considered the study of Jewish mysticism, however when you study such ideas in Chasidus Chabad, things are more clearly understood, and you are spared from inappropriate interpretations. This is not the case when you study without the above (Chabad) commentaries, where caution is advised.⁶⁷

Similarly, in 1990 when the Rebbe was asked by a grandson of Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag to make a “public call” for people to study Kabbalah, the Rebbe declined, explaining:

Chabad Chasidus incorporates concepts of Kabbalah... so when one studies Chabad Chasidus, one also studies the Kabbalistic concepts that it cites. This being the case, such a ‘public call’ would imply that one cannot fulfill this study through Chabad Chasidus....⁶⁸

From all of the above, one might easily get the impression that the Rebbe's position on this issue was strongly exclusivist. Chabad Chasidus, he seemed to argue, is the most accessible and “safe” approach to study Lurianic Kabbalah. On the other hand, direct study from Lurianic writings lacks the necessary elaboration. There is also a concern that the Lurianic anthropomorphic imagery could be misinterpreted. Everyone is

⁶⁵ See *Siach to Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah*, 246, par. 6. For an extensive discussion on the sources in Jewish Law regarding the permissibility of Kabbalah study see Rabbi Moshe David Chaimovitch, *Emes Ve-Emunah* (Bet E-I, 2015), pp. 149–245.

⁶⁶ *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos* 5744, volume 4, p. 2416.

⁶⁷ *Igros Kodesh* vol. 11, p. 276. See also *ibid.* vol. 8, p. 222.

⁶⁸ *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, p. 491. A video of the exchange can be seen at <https://youtu.be/S6otDPrA1t4>. See discussion below.

advised, therefore, to study Chasidus without reservation, and be wary of Lurianic study.

However, the matter is not so simple. As is the case in so many instances, the Rebbe's approach to this issue is nuanced and multifaceted. As we shall see from the following, many sources indicate that a more inclusivist approach was adopted by the Rebbe, which neutralized some of the Chasidic aversion to Lurianic study.

First of all, this was the tradition in which the Rebbe himself was raised. His father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak ("Levik") Schneerson, was a Chabad *chasid*, but also a Lurianic Kabbalist. All the writings that we have from Rabbi Levi Yitzchak demonstrate a deep engagement with Lurianic Kabbalah.⁶⁹

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's public teaching of Lurianic material attracted criticism from his peers, as his wife, Rebbetzin Chana, noted in her memoir:

My husband had sometimes encountered opposition to his style of Chasidic discourses. Some complained that there was too much Kabbalah.⁷⁰

Another incident that has reached us is the account of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's Kabbalistic discourse in 1928 to the Chasidic community of Leningrad. The strong emphasis on Kabbalah prompted some listeners to,

Begin questioning Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's knowledge of such Kabbalistic works as *Etz Chaim* and other Lurianic texts, prompting him to cite entire pages verbatim."

"Rabbi Michael Dworkin, a respected Chasid, was unable to contain himself and challenged Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's novel approach. 'On what do you base your method of teaching?' he asked the Rav.

"I received fundamental guidance and basic principles from Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber,"⁷¹ replied Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. 'Drawing on his instructions I later formulated a methodology.'⁷²

Contrary to the norm in Chasidic circles where Lurianic Kabbalah was not emphasized (beyond its inclusion in Chasidic discourses), Rabbi Levi

⁶⁹ Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, *Likutei Levi Yitzchak* (Kehos 1971–3), four volumes.

⁷⁰ *Memoirs of Rebbetzin Chana* (Kehos 2012), installment 20.

⁷¹ The Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn, in whose *yeshivah* Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had studied.

⁷² Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Gottlieb (Rabbi Elchonon Lesches, trans.), *Rabbi, Mystic, Leader* (Kehos 2008), pp. 74–5.

Yitzchak was well versed in these texts and they featured prominently in his public discourse.

