

Gratitude, Israeli Spiritual Care and Contemporary Hassidic Teachers: The Theme of Thankfulness in the Works of Rabbis Brazofsky (the Netivot Shalom), Rav Arush and Yemima Avital

A. Introduction

In this paper I highlight the possible contribution of three contemporary Hassidic Israeli thinkers, largely unknown outside of Israel, to the shaping of the theological landscape of spiritual care in Israel. The Israeli spiritual care movement is still in its infancy, and scientific, quantitative studies concerning its theological direction have yet to be carried out. The possible influence of the three contemporary Israeli Hassidic thinkers in question, however, is evidenced by the fact that they are often mentioned and are quoted by leaders in the spiritual care-giving movement in Israel.¹ My argument here is therefore limited to pointing out that these thinkers – emphasizing the idea of healing through the consciousness of gratitude, and active in Israel during the late 20th and early 21st Centuries – may play a similar role to that of William James in relation to the North American chaplaincy movement.² These figures are the previous ultra-Orthodox Rebbe (spiritual leader) of the Hassidic group of Slonim, Reb Shalom Noach Brazovsky (Belarus 1911- Jerusalem 2000), author of the book *Netivot Shalom* [Paths of Peace]; Yemima Avital (1929, Casablanca – 1999, Jerusalem), a female mystic and student of psychology who developed a spiritual discipline titled “cognitive thinking”; and Rav Shalom Arush (Morocco, 1952 – Jerusalem), a Sephardic-Hassidic spiritual leader, and formerly a student of one of Yemima Avital’s own students. In their writings, all three develop a Hassidic approach to life in which gratitude is the essence of spiritual resilience. Gratitude expresses an appreciation of the goodness in God’s world, in oneself and in others.

It is more accurate to classify these thinkers as contemporary Hassidic rather than neo-Hassidic: The two male thinkers were leaders of contemporary Hassidic religious communities. Recently, Yemima Avital has also been identified as a leader of a “contemporary female-Hassidic movement.”³ This definition is accurate because the movement inspired by her teachings does possess many features of Hassidism.⁴ Another reason for the identification of Brazovsky, Avital and Arush as Hassidic as opposed to Neo-Hassidic is that the latter, unlike both early and contemporary Hassidism, aim to reach out to secular and religious Jews alike, while assuming that traditional Hassidism is irrelevant because it is too Orthodox.⁵ Neo-Hassidism was developed largely by non-Orthodox thinkers who were raised in the Orthodox world and then left it in order to cultivate a Jewish spirituality that does not require a commitment to halacha (Jewish Law). The thinkers explored in this essay, however, regard commitment to the Torah as the basis of spiritual resilience, although they also emphasize the importance of “love of Israel,” i.e., a love of all Jews that extends to not-observant Jews as well.

B. On Spiritual Care/Chaplaincy in Israel, Jewish Themes and Theological Language

While rooted in the Jewish tradition, spiritual care/chaplaincy for individuals, families and communities who undergo difficult life passages has begun evolving into a profession in Israel only recently. With the establishment of various Israeli Clinical Pastoral Education programs and spiritual care initiatives around 2004-2006, and the founding of the Israeli Network of Spiritual Caregivers, the field is presently undergoing an accreditation process in line with local Israeli standards. This is being done under the joint guidance of Rabbi Zahara Davidowitz–Farkash from the National Association of Jewish Chaplains in America and Dr. John De Velder, who is the director of CPE programs at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical Center in New Jersey.⁶

As opposed to Western countries with a majority of Protestant citizens, initiatives in the field of clinical pastoral education in Israel have involved mostly lay leadership and secular individuals from their very inception, rather than clergy and religious adherents.⁷ At the same time, there are a significant numbers of primarily Orthodox women and Conservative women-rabbis among the first group of chaplains and of organizational leaders in the field.⁸ The sociological reasons for this situation need to be researched further and are beyond the scope of this article. Locations for the training of chaplains include old age homes and various educational institutions rather than hospitals, which at the moment generally refuse to admit CPE students. Founders of the field insist on defining it in Hebrew as *livui ruahni* or *hitlavut ruchanit* – spiritual companionship or spiritual “escorting” rather than spiritual support or care. The chosen term is etymologically rooted in the Hebrew Bible, and is related to the tribe of Levi, whose male members, the Levites, served in the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and accompanied the rituals performed there by the priests (Chronicles II, Chapter 29).⁹ The emergence of Israeli spiritual care within a secular, Zionist environment (with a large Orthodox component) is precisely the reason why the local theoretical/theological/philosophical resources for the new vocation have not yet been defined. As the first generation of chaplains in Israel go about discovering together with the individuals whom they accompany how to find meaning, happiness, laughter, or a sense of contribution in life in any given situation, they recognize the need to define their philosophical basis. I propose to examine the works of three Israeli thinkers as a potential framework for the work of spiritual care in the Israeli arena, as a useful starting point for the budding Israeli spiritual care movement. I will suggest that theological writings such as these develop themes which were promoted by eighteenth century Hassidic teachings. Those themes are now being “translated” into a more popular language for a wider, non-Hassidic audience: those who crave spiritual perspectives relevant to their lives in modern Israel.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the material, two methodological issues should be addressed. First, this is a work in the field of religious studies, specifically modern Jewish thought. It is not meant to be an examination of the professional toolbox used by Israeli Jewish chaplains, such as poems, meditations and songs. Instead, it will focus on theological ideas stemming from Brazovsky, Avital and Arush’s theological works that inform many of those involved in spiritual care today. My goal here is to introduce these theologies to the reader, as well as to understand their uniquely Jewish and Israeli themes and images in the context of shaping the spiritual care language in Israel. Second, there is no statistical information regarding the popularity of these works among spiritual care providers. However, the fact that these works have been anecdotally quoted or referred to by Israeli chaplains or spiritual care patients is sufficient reason to explore them as part of the field of “applied Israeli spirituality” based on Hassidism.¹⁰

