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by Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse

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“THE GREAT CALL OF THE HOUR”: HILLEL ZEITLIN’S YIDDISH WRITINGS ON YAVNEH

Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse

Abstract: *Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942) was the leading figure of what may be called “philosophical neo-Hasidism” among Eastern European Jews in the pre-Holocaust era. A tireless author, journalist, and polemicist, he published constantly in both the Yiddish and Hebrew presses, offering a bold new vision of contemporary spiritual life grounded in his reading of Hasidic sources. But Zeitlin sought to become an activist as well as a literary figure. He was especially concerned with the situation of the rootless Jewish youth. Throughout his career as a public figure, beginning shortly after World War I, he issued calls for a new organization of Jewish life. In a series of articles published in the 1920s, he sought to form an elite Jewish spiritual fraternity to be called Yavneh, which was the most fully elaborated of his attempts at intentional community. The present study collects together Zeitlin’s Yiddish writings on the Yavneh fellowship, describing its ambition and scope within the context of interwar Jewish and Yiddish culture. These writings, re-printed and translated into English for the first time, can be read in their entirety in Yiddish and English here. Alongside his articles and essays published in the Yiddish press, we also present a newly discovered manuscript signed by Zeitlin, a single-sheet four-sided text in which he describes more succinctly and clearly the nature of the group and its intended function.*

Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942) was the leading figure of what may be called “philosophical neo-Hasidism” among Eastern European Jews in the pre-Holocaust era.¹

¹ See Shraga Bar Sella, *Ben sa’ar le-demama: hayav umishnato shel Hillel Zeitlin* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 1999); Jonatan Meir, “Sefer ha-ḥezyonot: ‘al yomano ha-misti shel Hillel Zietlin unisyonot hadpasato le-or igrot gnuzot,” *Aley Sefer* 21 (2010): 149-71; Jonatan Meir, “Tshukatan shel neshamot el ha-shekhinah: beyrur masekhat ha-ksharim ben ha-rav Kook le-Hillel Zeitlin ve-Yosef Ḥayim Brenner,” in

In this, his position was parallel to that of Martin Buber, but addressing the Hebrew and Yiddish-reading public. Like Buber, Zeitlin tended toward a certain romanticization of Hasidism, in the spirit of the age during which they both wrote. For this they were both criticized and dismissed by Scholem and his school, who were among the first critical scholars of Jewish mysticism and Hasidism.² But also like Buber, Zeitlin had profound insight into the religious heart of Hasidism that has come to be appreciated again in more recent times.³

By the term “philosophical neo-Hasidism,” we mean to distinguish the work of these two thinkers from that of the many re-tellers of Hasidic tales in the early twentieth century, and also from those who affected a re-appreciation of Hasidism as a way of defining their own literary or artistic creations.⁴ Buber and Zeitlin were both well schooled in the Western philosophical tradition. Although Zeitlin, the scion of a Chabad family who had rebelled as a youth, was an autodidact, he clearly had read very widely, especially in the thought of his own era. In the first decade of the twentieth century, he saw his task as that of bringing philosophical enlightenment to the reader of Hebrew literature. His first two significant published works were on Spinoza (1900) and Nietzsche (1905). He was also influenced by Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Lev Shestov, readings in Buddhism, and various other contemporary philosophical-theological currents. All of these studies fed directly into his way of understanding Hasidism and his decision to re-appropriate its religious language as his own.

Around the time of the First World War, Zeitlin, a member of the largely secularized circle of Y. H. Brenner, Uri Gnessin, and others, all of them more-or-less followers of M. Y. Berdyczewski, made the very unusual decision for those times to re-embrace a life of religious observance. Until his death on the road to Treblinka in 1942, he lived at the center of Warsaw’s teeming intellectual and highly partisan political life dressed in a Hasidic caftan—a mystical/prophetic figure choosing to operate within

Derekh ha-ruah: sefer ha-yovel le-Eliezer Schweid, vol. 2, ed. Y. Amir (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2005), 771-818; Arthur Green, “Hillel Zeitlin and Neo-Hasidic Readings of the Zohar,” *Kabbalah* 22 (2010): 59-78; Green, “Three Warsaw Mystics,” in *Kolot Rabbim: Essays in Memory of Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer*, ed. R. Elijor (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1997), 1-58. For a collection of Zeitlin’s most significant works translated into English, see Arthur Green’s edition of *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

² See Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 228-50.