He also encouraged his son, the future Rebbe, to follow in this path. In a substantive correspondence that has been preserved, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's letters to his son are saturated with Lurianic teaching.⁷³ In one letter, penned in 1934, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak actively encourages the future Rebbe to incorporate more Lurianic Kabbalah into his Torah thoughts.

Your essay was, generally speaking, very good. It demonstrated critical insight and mastery of legal and mystical sources.... But, my beloved son, my suggestion to you is... to add more 'pepper and spice,' meaning to connect the ideas more and more with their foundation in the 'true wisdom' of Kabbalah... for then each idea will be recognizable as true.... For, as you can see, the majority of Chasidic texts are based on Kabbalah... and even those that do not have (Lurianic) interpretation printed alongside them, the truth is that they are all based on Kabbalah.⁷⁴

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak saw importance in connecting all parts of Torah with Lurianic Kabbalah, in order to bring to light their "truth" in a more overt way. He also observed that Chasidic wisdom is founded on Kabbalah, though the connection is not always obvious. He encouraged his son, the future Rebbe, to include more Lurianic content in his Torah thoughts, beyond that which is already cited in Chasidic discourses.

We find that this was indeed the style of the Future Rebbe's first public discourse, delivered at the court of the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, in 1929, when the latter was away traveling. One observer later reported:

He spoke for several hours without interruption, words of Chasidus mixed and spiced with Midrash, Kabbalah and *gematria* (numerology), the approach he has received from his father... If only we would hear from his mouth the Rebbe's Chasidus! I hope this will happen soon.⁷⁵

In summary: Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson encouraged his son, the future Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, to have a strong interest in Kabbalah, beyond the material that had already been incorporated in Chabad

⁷³ *Likutei Levi Yitzchak*, volume 3, pp. 197–423.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁷⁵ Report of the events written to the Sixth Rebbe by Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Althaus, reproduced in Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *Igros Kodesh* vol. 16 (Kehos 2001), pp. 387-8.

Chasidus. While we do not find any clear indication that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak taught Lurianic Kabbalah in public without an accompanying Chasidic commentary, he certainly did so in private, and his writings that have survived are predominantly Lurianic. For a Chabad Chasid, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's approach was considered unusual by his peers.

The extent to which the Rebbe was molded by his father's influence is complex. The Rebbe certainly did not emphasize Lurianic study to the same extent as his father, but the Rebbe's public sermons (*sichos*) for over forty years are strikingly original, expanding on themes well beyond those discussed by the previous leaders of Chabad, including significant attention to Kabbalah. The Rebbe also devoted much time to teaching his father's Kabbalistic writings in public,⁷⁶ though these sermons are never *purely* Lurianic and always contain some practical lessons and/or ties to Chasidic ideas. In private, the Rebbe showed interest in a broad spectrum of Lurianic literature, including its Sefardic, Lithuanian (non-Chasidic) and Chasidic schools of interpretation.⁷⁷

Coming from an inclusivist background, how did the Rebbe view the generally exclusivist approach that dominated Chabad circles? The following passage from a 1976 sermon is telling.

There were Chasidim, even great Chasidim, who did not study Etz Chaim etc., saying that whatever they needed to know from Etz Chaim had been cited by the Alter Rebbe in Tanya or in Chasidic

⁷⁶ Many of these sermons are collected in *Toras Menachem, Tiferes Levi Yitzchak* (Lahak 1990–1993), three volumes. For the Rebbe's sermons on his father's Kabbalistic notes on *Tanya*, see *Likutei Sichos*, vol. 39, pp. 51–160.