C. The Theological-Spiritual Language of Chaplaincy within North American Protestant Culture: Forgiveness, Salvation and Hope

The modern history of spiritual care in the Western world, particularly in North America, is intertwined with 20th century liberal Protestant theology, which is woven into the evolution of chaplaincy as a profession.¹¹ Spiritual care/chaplaincy evolved into a profession as a consequence of the collaboration of two theologians: Rev. Anton T. Boisen and Dr. Richard Cabot, the latter of whom was a medical doctor and a philosopher.¹² Boisen was a pastor (a graduate of Union Theological Seminary) and – for some time – a psychiatric patient. Basing his theology on his own experiences, he claimed that the “real evil in mental disorder is not to be found in the conflict but in the sense of isolation or estrangement.”¹³ “What is needed,” wrote Boisen, “is forgiveness and restoration to the fellowship of that social something that which we call God.”¹⁴ The role of the pastor-chaplain as seen through Boisen’s liberal Christian theological paradigm is to “try to get him [i.e., the patient, E.R.] to see that no matter how unworthy he may have been, he was a good man and worthy of honor in so far as he is earnestly seeking to become better.”¹⁵ To Boisen, the pastoral goal was helping the patient to[...]

develop a philosophy of life which will enable him to cope with the instinctual drives and bring him to harmony with his ideals.”¹⁶ Suffering, he summarizes, “is remedial.” “As long as there is suffering there is hope.”¹⁷ Such statements echo William James’ assertion that “pessimism is essentially a religious disease.”¹⁸ James thus suggested to his followers: “Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.”¹⁹

Boisen’s worldview oversaw the training of theological seminary students at hospitals during the early twentieth century in order to provide a professional framework for restoring hope to suffering patients. Salvation, according to Boisen, meant “transformation of the personal and social life” of the person who is spiritually cared for. And while today spiritual care givers in North America seem to set more humble goals for themselves both theologically and professionally rather than striving to bring the patient to a state of “salvation,” similar images of advocates “on behalf of the spiritual and emotional well-being of individuals” prevail in the field.²⁰ Even contemporary multicultural awareness, which emphasizes active listening and “being there” as pivotal foundations of chaplaincy, does not refute the need to produce an “outcome oriented chaplaincy.”²¹ Chaplains today demonstrate the need for “observable results of our care,”²² such as focusing on “concerns of the present rather than past or future” or “envisioning a hopeful future that incorporates effects of the patient’s injury.”²³ When observing the theologies of Rabbis Brazovsky, Arush and Yemima Avital we would need to ascertain what are the clinical and professional implications of these works; what do they offer to patients at the bedside, at the old age home, in teenage support groups and any other arena in which practitioners, students and patients crave a perspective that makes life worth living in harmony with their ideals.

D. Locating the Sources of Jewish Spiritual Care Language in 18th Century Hassidic Thought: The Power of Consciousness in Healing Body and Soul

Before we move to examine contemporary Hassidic Israeli thought as a relevant foundation for chaplaincy, it is worthwhile looking at early Hassidic approaches to the relationship between body and soul. Hassidism is a Jewish spiritual movement which was developed in Ukraine in the eighteenth century, by Yisrael Ben Eliezer (known as the Baal Shem Tov).²⁴ The teachings of Hassidism initially expanded on many earlier Rabbinic Kabbalistic teachings.²⁵ They emphasized the inner lives of the Jew, the inner meaning of prayer and the keeping of 613 commandments.²⁶

A recurrent theme in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov equates the man who is learned in Torah, the Talmid Hacham, to a healer of the soul (Rofe Nefashot). He quotes the Medieval Sephardic Jewish thinker Maimonides in reference to this idea.²⁷ The Baal Shem Tov believed that humility and the willingness to learn from everyone has a healing effect on people, in that it opens up the human being to the reception of spiritual teachings from learned individuals. Arrogance, in his writings, appears as a source of mental illness that influences the soul.²⁸

The Baal Shem Tov's grandchild, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772- 1810), whose writings are a major influence in Israel today, was likewise known as a healer by the method of strengthening the patient's faith in God.²⁹ Rabbi Nachman advised one of his disciples to read the Song of Songs before dawn "because all of the remedies are included in it." Consequently, the ailing man was said to have recovered "completely."³⁰ The Song of Songs, fully embedded with love poetry and nature imagery, can certainly aid in making a person happy.

