Introduction - A “Conservative” Reckons with Innovation

On the second night of Rosh Hashanah in the year 5666 (1905), Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn of Lubavitch (“Rashab,” 1860-1920) delivered the first instalment in a series (heimshekh) of sixty-one discourses that would become known simply as Samekh vav.\(^1\) One hundred years after its author’s passing this text stands as the clearest, most elegant, and most comprehensive articulation of Habad thought since the appearance of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady’s Tanya in the last decade of the 18th century. While it has long been the mainstay of the advanced hasidut curriculum in Habad yeshivot it has received almost no attention in academic literature on Habad.\(^2\)

Rashab has been the subject of three well researched PhD dissertations, but two of those studies—by Ilia Lurie and Naftali Brawer—focused exclusively on Rashab’s institutional and communal activism, leaving his prolific theological writings completely unstudied.\(^3\) The third—by Reuven Leigh—does take up Rashab’s intellectual work, putting an earlier

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\(^1\) First published as Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn, *Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1971), a new edition with with the addition of footnotes and other supplementary material was published under the same title and by the same press in 2010. Page references are to the 1971 edition whose pagination is also indicated in the new edition.

\(^2\) See the relevant discussion and brief comments about this text in Nafatali Loewenthal, “‘The Thickening of the Light’; The Kabbalistic-Hasidic Teachings of Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn in Their Social Context,” in *Habad Hasidism: History, Thought, Image*, edited by Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2016), esp., 8*, 35* and 37*.

serialization of discourses in dialogue with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, and advancing an argument that Rashab was “a prescient precursor to the avant-garde thought which emerged in France in the nineteen sixties and seventies.”

In addition to breaking new ground in research on Habad, Leigh also challenged the more general assumption that a figure as rooted in Rashab in traditional Jewish discourse would have more in common with his medieval predecessors and would have little resonance with the “modern” concerns taken up by so-called “western” philosophers working in post-war France. At the same time, however, Leigh restricted his discussion to a series of eight discourses delivered by Rashab in 1898—known as *Ranat*. While this *hemshekh* is distinguished by its focus on the generative quality of communication and of the feminine, the underlying themes of creativity and innovation are engaged more directly and developed more fully in *Samekh vav*. As I hope to demonstrate below, it is in *Samekh vav* that Rashab’s thought crystallizes into a systematic philosophical account of the purpose of existence generally, and of Jewish religious life and practice particularly.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the trajectory of Rashab’s intellectual development was very much tied to his emergence as a communal leader and institution builder. In 1897 he established Tomchei Temimim, the first yeshiva to make the study of hasidic texts a formal part of its curriculum, and from this point onward he would engage its senior students as the chief audience of his formal discourses. Lurie, Brawer, and Leigh, rightly contextualized Tomchei Temimim as a central plank of Rashab’s activist response to the secularizing agenda of the self-styled Jewish “Enlightenment” (*haskalah*) movement; from the mid 1890s onward he set out to strengthen the core institutions of traditional Jewish religious life on a national scale. From this perspective, Hillel Zeitlin was quite right to describe Rashab as “a conservative through and through,” as one who “held by the old ways and did not reckon with any novelty.”

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4 Aaron Reuven Leigh, “Poststructuralism Avant la Lettre: Language and Gender in the Thought of Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn” (PhD Thesis, King’s College, University of Cambridge, 2019), 175.
5 See the relevant discussion and citations in Eli Rubin, “Giving Chabad New Life: 100 years later, it’s time to revisit the Rebbe Rashab’s obituaries and rewrite the story of his life,” Chabad.org/4693692 (accessed October 23, 2020).
6 Also see Loewenthal, “‘The Thickening of the Light,’”; Leigh, “Poststructuralism Avant la Lettre,” 42-45
The above characterization is found in a tribute published by Zeitlin following Rashab’s passing in the spring of 1920, just as the Bolsheviks were completing their takeover of what had been the Russian Empire. Under the Tzar, Zeitlin recalled, the Ministry of the Interior had convened a Rabbinic Commission in 1910, where other leading members of the traditional rabbinate sometimes showed willingness to give ground on one issue or another. But not Rashab. As Zeitlin put it, he “stood like a wall of iron. You could not make him bend even over a single hairsbreadth. He practically stood alone against everyone.”

Zeitlin recognized, however, that Rashab was not simply a reactionary. “From the enlightened (maskil’ishen) standpoint,” he wrote, Rashab’s conservatism would be judged “a great defect,” but “from an inner-psychological perspective it is very different, because Reb Shalom Ber was a whole person, a strong person, dependent on nobody.” Zeitlin understood that Rashab was an ideologue of tremendous integrity and commitment. “For him,” he wrote, “his truth was the most precious and beloved thing in life. Therefore he never entered into any compromise.” Accordingly, Rashab “carried the light of Chabad, and indeed of Torah in general, with extraordinary strength and resolution, and in a certain sense, we might say, with hardiness and persistence … The main thing is this: With such a fire, with such a truth, and with such a great dedication, he taught and disseminated the Chabad idea, the Chabad path in Torah and devotion.”