⁷⁷ For example, in a 1952 letter to Shlomo Chaskind, the Rebbe includes the following very broad "list of books that interest me": 1. *Beis Lechem Yehudah* on *Etz Chaim* (2 vols.); 2. *Leshem Shevo ve-Achlimah* (4–5 vols.), full set; 3. *Shalom Yerushalayim*, Responsa in Kabbalah; 4. *Me'il Kodesh* and *Bigdei Yesha*, three volumes on *Etz Chaim* and *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanos*; 5. *Siddur* Rabbi A. Sharabi, nine volumes; 6. *Damesek Eliezer*, commentary on the Zohar; 7. *Bnei Aharon*, commentary to *Shaar Ha-Gilgulim*; 8. *Choshev Machshavos, Magen David*; 9. *Kisei Mel'ech* on *Tikunei Zohar*; 10. *Sefer Ha-Mekaneh al ha-Mitzvos* and *Ohev Yisrael*; 11. *Chemdas Tzvi* on *Tikunei Zohar*; 12. *Pesach Einayim* by Rabbi Shalom Sharabi; 13. *Sha'ar Gan Eden*. (The letter is printed as an addendum to the weekly *Sicha* prepared by Lahak, published for *Shabbos Parshas Ki Seitzei* 5771, p. 11.) The Rebbe also showed interest in acquiring the *Sulam* commentary on the Zohar by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag [see Uriel Zimmer, *Igros Chasid (Kfar Chabad, 2010)*, p. 18]; works of Kabbalah by Rabbi Asher-Zelig Margolios (*Igros Kodesh* #1053); and those of Rabbi Moshe Yair Weinstock, with whom he corresponded and met in person in 1959, discussing Lurianic Kabbalah (see account of Rabbi Shalom Wolpo in *Shemen Sason Me-Chaverecha*).

discourses. As a student of the Alter Rebbe, he did not want to receive from any other source. Everything that he needed to know, he would know from the Alter Rebbe.⁷⁸

Here the exclusivist approach, of studying only Chasidus, is not presented as the normative position of Chabad; it is portrayed as an extraordinary, although admirable, approach of some special individuals. “*There were Chasidim*” who acted in this exceptional fashion, but there were, of course, Chasidim who did not share these exclusivist sentiments.

If I am reading this correctly, the Rebbe is speaking as one who has an admiration and respect for the exclusivist position, which stems out of devotion and attachment to one’s Rebbe, but it was not a position with which he himself was fully aligned.

The following section from a 1978 sermon appears to be more reflective of the Rebbe’s own position (and consequently, the position of Chabad in its Seventh Generation).

When speaking of Seder *Hishtalsbelus* (detailed study of the spiritual realms), Kabbalah has more commentary than Chasidus. As we see in practice: first we study Chasidus, and then we study Kabbalah. But after studying Kabbalah, we still need to study Chasidus, to ensure that the Kabbalah study is in order.⁷⁹

Here Kabbalah study, beyond the material incorporated in Chabad Chasidus, is painted in a positive light. Lurianic Kabbalah simply has more information about Seder *Hishtalsbelus* than Chasidus,⁸⁰ and therefore “*we study Kabbalah.*” However due to the concerns that have been aired by the *Ba’al Shem Tov*, “*first we study Chasidus*” and “*after studying Kabbalah, we still need to study Chasidus, to ensure that the Kabbalah study is in order.*”

If these recommendations are followed, Lurianic Kabbalah study is

⁷⁸ *Sichos Kodesh* 5736, vol. 1. p. 197.

⁷⁹ *Sichos Kodesh* 5738, volume 2, p. 413. This view is also echoed by Chabad adherent and Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh in: Ephraim Kurer, *Sefer Ha-Zohar: Its Author and Status* (Heb.) (Yeshivas Mekor Chaim, 2011), p. 61

⁸⁰ And “factual knowledge of *Seder Hishtalsbelus* is also a lofty and exalted mitzvah. Indeed, it outweighs everything” (Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Tanya, Kuntres Acharon* p. 156b). See discussion of Rabbi Nochum Greenwald on this text in *Ha’aros Oholei Torah, Parshas Noach* 2002 (pp. 38-9), and *ibid.*, *Parshas Toldos* (pp. 87–90).