While contemporary Hassidic thought seems to take more care not to confuse physical and spiritual ailments, the underlying assumption of the connectedness of body and soul and the influence of the spirit on a person's well-being is a common thread that runs through all of these works.³¹ Hassidim maintain that a certain kind of consciousness determines a person's well-being and includes physical health; it encompasses both body and soul and is reached through the vehicle of deep spiritual contemplation.³² Early Hassidism emphasized the role of the Rebbe, the leader of the Hassidic group as a healer of body and soul.³³ Contemporary Israeli Hassidic teachings put less emphasis on the centrality of the man of Torah as a healer, combined with a higher focus the body-mind connection and each person's responsibility to his/her virtues, which lead to a healthy mind. They do not neglect the idea that the individual's virtues influence the state of his/her body in many ways, and like James and Boisen, they believe that a person's worldview and attitude towards life has an effect on one's over-all health and quality of life.

E. Rabbi Brazofsky's Netivot Shalom (Paths of Peace) Commentary on the Torah and the Cultivation of a Wider, Divine Perspective on Life

Hailing from a family of Hassidic leadership whose worldview united the spiritual teaching of Hassidism with a stringent emphasis on a rational approach to Talmudic

learning, Rabbi Shalom Noach Brazovsky immigrated to the city of Tiberius near the Sea of Galilee in 1935. He married a woman from a Hassidic family that was part of the traditional, pre-Zionist Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel (the “Old Yishuv”). As a Hassid, Rabbi Shalom Noach was initially close to Zionist circles, and according to the testimony of one of his relatives, he even served in the Haganah (Labor Zionism’s military underground, which fought against British mandate authorities).³⁴ He taught at various Yeshivot (traditional academies for the study of Talmud and Jewish Law) including the Tel Aviv Habad Yeshiva, a Hassidic group known for openness and outreach towards the non-Orthodox world. Around 1941-1942, when he learned that his entire town in Belarus was eradicated by the Nazis, he decided to dedicate his life to restoring Yiddish Slonim Hassidic culture, which had been destroyed in the Holocaust.³⁵ He then established, headed and taught at Yeshivat Beit Avraham Slonim, where the teaching, hermeneutics, family and community life of the Slonim Hassidism were restored. In 1981 he was nominated as the official leader (Rebbe) of the Slonim Hassidim. His tenure lasted for almost 20 years until his death in 2000. The book *Netivot Shalom* (“Paths of Peace”) was written by his students, and is based on many of the sermons delivered by him to his disciples over the years. The sermons were based on the weekly portions of the Torah (Pentateuch) and were delivered between the years 1942 and 1982. They were printed in 1985 and became very popular outside the Rebbe’s own community, mainly among Modern Orthodox readers and followers in Israel.³⁶ Brazovsky begins his essay (originally a speech) on the topic of “Choose Life” with the words: “The happiness of the human being upon the face of the earth depends upon the purity of his virtues. But whoever does not purify his virtues, bad personality traits make him miserable.”³⁷ He then goes on to explain that the human being’s virtues are purified through acts of loving-kindness, through looking for ways to help each person in thought, speech and action, in seeing the positive within every situation and in being full of hope that things will eventually settle on the good side.

According to Brazovsky’s teachings, a person should never be angry at anyone, not at himself nor at those around him.³⁸ This is, essentially, what the construction of one’s personal world means.³⁹ The primary virtue from which all other virtues stem, according to the *Netivot Shalom*, is the virtue of loving-kindness. When people are engaged in such actions they feel closer to God and are happier. A Jew who is the follower of Abraham must be ever positive, feel happy about everything that exists in the world, and celebrate every creation in God’s world positively.⁴⁰ From his positive outlook on the world, while quoting many Rabbinic sources, Reb Shalom Noach presents his perception of what it means to be a Jew: “The entire book of Genesis discusses issues of virtues and trials,” he claims. The Torah warns us in the very beginning of the Pentateuch – using the stories about Cain and the generation of the flood – against what could happen to humans if humanity fails its trials.⁴¹ A Jew must regard his/her life as a chain of trials sent by God to each person according to the source of his (or her) soul. Thus each person’s unique contribution to the world is his struggle with those challenges as part of his unique destiny, about which he would be asked when his life reaches its end. What constitutes a person’s

contribution to the world is one's ability to increase one's faith in the face of these personal challenges.⁴²

Envy and lust, as opposed to loving-kindness, "drive the human being away from the world." By spreading bitterness within oneself and one's environment ultimately one's whole personality becomes obsessed.⁴³ Once one becomes easily enslaved to the pursuit of honor, wealth and competition, according to Brazovsky, these emotions bring about suffering – spiritual, mental and physical. Immersing oneself in the work of loving-kindness, believing in the ultimate goodness of the world, and adopting a positive attitude, is considered a healthy way to approach life.⁴⁴ Thus, suggests Rabbi Shalom Noach, a person's struggle with the hardship of life should be the acceptance of the fate that God has carved out for him. If he shows a happy face and stays away from sadness and negativity, he will merit the privilege of looking at everything through the "illuminating mirror,"⁴⁵ a Kabbalistic term that expresses a cosmological, secret view of creation from God's perspective.