It is difficult to know the degree to which Zeitlin would have had knowledge of Rashab’s voluminous corpus of formal discourses and treatises, letters and informal talks. Though many of his discourses were widely circulated among Habad hasidim in manuscript, hectograph and—later—mimeograph copies, almost none of Rashab’s writings would appear in print until after World War Two. Yet it is this corpus that so richly reveals Rashab’s “inner-psychological” dimension, which is not only characterized by the sort of ideological independence and

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9 Zeitlin, “Einer Fun Di Letzte.”
10 On the publication of Samekh vav and other works from Rashab’s corpus, see Zushe Wolf, Hoṣa’at sefarim kehot: toldot hoṣa’at haseforim haḥabadit (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2013), 230-252, and 712.
persistence that Zeitlin recognized, but also by a deep and searching concern with creativity and innovation as supreme religio-spiritual values. As we shall see, if Zeitlin had been familiar with Samekh vav perhaps he would have stopped short of the overly sweeping conclusion that Rashab “did not reckon with any novelty.”

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Part 1 - The Purpose of Existence and the Primordial Šimšum

Samekh vav opens with a phenomenological discussion of the devotional and mystical significance of the commandment to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, but quickly segues into a direct relitigation of the most fundamental of existential questions: What is the purpose of existence? The central concern of this hemshekh is, in Rashab’s own words, “the ultimate purpose of the creation of the worlds and the ultimate intent for which the soul descends into the body.”

This question is certainly not new, and indeed it is directly engaged in many earlier Habad texts. But never before did it so explicitly provide the ground for such a relentless, broad, and penetrating reformulation of Jewish thought. By way of contextualization and comparison, Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s Tanya is built around a question that is narrower and less dramatic, if no less difficult: How can imperfect human beings (albeit possessed of a divine soul) both acknowledge their imperfections and also motivate themselves to study G-d’s Torah and fulfill G-d’s commandments as best as they can? The question of purpose is not raised till chapter 35, and there it is first expressed more narrowly as an inquiry into “the ultimate purpose of the creation of the intermediate people (beinonim) … Why did their souls descend into this world to toil for naught, heaven forfend, to battle all their days with the inclination and be incapable of victory?” Only in chapters 36 and 37 does he discuss “the ultimate purpose of the creation of this world.” In Samekh vav, by contrast, this teleological concern is the starting point.

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11 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 3 [4]:

12 Likutei amarim - tanya (Vilna 1900), chapter 1, folio 5a [9].

13 Likutei amarim - tanya (Vilna 1900), chapter 35, folio 43b-44a [86-7].

14 Likutei amarim - tanya (Vilna 1900), chapters 36-37, folio 45b-49b [90-98].
Tanya is primarily concerned with the application of cognitive techniques to motivate and inspire a consistent behavioural alignment with divine wisdom and will as expressed in the Torah and its commandments. Samekh vav is primarily concerned with endowing such behavioural alignment with the kind of devotional luminosity that will fully realize the ultimate purpose of existence. (More will be said below about the specific intimations I intend to invoke with the term “luminosity.”)

From the very outset, Rashab examines the question of existential purpose through the prism of the primal cosmological event demarcated in earlier kabbalistic and hasidic discourse as simsum. According to classical Lurianic kabbalah, “the worlds were created via the primordial withdrawal (simsum) in the infinite light” which left a “hollow space,” empty of divine illumination, within which the cosmos could be “emanated, created, formed and made.”

Prior to the primordial simsum, it is understood, the infinite assertion of divine manifestation precluded the possibility of any sort of creation; simsum makes the existence of differentiated and otherly beings possible. Rashab adds that:

The ultimate purpose of the creation of the worlds, and the ultimate intent for which the soul descends into the body, is in order to elicit the revelation of the infinite light in the worlds via the Torah and the commandments … that is, to elicit additional luminosity … from the infinite light that precedes the simsum, to the degree that in the [messianic] future the revelation of the infinite light will be in the hollow space (makom haḥalal) as it was prior to the simsum.

Rashab points to the first chapter of the first section of R. Naftali Bakrakh’s Emek hamelekh (Amsterdam, 1648) as a source for this idea, yet the formulation found there is somewhat

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16 For the most comprehensive overview of post-Lurianic discourse on simsum, see Zimzum: Gott und Weltursprung (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 2014).
17 See, Rabbi Hayim Vital, Etz hayim, 1:2; Rabbi Naftali Hertz Bachrach, Emek hamelekh (Amsterdam, 1648), Shaar Shaashu’ai Hamelekh, chapter 1 (folios 1a-1d).
18 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 3-4 [4-5].
different. R. Bakrakh writes that through Torah study and miṣvah observance “the hollow of the infinite will revert (yahzor) to its primordial state, and will be entirely sacred.”