considered acceptable, it would seem, even for loyal Chabad adherents.⁸¹

There is another approach of the Rebbe that I would classify as inclusivist: he encouraged the publication and dissemination of Lurianic works by non-Chabad authors, even if such works did not contain any Chabad material. To be sure, the Rebbe would always encourage the inclusion of references to Chabad discourses in these works, but he had a positive attitude to disseminating all (Orthodox)⁸² treatments of Lurianic Kabbalah, even when Chabad references were lacking.⁸³ In fact, even when he declined to participate in Rabbi Ashlag's public call for Kabbalah study (mentioned above), the Rebbe was quick to emphasize, "I don't reject other approaches," and he blessed the project with success. Such a statement, I would argue, is the hallmark of an inclusivist approach. Exclusivism, by definition, rejects other approaches, and considers its own the uniquely correct path. Only an inclusivist would say, "I don't reject other approaches."⁸⁴

⁸¹ If I am indeed correct that the Seventh Rebbe favored a more inclusivist approach, then a special connection with *our* Rebbe would be best maintained through inclusivism!

⁸² The Rebbe expressed dissatisfaction with teachers of Kabbalah who were not Torah-observant Jews. In a 1985 letter, he explained: "When a person desires to do research in any scientific field, the only qualification required would be sufficient knowledge and ability to carry out the research. However, if one wishes to do research in any area of Judaism, in order to present an accurate assessment, it can be done only by a Jew, and not just a Jew, but one who has been living Jewishly for many years. Lacking this qualification, the conclusions will necessarily be superficial at best.... The same is true in the matter of the Kabbalah. A true and scientifically valid study of it cannot be made just on the basis of books, but one has to be personally involved in the Kabbalah in his everyday life over a period of many years."

Similarly, in a 1976 letter the Rebbe argues that Kabbalah "is a subject that cannot really be studied without a G-d-fearing, Torah-true teacher, much less by one who has no solid Torah background" (both letters can be found at https://www.collive.com/show_news.rtx?id=50902).

⁸³ See letters to: Rabbi Yehudah Tzvi Brandwein (*Igros Kodesh*, letter 8310); Rabbi Reuven Margolios (24th Elul 5714, 8th Elul 5717); Rabbi Asher Zelig Margolios (*Igros Kodesh* vol. 4, p. 331); Rabbi Moshe Yair Weinstock (*Shemen Sasson* *ibid.*). The Rebbe was also encouraging of Rabbi Yitzchak Kaduri's efforts to build a yeshiva devoted to Lurianic study and practice in the Sefardic tradition (see video of their meeting at <https://youtu.be/Muz2huD-5tk>).

⁸⁴ That the Rebbe declined to participate in Rabbi Ashlag's "public call" to Kabbalah should therefore be perceived in light of the following factors. 1. A "public announcement" needs to be kept relatively simple, and given the choice between emphasizing Chasidus or Kabbalah, the Rebbe felt the former to be more beneficial. 2. The Rebbe was respectful of the exclusivist tradition in Chabad, and did not want to make a public declaration to the contrary. 3.

So far we have seen that the Rebbe's inclusivism incorporated:

- a.) Personal interest in all strands of Lurianic Kabbalah;
- b.) Citation of Lurianic material in his public sermons (alongside Chabad Chasidus);
- c.) Encouragement of the publication and dissemination of a vast range of Lurianic texts and commentaries;
- d.) Sanction for Lurianic study among Chabad adherents, when accompanied by a firm grounding and ongoing interest in Chasidus.

The Rebbe's position might therefore be considered a *conservative inclusivism*, seeing value in broader Kabbalah study, but in limited contexts.

There is, however, a further important source on this issue that we have not yet addressed. I refer, of course, to the Rebbe's very frequent citation of a line in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya (Igeres Ha-Kodesh)*.

Arizal wrote that specifically in these latter generations it is permitted to reveal this wisdom, and a mitzvah (to do so).⁸⁵

Arizal's reference to "this wisdom" is clearly not to Chasidus—which he predated by two centuries—but to his own Kabbalistic teachings.⁸⁶ This statement itself is not alarming *in a Lurianic text*, but it is anomalous in an early Chasidic text, such as the *Tanya*. As we have seen, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* certainly did *not* deem it a "*mitzvah*" to reveal Lurianic wisdom to the public; on the contrary, he rebuked those who did so.