When translated into a Hassidic-psychological reality, looking at the world from a positive "illuminating mirror" guarantees that

The evil virtues that take over the human being are born of his contracting himself into a state of small mindedness and narrow thinking, where he does not see or think of anything but himself and is angry about everything that harms his small and narrow world. The advice that must be offered to such a person is to extricate himself from his narrow existence into the wider world and observe the infinite open spaces upon which the Blessed light of God shines bringing light and life to them. [...] then all these irrelevant small things, as well as envy, lust and honor, will be annulled.⁴⁶

Brazovsky and the entire Hassidic tradition which he represents assert a worldview that is by definition uncritical of God, set against modern psychology's views of the individual and the family that are critical by definition.

For instance: Freud regarded the human psyche and its environment as an arena of conflict, stemming from the view that "the patient fell ill because the emotion developed in the pathogenic situation was prevented from escaping normally, and that these imprisoned [...] emotions undergo a change into unusual physical symptoms of the case."⁴⁷ According to Freud the therapeutic process ought to "redeem" these negative emotions from one's repressed past. Therapy loosens one's inner pressure, by "widening one's consciousness" through "submitting to the psychoanalytic treatment." ⁴⁸ Reb Shalom Noach's worldview offers, too, a kind of "widening of consciousness," not necessarily within one's own memory but concerning one's entire worldview and perspective on life in general. True enough, Reb Shalom Noach could argue that a person may have experienced hardships in life, in relationships and other spheres, but all of this is considered part of God's creation. Our role, our contribution to this creation, lies in the way we struggle with these hardships in our lives, in the meaning we attribute to them, and through not becoming embittered. We do so by shifting our gaze to God's illuminating presence in the larger world.

Two challenges may arise in response to Brazovsky's worldview, one theological and the other psychological. From a theological point of view, a question may be asked:

Isn't it wrong to always be "on the side of God" when suffering hardship? Shouldn't we "let out" our negative emotions – isn't that a more honest approach to life? Especially after the Holocaust? While such theological worldviews were and are present in Jewish thought,⁴⁹ Brazovsky, who lost most of his family as well as his entire community and culture to the hands of Western – Nazi civilization which promoted "critical" perspectives" on life and society, offers another, Jewish spiritual perspective. He suggests that basic optimism entails hope for creation, even in the face of brutal destruction. An optimistic, positive take on life pays off, on the most basic daily level of human existence.⁵⁰ This theological challenge can be translated into the psychological realm as well: one might ask, aren't psychological denials and repressions dangerous to our mental health? If we prevent negative emotions from surfacing, won't that create an inner pressure? It is natural that grief – not only in face of physical death of a loved one but also in the face of frustrations that signify the dying of our dreams and expectations – "often reawakens the earliest and most repressed feelings of anxiety and helplessness associated with separation from the mother figure in the first year of life."⁵¹ Brazovsky responds to this challenge in the same way that Isaac "pleaded" for his barren wife, Rebecca (Genesis: 25:20).⁵² Prayer, not complaint or envy, is the right channel and a useful, positive response in moments of powerlessness and hardship. Other useful tools, according to Reb Shalom Noach, are living a life full of acts of loving-kindness, and viewing our hardships from God's wider perspective.

F. Rav Shalom Arush's Consciousness of Gratitude

Rabbi Shalom Arush, another contemporary Hassidic resource who writes for the wider public in Israel, was born in 1952 in Morocco, and raised in a traditional, Orthodox Sephardic home. He immigrated to Israel at the age of thirteen.⁵³ Though he received a modern Orthodox education in Israel in the town of Petach Tikvah, Zionist secularism had influenced both him and his siblings. Thus, they all became secular at a later age, though their parents remained religious. Arush served in an elite IDF military unit, and later studied economics and accounting. When he was 23 years old, six of his close friends were killed, together with many others, in a military helicopter crash. That event set him off on the spiritual journey back to Orthodox observance and spiritual direction by Orthodox rabbis. He eventually was drawn to the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Ukraine, 1772- 1810),⁵⁴ and began to write popular books on the wisdom of life based on various Hassidic teachings, especially those of the latter. Arush offers advice on how to maintain happiness in life by thanking God for every aspect of our life, including aspects with which we are unhappy.⁵⁵ His books were later translated into many languages and became bestsellers worldwide, even in certain Christian circles.⁵⁶ They are sold in hospital shops as well as at university bookstores, particularly in the Jerusalem area, indicating his great popularity among many Israelis, religious and secular, academic and non-academic alike.