Rashab, crucially, does not speak merely of reversion, but rather of the elicitation of “additional luminosity” (tosefet or). As is often the case in the Habad corpus, Rashab’s paraphrase of Emek hamelekh can be traced back to several discourses transcribed from the mouth of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, and echoes of the terminology he uses can be found in discourses by all of his ideological successors up to Rashab’s time.

In contrast to Emek hamelekh and Samakh vav, these sources—for the most part—do not explicitly relate this notion to șimșum specifically. Rashab, moreover, is the first to subject the distinct intimations of this formulation to sustained scrutiny, erecting upon its foundation a systematic existential and religious teleology that is driven by the quest for innovation.

In most of its earlier invocations, the term “additional luminosity” may simply be understood to mean a degree of luminosity that exceeds the bounds of the cosmos. Divine light is generally understood to flow into the cosmos via the circumscriptions of the kav—a constrained “ray” of illumination drawn from the infinite light that precedes the șimșum—which emanates, creates, forms and makes the various finite realms of the cosmos within the hollow space left in the aftermath of the șimșum.

By contrast, Torah study and miṣvah observance are said to elicit “additional luminosity … from the infinite light that precedes the șimșum.” Rashab, however, immediately points out that—at first sight—such a conception provides an account of ultimate

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19 Rabbi Naftali Hertz Bakrakh, Emek hamelekh (Amsterdam, 1648), folio 1b:

חולול של אין סוף יחזור לקדמיו ויהיה כולו קודש


20 See the relevant discussion in Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, Maamarei admor hazaken 5570 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1981), 168-9. On the various manuscript versions of this discourse see ibid., 290, note 36. Briefer encapsulations of the idea can be found in idem., Likutei torah, “naso,” 22b: “and he settled them in the garden of eden to work it, and to elicit additional light …” ויניחו בג“ע לעבדה ולהמשיך תוספת אור, and ibid., “derushim leyom hakipurim,” 70c. The latter text is related to the more extensive discussion found in the first source cited in this note, both of them being elaborations appended to a single discourse delivered by R. Shneur Zalman circa 1810. This briefer articulation directly references Rabbi Natan Shapiro’s introduction to Pri ets ḥayim (Koretz, 1782). The discussion there does not engage șimșum explicitly, but may nevertheless align with the first of the two conceptions of “additional luminosity” elaborated by Rashab and described below.

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cosmic and religious purpose that is fundamentally circular, and therefore fundamentally unsatisfactory: If the infinite light initially filled the entirety of the hollow space, why was the space then cleared only to refill it with infinite light drawn forth by Torah study and the observance of miṣvot? “What is the innovation in this?” he asks, “is it not the case that prior to the simšum as well the infinite light filled the entirety of the hollow space?”

Rashab offers two answers:

1) The self-described “simple” answer is that “initially, when the infinite light filled the entirety of the hollow space, it was not possible for worlds to exist … however the innovation is that the revelation will be in the worlds.” On this score, the innovative purpose of Torah and miṣvot is to “refine” the created cosmos, including this lowest of all worlds, to the point that it shall be a “receptacle” fit to be illuminated by the infinite light that preceded the simšum, even though such radiance initially precluded the very possibility of creation:

Although the light is the same light that filled the hollow place prior to the simšum, nevertheless the innovation herein is that the revelation shall be within the worlds.

This first answer upholds the original concept of “reversion,” as formulated in Emek hamelekh. No “new” revelation of the divine is elicited as a result of simšum and creation. What is new is that the primordial radiance of the infinite light will no longer preclude the existential possibility of the created realms as it did prior to the simšum. Instead, the created beings will ultimately be so refined and tempered—especially, Rashab emphasizes, through the revelation of the Torah—that they will no longer stand as the sort of opaque and egotistical assertions that must inevitably be obliterated by the disclosure of the infinite light in all its pre-simšum potency. The post-simšum cosmos will be saturated with the pre-simšum radiance and yet remain intact.

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23 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 4 [5]: מהוא הת노동שות בחזלו גב קדושה העונות היה איה"ס פמילא כמוקם החלל

24 Ibid., 4 [5-6]: על"פ פשוט … החלל בשתי א"ס פמילא מוקם החלל כי לא היה אarshal לחון מורא ו.SOCKA הערמות … אסמה הת노동שות בזח, מה שידעי יכללי

25 Ibid.
2) Rashab’s second, and self-described “main,” answer asserts that Torah and miṣvot can ultimately elicit “a supernal luminosity that is loftier than the primordial light” that filled the empty space prior to the simsum, namely, “the interiority and the essence of the infinite light.”