The Rebbe possibly harbored concerns about Ashlagian Kabbalah which he preferred not to air in this meeting, since it was unnecessary to do so and would have been insulting to Rav Ashlag (see his comments in *Igras Kodesh* vol. 11, p. 276). For these reasons, the meeting between Rav Ashlag and the Rebbe is not, in my opinion, proof that the Rebbe's position was exclusivist, as is often (understandably) inferred. A nuanced understanding of the Rebbe's position needs to be perceived in the context of all the sources cited in this essay.

⁸⁵ *Tanya, Igeres Ha-Kodesh* sec. 25. The source for this statement in *Arizal's* writings is often cited as Rabbi Chaim Vital's introduction to *Sha'ar Ha-Hakdamas*, printed at the beginning of our editions of *Eitz Chaim*. However, the assertion that "*it is permitted to reveal this wisdom, and a mitzvah to do so*" is never stated there explicitly, only by implication. However, a more accurate source for the *Tanya's* statement is found in earlier printings of *Eitz Chaim* that were available to Rabbi Shneur Zalman. There, a different introductory letter from Rabbi Chaim Vital is printed, stating: "*But in these generations it is a mitzvah and great joy before G-d that this wisdom be revealed*" [*Eitz Chaim*, Koritz Edition (1782), p. 2a; Shklov edition (1800), p. 3a].

⁸⁶ Rabbi Aharon Horowitz of Starosselje did try to argue that *Arizal's* statement refers, in fact, to Chasidus, and not Kabbalah (see *Sha'arei Ha-Yichud Ve-ha-Emunah* p. 4b-5a). However, his argument, which is clearly anachronistic, seems to have been rejected by the Rebbe, as will become apparent below.

How, then, could Rabbi Shneur Zalman promote a teaching to the contrary?

In a 1987 sermon, the Rebbe highlighted this contradiction:

There is something to which, remarkably, people do not pay attention. (Tzemach Tzedek) cites... the Ba'al Shem Tov's directive not to study works of (Lurianic) Kabbalah. But note the contrast: The Alter Rebbe writes in *Igeres Ha-Kodesh* that, 'In these latter generations it is permitted to reveal this wisdom, and a mitzvah (to do so).' This is at the same time Tzemach Tzedek stresses conservatism and caution in Kabbalah study!

Whatever the reason may be, a conservative approach to Kabbalah study has become the norm.⁸⁷

Already in his ninth decade, after a lifetime of reflecting on these texts, the Rebbe shared his impression that there is an unresolved tension here. The *Ba'al Shem Tov's* directive not to spread Lurianic Kabbalah is in direct opposition to the *Tanya's* statement that it is a *mitzvah* to do so. While the contradiction is blatant, "people do not pay attention" to it. Practically speaking "a conservative approach to Kabbalah study has become the norm," following the view of *Ba'al Shem Tov*—but that does not mean to say that the matter has been clarified; it is just a reflection of the "facts on the ground" in Chasidic circles.

In his *Likutei Sichos*, the Rebbe devotes an entire essay to the *Tanya's* statement (from Arizal), in which he concludes:

We see that, despite the warnings and limitations imposed by Rabbi Chaim Vital, we do indeed learn concepts in Kabbalah. Not only do we study them, but based on Arizal's statement that now 'It is a mitzvah to reveal this wisdom,' we disclose and publicize them....

The study of any part of Torah after it has been revealed,⁸⁸ including (Lurianic) Kabbalah, strengthens the connection between a Jew and the Creator... no person should wait to study this wisdom until he has satisfied all the criteria and restrictions (stated by Rabbi Chaim Vital).⁸⁹

Likewise, we find in a 1987 sermon that the Rebbe actively encouraged the dissemination of *Arizal's* writings, explaining:

This will also achieve 'the outward dissemination of the well-springs' upon which the coming of *Mashiach* depends. As in his re-

⁸⁷ *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos* 5747, volume 3, p. 61.