Rav Shalom's spirituality stems from the Rabbinic idea expressed in Mishna Berakhot 9:5 that a person must bless God for his misfortunes just as he blesses God for the good things in life. The sense of thankfulness is, according to one of his books, *She'arav BeToda* (His Gates of Gratitude), a way of life, a disposition that can uplift the individual from the depths of suffering.⁵⁷ He offers his readers a healing

tool: to take a pen or pencil and make a list of the elements in life for which one is thankful.⁵⁸ And while he preaches taking care of oneself and maintaining a healthy lifestyle,⁵⁹ Rav Arush emphasizes in another book on healing that anger and lack of thankfulness are often the cause of a weakened immune system.⁶⁰ Lack of faith and gratitude is, according to him, the source of many mental illnesses, and he is known in Israel for helping mentally ill individuals.⁶¹

Rav Arush wrote a number of books on many subjects, including marriage and its maintenance, and faith in God. The idea of gratitude is a common thread running through his writings and serves as a pillar of his theology. His writings serve as the spiritual basis for his growing circle of followers within Israel and even among non-Jews outside Israel; some of his books have become bestsellers in English, and his public lectures throughout the U.S. and around the world resonate in various blogs.⁶² In a book that has been translated into English, Rav Arush summarizes his position on the centrality of gratitude in the Torah, stating that while a person does not always “win the battle with his evil inclination [...] there is no excuse for ingratitude.”⁶³ This is because “the ultimate purpose of Torah learning is to bring a person to thank God.”⁶⁴ When a barren woman came to him complaining that she remains childless though she regularly prays and begs God to allow her to conceive, he instructed her to “thank God for giving children to her girlfriends,”⁶⁵ and then to appeal to God to have her own children. This kind of prayer, he commented, expresses gratitude and is an expression of faith in God, in the world and in the world to come, while crying and complaining reveal lack of faith.⁶⁶ Gratitude is the consciousness that assures the endurance of life’s trials without bitterness.

Rav Arush constantly stresses that unless we train ourselves to be thankful even for the troubles we have in life we are destined to a life of misery. Based on the teachings of Rav Nachman of Breslov, who emphasized the centrality of happiness in one’s spiritual life, acceptance of one’s own suffering and frustration is part of the process of a person’s acceptance of his/her own life that brings one closer to God.⁶⁷ A person’s obsession with complaints is thus considered a recipe for a miserable life. The shedding of resentments, complaints, envy, etc., is expected to bring happiness to a person’s life.⁶⁸ Emmons summarizes the same ideas in philosophical-scientific language as follows:

Recognition is the quality that permits the quality of gratitude to be transformational. To recognize is to cognize, or think differently about something from the way we have thought about it before. Think about an experience when what was initially a curse wound up being a blessing in disguise. Maybe you were terminated from a job, a marital relationship dissolved, or a serious illness befell you. Gradually you emerged from the resulting darkness with a new perception. Adversity was transformed into opportunity. Sorrow was transformed into gratefulness. [...] Gratefulness is a knowing awareness that we are the recipients of goodness.⁶⁹

While Rav Arush’s theology often seems quite simplistic (as it is intentionally written in a very simple, plain Hebrew) many of his followers – secular and Orthodox Jews alike – claim that it is a very useful theology. Unlike Rabbi Brazofsky or Yemima Avital’s Hassidic theology, which appeals to certain religious or academic elites in Israel, Rav Arush appeals to everyone. Yet, its theological and linguistic simplicity

does not detract from the pragmatic advice he gives to his readers and the resulting improvement in their quality of life to which they testify.

G. Cognitive Thinking: Yemima Avital's Work On Accurate, Balanced Existence and "Recognition of the Good"

Yemima Avital was born in Casablanca on the 9th of the Jewish month of Av (a day of fasting which commemorates the destruction of the Jewish Temple) in 1929 as the oldest daughter to a family of Kabbalists. Very little is known about her biography.⁷⁰ She was married to Eliezer Avital and was a mother of two children, one of whom died at a young age. She lived on a kibbutz and later in Beer Sheva, the largest city in southern Israel, where she studied French Literature, and was widowed early in her life. She later moved to Tel Aviv and studied psychology at Tel Aviv University. In the nineteen-seventies, when she was about fifty, she started providing consultation and healing to clients. Later on during the nineteen-eighties she opened the Maayan Institute in the Herzliya area and began teaching groups. Her students reported that she had mystical qualities and could "read" the thoughts of many of them, as well as healing many people suffering from various terminal diseases.⁷¹ Recently, Yemima's son, Yishai Avital, published a book including "speeches/testimonies" by her, where she is quoted as saying that she saw the cells of each person's body, and thus functioned as a "channel" that transmitted God's message to people.⁷² Although little of her work has been printed, the book published by her son offers the non-biased reader a glimpse into her spiritual world and her traditional views on God, the Jewish people and the Torah.⁷³

Unlike the works of Rabbi Noach Brazofsky and Rav Shalom Arush, who together with their disciples produced a written corpus with a clear contemporary Hassidic theology, psychology and worldview, Yemima's works were never written in the form of books. Her thought is encapsulated in the notebooks of her students and their students. She dictated parts of her "prophecy" to them, and indicated that she saw the letters written in front of her in white fire (as were the words of the Torah during the revelation at Sinai, according to the description of the Rabbis in Babylonian Talmud Shekalim 14). It would be impossible to collect and edit all these pieces as was done with the works of Kabbalistic and Hassidic rabbis.