This distinction rests an a more basic distinction asserted by R. Shneur Zalman of Liady in a well-known discourse published in the influential compendium Torah or, according to which the infinite light (or ayn sof) is not synonymous with the essence and being of G-d, but is rather the primordial revelation emanating from the being and essence of G-d. On this score, G-d’s self should not be equated with the infinite “light” but rather with the “luminary” (ma’or) that is the source of that light. A few years before beginning Samekh vav, Rashab had completed a commentary on this discourse—known by its opening words as Patah eliyahu—whose further relevance to this discussion will be discussed below. For now it is sufficient to note that Rashab’s second explanation of the purpose of simsum rests on this fundamental distinction. As Rashab expresses it towards the end of Samekh vav’s first discourse, the clearing away of the primordial revelation of the or ayn sof does not prepare the way for a straightforward reversion of the simsum, but rather that:

Specifically via the fulfillment of Torah and miṣvot … shall be elicited a new luminosity, with addition exceeding the principal that was already established according to the cosmic order etc. … [that is,] the elicitation of new luminosity from the essence of the emanator … In R. Shneur Zalman of Liady’s earlier discussion of the term “additional luminosity,” he similarly explained that it refers to the elicitation of “additional new luminosity from the aspect of the pinnacle of the light that is within the essence, which transcends the [primordial] assertion [of infinite light].” For Rashab, it soon becomes clear, the word “new” is crucial, and the term

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26 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 4 [5]: א"ו ר' ש"ח ש"ל ר"ש ה' שלמעלה גם מהאור שהי' ממלא מקום החלל וכ"ו פנימיות ועצמות א"וס 'שלמעלה ש"י השכבה והוסר 'ת מק"ו והשתלשלות כ"ו.

27 Torah or (Kehot Publication Society, 2001), 14a.

28 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 8 [12].

29 Maamarei admor hazaken 5570 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1981), 169:
“new luminosity” (or ḥadash)—sometimes with the supplemental emphasis of words such as “legamrei,” “mamash” or the like—appears at key junctures throughout the hemshekh. It is equally clear that the word “essence” (aṣmut) is also crucial, and that innovation and essentiality are intrinsically linked.31

This gives us a clue to the significance of the fundamental distinction between “the primordial light” that precedes the ṣimṣum (often referred to by Rashab as or ayn sof) and the “entirely new luminosity” (often referred to by Rashab as the disclosure of aṣmut or ayn sof) that is to be elicited through Torah study and miṣvah observance. The latter is not simply a new elicitation of divine revelation relative to the cosmos and to the creatures that inhabit it, but rather an entirely original manifestation of the divine essence. This is the sort of novelty that Samekh vav reckons with. More specifically, there are two central questions that Rashab consistently probes from the beginning of this hemshekh to its conclusion: 1) What sort of a phenomenon can rightly be construed an “entirely new” revelation of the essence? 2) How is it that Torah study and miṣvah observance, specifically, can elicit the phenomenological manifestation of such novelty?

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Part 2 - Concealment and Revelation / Innovation and Essentiality

In one of his more explicit discussions of the nature of “innovation” Rashab asserts that anything subject to the dynamic of concealment and revelation cannot be construed as fundamentally “new.” The revelation of that which was previously concealed is merely the instantiation of a reversion; the discovery of the concealed manifestation. No “new” manifestation is thereby elicited. Such is the case within the ordinary, hierarchical, relationship between “provider” and “recipient,” which, in the Habad tradition, is often exemplified by the relationship between a teacher who provides knowledge and the student who receives knowledge.32

As Rashab expresses it:

31 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 336 [444], 337 [445], 348 [460], 351 [463], 354 [467], 356 [469-470], 359 [474], 391-2 [517].

[In] all forms of transmission from the provider to the recipient, nothing at all new is [received] by the recipient, since this transmission already existed beforehand on the provider’s part ...  

Rashab then contrasts this dynamic of concealment and revelation with the dynamic of innovation that occurs when the essence of the infinite (ašmut or ayn sof) is made manifest:

The luminosity that is disclosed from ašmut or ayn sof, not by means of concealment and revelation—and that is ašmut or ayn sof as it is prior to the primal şimsūm, transcending the root of the kav etc.—is that which is called a fundamentally new luminosity (or hadash me’ikaro) … the disclosure of a new luminosity, verily (or ḥadash mamash) …

This distinction—between the ordinary dynamic of revelation and concealment, and the new revelation of the essence—can best be unpacked by returning to Rashab’s extensive glosses to R. Shneur Zalman’s Pataḥ eliyahu, where the underlying distinction between the light (or ayn sof) and the luminary (ašmut or ayn sof) is more directly examined. In Pataḥ eliyahu the latter made the seminal assertion that the withdrawal or concealment of the primal şimsūm only pertains to the revelation of G-d (“the infinite light”), but not to the essential self of G-d (“the luminary” or “the Infinite Himself”). “On the contrary,” he declared, “the luminary is revealed” (hama’or hu behitgalut). Glossing this deeply enigmatic pronouncement, Rashab writes as follows:

There is a distinction between the concept of “revelation” that is applied to “light” and between the concept of revelation that is applied to “the luminary.” For behold, the very purpose of light is revelation, for this is the entire function of light, that it is drawn and revealed from the luminary. Accordingly, the purpose of revelation in this context is that

33 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 336-7 [445].
34 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 337 [445].
35 Torah or (Kehot Publication Society, 2001), 14b.
it should be grasped and comprehended, and that is that it shall radiate internally, [meaning, in a manner] that the recipient can know and feel it, knowing how and what it is. And this pertains to the light, which is in the aspect of revelation [in the ordinary sense of the term] etc …

By contrast, the function of the luminary is not to be in the aspect of revelation, for it is not in the realm of revelation at all, for any essence (ešem) does not reveal itself etc. (And nor is the function of concealment relevant to it either, for concealment relates to that which can be revealed, like the light that is the aspect of revelation … and prior to its revelation is concealed. But the luminary itself (ešem hama’or), its function is not revelation, [and] by extension it cannot be concealed either etc.) And, this being so, the concept of revelation as applied thereto, does not signify that it should become graspable and comprehensible, so that one can know what it is, for it is not in the realm of revelation etc. Rather this concept of revelation is that it is found and reveals itself as it transcends any realm of revelation and any realm of concealment. And this [the meaning of] “the luminary is revealed,” as he [i.e. Rabbi Shneur Zalman] explains afterward that even infants know etc.36

In the normal sense, according to Rashab, “revelation” refers to the external articulation of something in terms that can be conceptually or phenomenologically comprehended, assimilated

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36 Hagahot ledibbur hamasḥil pataḥ eliyahu 5658, 52.
and described. By contrast, to speak of the “revelation” of the essence, is not to speak of any sort of external articulation beyond the being of the essence itself. This sort of “revelation” has nothing to do with the ordinary dynamic of concealment and revelation, nor is it about discerning one or another of the attributes that theologians or mystics might ascribe to the deity. This sort of “revelation” transcends all theological constructs. It is rather a discovery of the barefaced essence that is the very ground of all particular phenomena. It is this sort of unconstructed and unarticulated manifestation of the essence that R. Shneur Zalman declared to be readily accessible, and perhaps actually innately intuitive, even to an uneducated child.

It is with this notion of “revelation” in mind that I have chosen to translate the terms tosefet or and or hadash as “additional luminosity” and “new luminosity,” rather than as “additional light” and “new light.” Rashab does not use these formulations to speak of the sort of “light” that can be “revealed,” in the ordinary sense of these terms, but is rather speaking of the disclosure of “the luminary itself” (eṣem hama’or), as it stands beyond the dynamic of revelation and concealment, as it is “itself.” While the term “light” bespeaks external revelation in the usual sense, like sunlight that radiates outward from the sun, I have used the term “luminosity” to indicate that the disclosure of the essence remains enfolded within the luminary and is therefore utterly unarticulated even as it stands in open view.

Rashab makes this distinction explicit at the outset of Samekh vav’s second discourse. In the following quote we again see that the realization of creation’s ultimate purpose is explicitly linked to the messianic future to come (le’atid lavo), as it is throughout Samekh vav and throughout the Habad corpus more generally:

In the future there shall be the elicitation of the essence, verily (hamshakhat ha’ašmut mamash) … And the revelations of the future shall not be the aspect of diffusion and revelations of lights, but rather that the essential hiddenness, verily, shall disclose itself and reveal itself; or that this shall occur by means of ascent, that the souls of Israel shall ascend into the essential hiddenness of the essence of the infinite … literally, before Him
[that is, they shall behold G-d’s very self as it is essentially], within the aspect of the interiority and essence of the infinite (penimiyut ve’asmat ayn sof) etc.\(^{37}\)

Rashab’s commentary to R. Shneur Zalman’s statement that “the luminary is revealed,” serves not only to illuminate the axiomatic conception of “new luminosity” that is at the heart of Samekh vav, but also to throw a significant point of departure into sharp relief: For R. Shneur Zalman the essential “revelation” of the luminary is taken as a given, so accessible that “even infants know.” In Samekh vav, by contrast, this “revelation” is cast as the fundamentally inaccessible object of the ultimate existential quest. It should nevertheless be clear that these two conceptions of the essential luminary—as at once revealed and hidden, accessible and inaccessible—cannot be seen as contradictory. Rather, the uninhibited “revelation” of the essence is a function of its ineffable “hiddenness”; it is precisely because nothing can be known of the essence that even the infant who knows nothing can apprehend its uninhabited presence. The opposite is also true; because the presence of the essence is not subject to any inhibition it consequently has no definitions or parameters by which its “revelation” can be grasped. To say that it is infinitely accessible is to say that it is infinitely inaccessible. As Rashab puts it elsewhere, “all apprehend the essentiality, but no one comprehends it.”\(^{38}\)