⁸⁸ Emphasis in the original.

⁸⁹ *Likutei Sichos*, volume 26, pp. 35-6.

sponse to the Ba'al Shem Tov's question, 'When, sir, are you coming?' to which *Mashiach* said, 'when your wellsprings (i.e., of the Ba'al Shem Tov), will be disseminated outwards.'⁹⁰

Now the 'wellsprings' of the Ba'al Shem Tov are based on the teachings of Arizal.⁹¹ So it follows that by publicizing and spreading the teachings of Arizal, (we achieve) 'the outward dissemination of the wellsprings,' speeding even more the coming of our righteous *Mashiach*.⁹²

Another instance where the Rebbe was encouraging of public Lurianic study was in the summer of 1976, on the Sabbath afternoon preceding *Arizal's yahrtzeit*, the following day:

At this time, we ought to study some teachings of Arizal, also after the departure of the Sabbath this evening, and especially on Sunday, which is the anniversary of his passing."

"And wherever Jews are to be found studying Torah, they should also study something from the teachings of Arizal... and especially by his graveside.... And this study should continue in the following days...."

Also during upcoming gatherings for young children, an idea from Arizal's teachings should be taught, since in Lurianic writings there are many ideas that one could explain even to children.⁹³

Here the Rebbe instructed that *Arizal's* writings be studied publicly, without restriction, "*wherever Jews are to be found studying Torah.*" Unusually,

⁹⁰ Letter of the *Ba'al Shem Tov* describing his soul's ascent to the heavenly chamber of *Mashiach*, printed in *Keser Shem Tov* (new edition, Kehos 2004), pp. 4-5.

⁹¹ The Rebbe's words here echo his father's letter from fifty years earlier (cited above), "the majority of Chasidic texts are based on Kabbalah... and even those that do not have (Lurianic) interpretation printed alongside them, the truth is that they are all based on Kabbalah."

⁹² *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos* 5747, volume 3, p. 369. Rabbi Simchah Ashlag claims that the Rebbe was responding to an earlier complaint that he had made, that the Rebbe's constant stress on the dissemination of *pnimiyus ha-Torah* (the mystical parts of Torah) was perceived as referring only to Chasidus and not Kabbalah. According to Rabbi Ashlag's recollection, the Rebbe replied, "G-d forbid, I will clarify this matter" (see https://youtu.be/-Q8_jyqpvGg).

The notion that spreading Lurianic Kabbalah accelerates the coming of *Mashiach* is also mentioned by Rabbi Chaim Vital himself (in the above-cited introduction to *Etz Chaim*, Koretz edition), who stresses, "*But in these generations it is a mitzvah and great joy before G-d that this wisdom be revealed, and in this merit Mashiach will come*" (emphasis added).

⁹³ *Sichos Kodesh* 5736, vol. 2, p. 572.

this campaign was also directed to children, who were encouraged to study Lurianic teachings (on their level). The campaign also proposed a gathering at *Arizal's* grave where his teachings were to be publicly studied, an event that was subsequently reported in press reports, which marveled that children were studying Lurianic teachings.⁹⁴

There was no insistence in the Rebbe's directive that *Arizal's* teachings be taught with Chasidic commentary, and if Lurianic writings were to be learned "*wherever Jews are to be found,*" this could certainly not be guaranteed.⁹⁵

Let me cite one more similar case from 1984. In a public meeting with Rabbi Avraham Shapira (1914–2007), Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi of Israel, and Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu (1929–2010), Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, the Rebbe encouraged his colleagues to make a "public call" for the study of Kabbalah.