Yemima eventually began to convey her teaching while covered in many white scarves, sitting behind a curtain or half a floor above the class so that the students' attention would be focused on her message and not on her. This was done in an attempt to avoid a cultivation of a personality cult. She taught men and women separately, from all walks of life in Israel: secular, traditional and Orthodox, rich and poor, academic and non-academic, and many performing artists. She referred to the generation of her students as "the generation of confusion," indicating that many of the Jewish spiritual values had become blurred during the generation born and raised after the establishment of the State of Israel, with increased polarization of secular and religious extremes. Her classes began with the singing of mostly Hassidic songs. Later a "portion" of her learning (as she called it) was dictated to the group (in Hebrew, chelek). Each student wrote the portion in a personal notebook and was instructed to write down at home what he/she understood it to mean, including how he/she applied that teaching to their lives.

In 1999, Yemima died suddenly at age of 70. Following her death, classes taught by students who she trained (most of whom have become Orthodox over the years) began to spread throughout the country. Today, their own students have become teachers as well.

The “portions” of Yemima Avital’s teachings, which were never published and are still dictated in each class and passed on from teachers to students, deal primarily with the method of improving one’s personal virtues, communication and listening skills. Some of her students claim that she revealed to their generation the inner meaning of the Torah. Yet aside from referring to a few verses on the role of men or women, on loving your fellow as yourself, or on the essential meaning of Jewish holidays and the way they could be applied to our spiritual daily discipline, Yemima never addressed the Torah directly. Yemima’s teachings are often a dictation of a prior conversation on the particular personal, emotional pain of the student; the portions resemble “therapeutic conversations”. Yemima often commented on the relationships between her students and their parents and how pain from those early relationships should not be carried into the present. She directed her students to separate between negative behavior acquired through unconscious defense mechanisms in childhood – which she calls *omes* (in Hebrew: extra baggage) – and *mahoot*, the real essence of the human being which is of a good nature and well-constructed.⁷⁴ She focuses on the inner work that the students need to do in order to “mend” themselves. Thus she takes Hassidic teachings one step further and uses Kabbalistic and Hassidic language in a daily spiritual discipline to be practiced through the work (*melacha*) of recording personal-emotional observations, and in that process she creates her own idiosyncratic language. Some “portions” record Yemima’s response to her audience’s struggle with the terror attacks that followed the Oslo accord in 1992-1993. They reflect her insistence on maintaining an optimistic disposition – both personal as well as national – even as Israelis were tormented by mourning and fear. Her teachings typically suggest that the body is influenced by “blockages” that stem from a person’s focus on his/her extra baggage, rather than on his/her essence as the soul, and our social behavior can all be “blocked” by unnecessary baggage that stands between people and prevents personal and social “mending” (*tikkun*, in Kabbalistic terms). Although Yemima’s “portions” were delivered to different groups and thus vary from teacher to teacher (most teachers today are her direct disciples), there is an agreed upon version of parts of her introduction to her works. In that text (recently published by her son), she claims that:

A “portion” [of the teaching, E.R.] can awaken understandings that separate between the [extra-emotional] baggage that creates distance from the sought for balance. The more she [= the student practicing the spiritual discipline of cognitive thinking] strives to be accurate, the more likely that she will discover the blockages. The mending also mends the body.⁷⁵

Her worldview concerning emotional dispositions that affect the body is well expressed by a story told by Ilan, a close disciple of hers, speaking at a service marking the date of her death, when many of her students assemble in Jerusalem to commemorate her life and work. He related how Yemima told him one day, as he

was following her work on improving the health of a patient, that the patient was now completely healthy. Yet, as soon as the patient went home, he would sink into his feeling of loneliness, into his blockages and sadness and that made him ill. She insisted that happiness is neither a method nor a tool. One cannot force himself to do it or artificially make herself happy; happiness is a result of precise, balanced thinking and behavior. "Precision [diyuk, in expressing emotions] brings serenity and happiness.⁷⁶ Precision regarding oneself comes first. That means striving to find the golden path between self-rejection (over-criticizing oneself or ceding too much) and rejecting others."⁷⁷ The ultimate goal is to return the heart to its real essence, to free it from its narrow place, metzar or tzar, which is etymologically close to the term mitzrayim – the Hebrew name for "Egypt" from which the People of Israel, according to the Bible, were released and redeemed. Rather than focus on why something has happened to us in our lives, Yemima suggests that we must train ourselves to give generously, to listen to ourselves and to others, and to lead a balanced life.