Indeed, it wouldn’t be a stretch to say that it is specifically the infant—whose sensibilities have not been embellished with the more or less sophisticated constructions that are labeled “theology”—who can apprehend that about which nothing can be said. Most of us, however, have been robbed, by what we like to think of as our “worldliness” or “maturity,” of such childish innocence; we are desentized to the ineffable intuitions of the infant. As William James

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\(^{37}\) *Yom tov shel rosh hashanah* 5666, 10 [14-15]. The Hebrew locution “before Him” (lefanav) is here endowed with a double meaning. It’s literal sense evokes face-to-face intimacy with the divine essence, but it is also linked phonetically to the word for “interiority” (penimiyut), which heightens that intimacy to the point that the subject is encompassed within the object beheld; that is, within the divine essence.

once put it, “If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits.”\textsuperscript{39} We live in a world of corruption, divisiveness and sophistry; a world which the post-Lurianic kabbalists regard as the shattered remnants of divine chaos; a world in which the obvious is easily obscured and easily overlooked. To borrow an ancient metaphor popularized by Isaiah Berlin, the Oxford philosopher and estranged scion of the Schneersohn family, we live in a world where the multifarious cunning of the fox is wont to confuse the single minded knowledge of the hedgehog.\textsuperscript{40}

Following this line of thinking from \textit{Patah eliyahu} to \textit{Samekh vav}, we can accordingly frame Rashab’s teleological concept as a cosmic quest for the reattainment of lost innocence, the childlike perception of the singular essence. Crucially, however, he is not interested in a mere reversion to that primal state. He is instead in search of a “new luminosity” such that the previously unarticulated essence will be articulated within and through the multifariousness and differentiation of individuated human activity and experience, while yet maintaining its singular and ineffable essentiality. To reiterate the formulation cited above from the second discourse of \textit{Samekh vav}, Rashab seeks “the elicitation of the essence, verily (\textit{hamshakhat ha’asmut mamash}) … that the essential hiddenness, verily, shall disclose itself and reveal itself; or that this shall occur by means of ascent, that the souls of Israel shall ascend into the essential hiddenness of the essence of the infinite.”\textsuperscript{41}

In a sense, we might say, Rashab is interested in undoing the distinction he so clearly elucidated in his glosses to \textit{Patah eliyahu} between “the concept of ‘revelation’ that is applied to ‘light’ and between the concept of revelation that is applied to ‘the luminary’.”\textsuperscript{42} In \textit{Samekh vav} his quest is that even the luminary, whose function is not to be revealed, “should be grasped and comprehended … that the recipient can know and feel it, knowing how and what it is.”\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} William James, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience}, Lecture III (Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2004), 74.

Part 3 - Desire, Pleasure and the Transcendence of Sense

Having gone some way to unpacking what Rashab intends when he speaks of a new revelation of the essence, our task now is to offer a broad outline of his account of how such a revelation can be elicited. The first and most obvious element of Rashab’s account is its emphasis of the teleological centrality of the lowest rung of the cosmological order, namely the material world of human habitation. For Rashab, the sheer abjection of this material world generates a powerful critique of conventional explanations of divine purpose, and thereby provides the ground for an argument that is at once rigorously philosophical and yet returns us to what might be termed a “pre-philosophical” teleology that appeals not to rationale but to desire.

The following is an abbreviated citation of one segment of Rashab’s argument, from the first discourse of Samekh vav:

[As to] what is written in the Zohar, [that the purpose of creation is] “in order that they shall know Me,” it is the case that knowledge and apprehension of the or ayn sof is mainly in the supernal realms, such as the realm of emanation (aṣilut) and beyond aṣilut; there the revelation of the or ayn sof shines … and they know and grasp the very being (mahut) of the divine etc. But in the realms of creation, formation, and action (bey’a), it is the case that the light is concealed and hidden … and the physical realm of action was created specifically in such a manner that even the existence (méši’ut) of divinity [much less the “being” of the divine] shall not be sensed, and that they shall be separated from their source etc … and, on the contrary, their entire creation is specifically by means of the concealment of the light; it is only possible to know G-d through work and intense toil specifically … [Accordingly,] it is impossible to apply this reason to [justify] the creation of the lower realm …