After citing *Arizal's* statement (from *Tanya*) that "*in these latter generations it is permitted to reveal this wisdom, and a mitzvah (to do so),*" the Rebbe suggested:

The two Chief Rabbis should issue a joint 'public call' to awaken and inspire the hearts of our Jewish brethren in all locations, concerning the need and urgency of studying the mystical parts of Torah. This ought to be publicized very widely.⁹⁶

The Rebbe's request was unfortunately not heeded, and in a subsequent meeting in 1989 with the two Chief Rabbis, he lamented:

In our last meeting we spoke about the need to make a public call for the study of mystical parts of Torah, the teachings of Kabbalah, since, regrettably, some people have never learned Kabbalah in their life.⁹⁷

If the Chief Rabbis' public call would have taken place, it would have obviously led to the study of a vast range of mystical texts, including Lurianic Kabbalah. This represents another instance in which the Rebbe encouraged public Lurianic study, without restriction or direct stipulation that it must be interpreted through a Chasidic lens. In this particular case the Rebbe explicitly quoted the *Tanya's* statement as one

⁹⁴ The newspaper articles and related documents are reproduced at <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?section=artdays&id=3174>.

⁹⁵ Although the directive was directly addressed to an audience of largely Chabad Chasidim, who were presumably well grounded themselves in Chasidus.

⁹⁶ *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos* 5745, p. 3090-1.

⁹⁷ *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* (Machon Oholei Tzadikim), p. 469.

of his sources, that “*in these latter generations it is permitted to reveal this wisdom, and a mitzvah (to do so).*”

In fact, in 1983 the Rebbe even went so far as to “co-opt” the *Arizal* into the dynastic chain of Chabad Chasidic Rebbes that he would list during his *Rosh Hashanah* sermon, a practice he continued in all subsequent years.

My father-in-law the (Sixth) Rebbe spoke about mentioning the name of all our Rebbes on Rosh Hashanah, beginning with the Ba'al Shem Tov, then the Maggid, the Alter Rebbe, Mittlerer Rebbe, Tzemach Tzedek, Maharash, the Rebbe Rashab and, in our times, the Rebbe, my father-in-law.... I would like to now add mention of the Arizal's name... based on the statement in Tanya, in the name of Arizal, that ‘specifically in these latter generations it is permitted to reveal this wisdom, and a mitzvah (to do so).’⁹⁸

In summary: In most contexts the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe upheld the Beshtian tradition which opposed public teaching of Lurianic Kabbalah (when devoid of Chasidic commentary). However, there were several instances where the Rebbe did encourage public Lurianic study. This seems to have been based on the authority of the *Tanya's* teaching (in the name of *Arizal*) that “*it is permitted to reveal this wisdom, and a mitzvah (to do so).*”

Conclusion

- Chabad differs in its attitudes towards the study of Zohar *vis-a-vis* the study of Lurianic Kabbalah (teachings of *Arizal*).
- Early Chabad vigorously encouraged Zohar study.
- In later generations of Chabad, Zohar was less emphasized, but there was never any objection or restriction aired against study of the Zohar, which is considered a form of *Midrash*.
- This was not the case with Lurianic Kabbalah, which the *Ba'al Shem Tov* strongly discouraged from the general public, arguing that it could confuse the average person.
- Rabbi Shneur Zalman introduced more Lurianic Kabbalah into his Chasidic discourses than his contemporaries, and this became a hallmark of what came to be known as the Chabad school of Chasidism.

⁹⁸ *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos* 5744, vol. 1, p. 25.

- Reflecting the *Ba'al Shem Tov's* concerns, an *exclusivist* position became dominant in Chabad, where pure Lurianic study was discouraged and accessed only through the material cited in Chabad discourses.
- The Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was respectful of this position, and generally emphasized it.
- However, the Rebbe also demonstrated inclusivist tendencies and was not discouraging of Lurianic study for individuals well-grounded in Chabad Chasidus.
- Toward the latter part of his leadership, there were several occasions when the Rebbe did promote Lurianic study more vigorously, in a way that had not been preceded before. While it is hard to say so conclusively, this appears to reflect a shift in emphasis, toward an even more inclusive approach.
- As a whole, the Rebbe was consistent in his stress that Chabad Chasidus represents a peak in the development of the wisdom of Kabbalah/Chasidus, and it should be our utmost priority to encourage its dissemination and study. ❧