Thus, there is much in her teachings that could be seen as a theology of spiritual care. Her entire teaching may perhaps be seen as spiritual care, offering spiritual personal tools for leading a life that focuses on that which leads to precise balance – diyuk – and happiness in who we are and in our surroundings. This means learning how not to dwell on anger, resentment, agony and other negative thoughts. To lead a life independent of our parents or other people, but also to appreciate our parents for what they have done for us, or to forgive them if we feel we have been wronged by them.⁷⁸

Yemima's teachings are more pragmatically oriented than early or contemporary Hassidic thought; her thought can also be seen as a "manual" for spiritual self-care. Hassidism promotes prayer, learning, singing, observance, and meditation as spiritual methods, but Yemima expands upon these tools and teaches her students listening and inter-personal skills, self-love and gratitude. Yemima left a rich legacy of a psychologically-minded spiritual discipline. Similar to personal recitation of prayer in Orthodox Jewish or Christian circles (or lists of reasons for thankfulness), or Yoga or meditation in Eastern religions, she left followers of her teachings in touch with their own daily spiritual consciousness of balance. Her discipline relies heavily on writing down insights into different portions on a daily basis and paying attention to listening skills in order to respond accurately to any of life's challenges.

Yemima's method appeals to secularists and atheists as well. The reason is that her teachings do not depend on theology, faith in God or the Torah (although it is assumed in her teachings). Her thought addresses everyone in a non-judgmental manner; it is not required to adhere to any particular belief, although she herself clearly did so. According to her, when one sits down to write his or her understandings of the portion of learning that they have received, one is then directed to examine his/her heart and being in the world. Followers thus bring their personal writings to the group, based on the portion of the learning they received. When members of the group share their understandings of each "portion," each participant learns from what his/her colleagues have written.⁷⁹ The goal is to "let loose of stiffness."⁸⁰ However, not every opposition or surrender is good.⁸¹ One must distinguish between the time when one must stand up for himself and not violate his/her "right to his/her own existence," and the time when that attitude actually conceals rejection of the other, which is in fact a rejection of self.⁸²

Yemima's assumption is that one's task is to "expand that which is good in himself/herself in order to gain insight,"⁸³ to reduce stress and thus improve the state of our bodies as well. However, this assumption also impacts the very concept of training spiritual caregivers. Following her teachings calls upon those of us who work as educators in this field of Israeli Clinical Pastoral Education to see how "expanding the good" within ourselves helps our students.⁸⁴ When supervisors encounter unconscious resistance in students, they should focus on their good essence.⁸⁵ Yemima's tools instruct the spiritual care supervisor to clearly separate and limit his identification with the student; not to dwell on the student's acts of resistance while constantly communicating hope and faith in the student's inner strength.

I. Contemporary Israeli Hassidism and Supportive Studies on the Symbiosis of Body and Soul and the Consciousness of Gratitude in the Social Sciences.

Much of what we learn from Rabbi Brazovsky, Rav Arush and Yemima Avital is supported by contemporary research in the socio-medical sciences. Various writers demonstrate statistically that being thankful, living a life full of meaning, learning from painful experiences and dwelling in a spiritual world of hope, meaning and loving-kindness, improves the wellbeing of human beings. It is not accidental that some of Yemima's students, or their students (including Dr. Yakir Kaufman, a neurologist who promotes spiritual care at the Herzog medical center in Jerusalem and teaches "cognitive thinking"), are trailblazers in the spiritual care movement in Israel.⁸⁶ In an interview printed in a medical magazine, Kaufman shared his thoughts on a study that demonstrates the interrelatedness of good health and spiritual content in the progression of Alzheimer's disease.⁸⁷ In his article "Psychoneuroimmunology: The Science Connecting Body and Mind," he challenges the dichotomous assumptions of modern science and claims that

Various studies indicate that stressful events or the breakdown of psychological defenses are related to the onset of allergic, autoimmune, infectious, neoplastic, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, and other illnesses. Other studies link stress to myocardial infarctions (heart attacks), stroke, cancer, hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, infertility, depression, obesity, and many other health problems. The first three illnesses listed above are the main causes of morbidity and mortality in Western societies today. This means that stress, by causing a "negative" mind-body interaction, is a significant factor in morbidity and mortality.⁸⁸

Studies on happiness have been conducted by social scientists and thinkers such as (to name but a few) Tal Ben Shahar, Yoram Kirsch and Robert Emmons.⁸⁹ "When we make a habit of gratitude we no longer require a special event to make us happy," writes Ben Shahar. He summarizes:

We become more aware of good things that happen to us during the day, as we anticipate putting them on our list. The gratitude list includes the name of the person

you care about, something that you appreciate that you or someone else did, or an insight that you had a result of writing in your journal.⁹⁰

Sherri Mandell, co-founder of the Koby Mandell Foundation, which was developed in order to help bereaved individuals rebuild their lives and create meaning out of suffering, introduced Emmons' book to the Israeli readers of her blog.⁹¹ She linked it to the deeper teachings of Judaism:

Judaism also focuses on gratitude. The first prayer a Jew recites in the morning is *modeh ani*, thanking God for the soul's return from sleep. Many of the sacrifices offered at the temple were brought in thanksgiving.