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44 Zohar 2:42b.
45 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 6-7 [8-10].
For Rashab, the traditional rationalization that the cosmos was created in order that G-d should be known by created beings, or—as articulated by Rabbi Saadiah Gaon and Rabbi Ḥayim Vital—in order that G-d’s goodness and completeness shall be exhibited, are belayed by the very existence of so abject a world as this one. Such rationalizations would be satisfactory if G-d had only created realms more perfect than our own, realms where such knowledge is attainable, and where such goodness and completeness is manifest. But the physical realm of human habitation seems to be completely unsuited to the realization of such ideals. Our embodied encounter with the real darkness and hardships of this world—our own experience of the axiomatic obscuration of divinity, which forms the very ground of this-worldly existence—renders such earlier teleologies unsatisfactory. In their place opens the sort of existential vacuum that can lead even the most worldly among us to seek out and elicit a more resonant explanation of why this sort of reality is meaningful and warranted. Compare the claim made the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as paraphrased by Dan Zahavi, that consciousness ultimately calls for a transcendental clarification that goes beyond common-sense postulates and brings us face to face with “the problem of the constitution of the world.”

For an explanation to satisfactorily respond to “the problem” of the world as we find it, it must transcend the idealistic conventions that govern traditional theologies, while somehow also revealing the imperceptible, making sense of the inexplicable, and communicating the ineffable within the finite bounds of our embodied lives, activities and experiences. Emphasizing the transcendence of conventional philosophical rationalization, Rashab cites the midrashic assertion that “G-d desired a dwelling place in the lowly realms,” which R. Shneur Zalman had termed “the ultimate purpose of the creation of this world.” As I have argued elsewhere, in invoking

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47 See Midrash tanḥuma, Behukotai 3 and Nasso 16, and Bereishit rabbah 3.

48 Likutei amarim - tanya (Vilna 1900), chapter 36, folio 45b [90].
this midrash R. Shneur Zalman was returning the semi-bifurcated traditions of Jewish mysticism and rationalism to their indigenous root in what I termed the authoritative “testimony” of the pre-philosophical rabbinic imaginaire. In Tanya the primary emphasis is on shifting the locus of ultimate purpose from the more ideal celestial realms to the “lowly realms” (taḥtonim), and to this material world in particular. In Samekh vav Rashab takes up this midrashic turn and extends it, setting it as the basis upon which to reexamine the entire tradition of Jewish religious life, thought and experience through the phenomenological prism of “desire” or “yearning,” rather than through the more conventional prism of rationalized ideals or values. He underscores this further shift by citing another midrash:

“His thighs (shokav) are pillars of marble” (Song of Songs, 5:15) … Shokav refers to the world, for He yearned to create it, as it says (ibid. 7:11), “To me is his yearning (teshukato).” How do we know that this is what is meant? For it says, “He completed (vayekhulu) the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 2:1). Vayekhulu is nothing other than an expression of desire (ta’avah), as it says, “My soul desired and yearned (kaltah) etc” (Psalms 84:3).50

For Rashab this intimates that the world is created, “due to yearning alone, not due to any requirement, heaven forfend—[such as] for the sake of completeness, and nor in order that they shall know Me … but this is only due to the yearning, because the Blessed Holy One yearned to create it, and we know no logical reason as to why He so yearned etc. and the intention in this is in order to elicit the revelation of asmut or ayn sof, specifically, below … which is not due to any


50 Bamidbar rabbah 10.
requirement or logical reason, but rather because He desired so, which transcends reason and sense.”

He goes on to cite a Yiddish aphorism attributed to R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, which makes the point even more forcefully: “Regarding a desire, there are no questions.”

Given this emphasis of divine desire as the ultimate impetus for creation it is not surprising that Rashab devotes a substantial segment at the outset of Samekh vav to a theorization of the misvot as the inner desire (penimiyut haraṣon), which is an externalized facet of the essential pleasure (ta’anug ha’ašmi), of G-d. This discussion is a fundamentally phenomenological exploration of desire and pleasure as they are manifest in the human soul, and in religious experience, which Rashab uses as a window via which to reexamine the innermost manifestations of the divine, both as they are encompassed within G-d’s self and as they function as an interface between G-d’s essence and the world. As is characteristic of Rashab’s writings, especially in Samekh vav and the even longer hemshekh known as Ayin bet, the arguments unfold with fulsome incrementalism. Swirling layers of orderly abstraction are presented with dizzying coherence, with each new concept being carefully distinguished from the one that preceded it, and at the same time being anchored deeply and rigorously both in human experience and in the classical canons of rabbinic and kabbalasitic literature. Given the sheer voluminosity of the hemshekh as a whole, and even of this particular discussion in particular, here we will make do with a single excerpt to illustrate of the phenomenological tenor of the discussion:

Pleasure and desire both issue from a singular root in the essence of the soul, and they are not two distinct faculties. Rather they issue from a singular root, only that pleasure is the inner dimension and desire the external one, and therefore pleasure is specifically concealed and desire is specifically revealed. For desire is the elicitation of the soul … this is the attachment of the soul to something other than itself, specifically … And this is because desire is in the aspect of revelation, and therefore it has a beginning, that is, the beginning of the arousal, and it has an end, that is, that it becomes attached to the object

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51 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 7-8 [10-11]: מצד התשוקה לבד, לא מצד החрабר ח"ז בברכתי השלמות, ולא ב sond ר"ש מצד התשוקהنشותוקב הקב"ה ... ולא משוה קר מצד התשוקהنشותוקו הקב"ה. לברנוהו, או אר אחד שם סמל מפיין מנוסוקו렐מה ו논וי בז מהמניחיג bä יראה לעHashMap לאוד לאים דקח להשתוקו ... שאר הז מצד אהוב.

52 Ibid.: איך הם חיות אד כי נקשו.
etc. This is contrast to pleasure, which is only that in the interiority of the soul one experiences pleasure, and one’s desire toward the object in which one takes pleasure is not apparent at all. That is, even as one takes pleasure in a particular object—that is, in something other than the self—one’s desire [toward that object] is not apparent. Rather, one’s self takes pleasure in that thing, and the principality of the pleasure is that one experiences pleasure in one’s essence, and is not drawn toward any object at all.53

Broadly speaking, we can align “desire” with the conventional notion of revelation and “pleasure” with the essence as it stands beyond the dynamic of revelation and concealment. Yet, Rashab goes on to make a further distinction between a pleasure that is nevertheless experienced (ta’anug hamurgash) and a pleasure that transcends experience or sense (ta’anug hamurgash), according to which only the latter can really be said to be a true apprehension of the essence as it is in itself.54 An example of this is the distinction between the pleasure of Shabbat and the pleasure of Yom Kippur; whereas the former is celebrated with food and drink the latter is celebrated through fasting. In Rashab’s words: “one shall efface from her [i.e. the soul], through affliction, any sensual pleasure, and thereby arrive at the essential pleasure that is not sensible at all.”55 Indeed, he goes on to say that it is only “through true teshuvah,” the form of penitential devotion most associated with Yom Kippur, that “one arrives at the very essence … and thereby draw additional luminosities into Torah and miṣvot as well.”56

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53 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 73 [97].
54 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 99-100 [133-134].
55 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 106 [141]:
56 Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 108 [145]:
This pronouncement is made about one third of the way through Samekh vav, so this can by no means be taken as Rashab’s final word on how the ultimate purpose of creation is to be attained. Indeed, he begins the very next discourse by allowing that through toiling in Torah, as well, “it is possible to arrive at the essential pleasure that is not sensible.”\textsuperscript{57} The phenomenology of searching, or “in-depth,” Torah study (iyun hatorah) is one of several central threads that run through this hemshekh from beginning to end. More than thirty discourses later, after many meandering tangents that serve to further ground his fundamental argument in a bold and illuminating phenomenological extension of post-Lurianic cosmology and theology, Rashab writes:

When one comes to the oral Torah [i.e. the rabbinic tradition as recorded in the Mishnah, Talmud and subsequent commentaries and codifiers], that is, to decide the law in actuality, then something like doubts occur etc., which is the withdrawal and concealment of the light (siluk vehitalmut ha’or) etc … And through extreme toil and introspection one arrives at the truth of the matter … and one removes all the slag and concealments etc. Behold, with such toil and introspection one reaches asmut ayn sof mamash, that is the essential hiddenness of the infinite, and a revelation of new luminosity, verily, is elicited … And this is not merely [a disclosure] from concealment to revelation, for that is so when the elicitation is merely from the primordial Torah etc. But here, where the elicitation is from the essential hiddenness, these matters themselves come in a manner of innovation, from nothing to something, verily, etc … with multifarious extensions and a great deal of branches, and with deep conceptions that are entirely new etc.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57} Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 110 [147]: [ינור, ספסת ייון ח"פ, הקי א"ל ח"פ, דברי מ"ס: י"ל ק"א, ר"מ ק"א, ח"א קס"נ.]  
\textsuperscript{58} Yom tov shel rosh hashanah 5666, 391-392 [516-518].
There is much more to be said, especially about the nexus of pleasure, innovation and essentiality—as it is elicited and apprehended through Torah study and *miṣvah* observance—throughout this *hemshekh*. Likewise, there is much more to be said about how Rashab’s transposes his phenomenological analysis to reinterpret and further develop classical Lurianic accounts of G-d’s interface with creation, with particular reference to *ṣimṣum*. For now, however, we will have to make do with the examples of Yom Kippur and Torah study to illustrate the way in which Rashab’s phenomenology is attentive to the particulars of specific modes of religious devotional experience and activity, as they are manifest in a lived Judaism, and discovers in those particulars the specific means by which such experience and activity can elicit a new “revelation” of the essence as it remains beyond any revelation. For Rashab, it is clear, desire and pleasure both transcend the circumscriptions of sense.