The Hebrew word for Jew, *Yehudi* is related to the same root as thanks. Though we Jews may kvetch and complain, this sense of gratitude may well be one of the reasons for our endurance and longevity as a people.⁹²

Mandell does not mention Rav Arush's thought but her observation highlights the same point. To be Jewish means to be thankful, according to this etymological-theological world view. Thus, when one struggles with the hardships of life, thankfulness is a method to restore sanity, happiness and optimism. If we return to Boisen's understanding that chaplaincy restores the fellowship between God and human beings, then thankfulness is a Jewish-Hassidic way to express that same consciousness. Such Israeli-Jewish voices echo the American Jewish neo-Hassidic theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907- 1972), who wrote: "This is what we mean by the term spiritual: it is the reference to the transcendent in our own existence."⁹³ "A sense of contact with the ultimate dawns upon most people when their self-reliance is swept away by violent misery. Judaism is the attempt to instill in us that sense of gratitude as an everyday awareness."⁹⁴ Heschel's statement, "The greatest insights happen to us in moments of awe,"⁹⁵ summarizes this philosophical idea.

H. Israeli Contemporary Hassidism and Theological Reflection in the Context of Spiritual Care

How could the work of these theologies be applied to the field of spiritual care in Israel? In the field of Clinical Pastoral Education, theological reflection is an important element. "In a nutshell TR [=Theological Reflection, E.R.] is a process by which explicit connections are made between belief and practice."⁹⁶ Chaplains write their personal theologies as chaplains, as supervisors (or educators, in Israel) and as mentors to supervisors in order to be able to help patients contemplate their worldview and search for those elements in their worldviews that could act as a source of empowerment, hope, and/or meaning. "At its simplest, theology is a way to talk about people's deepest values. [...]. Pastoral caregivers can cast in high relief questions about religious faith and meanings."⁹⁷ Human beings are called upon to reflect theologically on their values at moments of existential rupture or crisis. Thus

frustrations and suffering are opportunities to review our values and the consistency of our actions with those values. There is, however, an embedded paradox in the professional task of theological reflection. On the one hand, a chaplain must put aside his/her own theology so that he/she can “support the needs of the patient.”⁹⁸ On the other hand we want to have chaplains whose spiritual lives are authentic and deep. We want to have chaplains who can serve everyone in Israel: Jews of different ethnic backgrounds, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Christians and Moslems, believers and atheist alike. As the same time, as Dr. Martha Jacobs testifies: “In order to be an effective multi-faith professional chaplain, I need to be secure in my own belief system.”⁹⁹ Following these professional insights, we can ask how can contemporary Hassidic theologies serve Israeli Jews in the context of theological reflection, either as spiritual caregivers or as receivers of care? One way would be to explore whether such contemporary-Hassidic ideas provide hope or a “road map” for individual action in life threatening situations or in cases of chronic illnesses. The images and terminologies offered here can serve as tools for a reflective conversation about one’s values. A caregiver might ask how concepts such as “a wider perspective on life and the world,” “gratitude,” or the distinction between “extra baggage” and inner essence can help a person think about how he/she must act in a given situation. An alternative way to use these theologies is to study them together with the care seeker if he/she might find them meaningful. Thus “the spiritual process of the pastoral visit can be enriched by attention to what we can contribute.”¹⁰⁰ In the Jewish tradition, where learning in pairs of sacred texts, havruta, is a religious activity, a spiritual caregiver could study some of these texts together with the care receiver.¹⁰¹ In this case the joint learning activity is a Jewish spiritual intervention, like spontaneous prayer, that could respond to the care receiver’s needs if the chaplain finds it relevant to his/her hopes, values and desires. R. G. Schultz proposes that “Spiritual care interventions are characterized by presence and absence and a nonjudgmental relationship.”¹⁰² As long as the caregiver keeps learning together such texts, if so desired by the care receiver and if they are helpful, they can serve as a useful tool in any responsible, relational and faithful Israeli spiritual care giving situation.

J. Conclusion

If in the Black church the role of pastoral carer would be “calling attention of people in need to how God is at work in their lives,”¹⁰³ I would like to suggest that current contemporary Hassidic theologies in Israel emphasize themes of expanding one’s horizons or perspectives, expressing gratitude for the gifts of life and emphasizing our own and others’ good essence. Those perceptions, together with the tools of personal journal writing, the sharpening of our consciousness, prayer, singing and learning are already serving as resources in the young and eclectic Israeli spiritual care movement. At the same time we must all remember that the very essence of chaplaincy is, in the words of Boise, listening and attending to the “living human document.”¹⁰⁴