³ On Martin Buber and his approach to Jewish mysticism, see Moshe Idel, “Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem on Hasidism: A Critical Appraisal,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. A. Rapoport-Albert (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), 176-202; Ron Margolin, *Mikdash adam* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 6-21, 41-58; Seth Brody, “‘Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness’: The Pursuit of Holiness and Non-Duality in Early Hasidic Teaching,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 89.1-2 (1998): 2-3; Martina Urban, “Hermeneutics of Renewal: Biblical Imagery and Tropes of Ecstatic Experience in Buber’s Early Interpretation of Hasidism,” *Studies in Spirituality* 15 (2005): 19-53; Tsippi Kauffman, “The Hasidic Story: A Call for Narrative Religiosity,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 22 (2014): 101-26.

⁴ Nicham Ross, *Masoret ahuvah usnu’ah: zehut yehudit modernit uktivah neo-ḥasidit be-fetah ha-me’ah ha’esrim* (Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 2010); Ross, “Can Secular Spirituality be Religiously Inspired?: The Hasidic Legacy in the Eyes of the Skeptics,” *AJS Review* 37 (2013): 93-113; and Ross, “I.L. Peretz’s ‘Between Two Mountains’: Neo-Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity,” in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, ed. S.E. Jelen, M.P. Kramer and L.S. Lerner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 104-26.

an almost entirely secular milieu.⁵ As we shall see presently, he disdained the orthodox movements of his day almost as fully as he disdained every other party. A tireless author, journalist, and polemicist, he published constantly in both the Yiddish and Hebrew presses,⁶ taking on enemies from all sides.⁷

Already in the 1920s, Zeitlin became obsessed by a growing sense of an impending (but undefined) catastrophe about to befall Polish Jewry.⁸ This was not difficult to imagine, given the terrible pogroms that had befallen the Ukrainian Jewish communities in the period between 1918 and 1921 (some of them visited upon their victims by the newly-formed Polish army). The forceful presence of antisemitism in Polish political life was also becoming apparent. Large numbers of Jewish refugees, fleeing the Galician and eastern Polish provinces devastated by the war as well as by the pogroms, flocked into Warsaw and other cities. These refugees included large numbers of young people who were just deciding, as they left their shtetl homes, whether to leave behind their traditional Jewish way of life as well.

In response to these volatile circumstances, Zeitlin sought to become an activist as well as a literary figure. He was especially concerned with the situation of the rootless Jewish youth. Throughout his career as a public figure, beginning shortly after World War I, he issued calls for a new organization of Jewish life, under any number of banners and addressed to varying aspects, concerns, and segments of the Jewish community. Each manifesto or call-to-action urged for transcending party loyalties, expressed concern for the entire Jewish people and its fate, and demanded a combination of political and economic reforms coupled with a call for spiritual renewal. These ranged from a project entitled *Ahdut Yisra'el*, which was a vision for unifying and re-charging the entire Jewish people, to another, *Beney heikhala*, a group so elite in its religious education that he sought to address it in Zoharic Aramaic! In 1936 he called the group *Moshi'im* or “saviors” of Israel. Even as the war was about to break out in 1939, Zeitlin assembled a group of ten *mekhavenim*, or people of intense prayer, to join him in devotionally withstanding the great destruction that he knew was about to come. More will be said about this incident below.

⁵ See Elchonon Zeitlin's memoir, published posthumously as *In a literarisher shtub* (Buenos Aires, 1946). Zeitlin's son Elkxonon died in the Warsaw ghetto in early 1942. His grave lies at the very entrance to Warsaw's huge Jewish cemetery, indicating that he was probably among the last to be buried there during the ghetto era.

⁶ For a fascinating reflection of the different reasons for his writing in Hebrew and Yiddish, see Zeitlin's “A bisl klorkeyt un pashtes in der shprakh-en-frage,” *Der Moment* 292, 19 December 1924, 4.

⁷ The bibliography of Zeitlin's publications by A. D. Malachi, published in *Ha-tekufah* 32-33 (1948), 848-75 and 34-35 and (1950), 843-48, is admittedly quite incomplete, especially regarding the “thousands and thousands” of his Yiddish articles, published in *Der moment* as well as various other Yiddish periodicals in Poland, New York, and elsewhere. Malachi makes note of having recently received from Aaron Zeitlin another bibliography of the articles in *Der moment* and *Haynt*, compiled by Y. Zeid, based on the Hebrew University Library holdings. Unpublished bibliographies like this one may be found in YIVO's archive, but the most exhaustive contemporary resource for locating Zeitlin's many and varied newspaper articles is the Abraham Icchok Lerner Index to Yiddish Periodicals, compiled by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Beth Shalom Aleichem, and the Jewish National and University Library (<http://yiddish-periodicals.huji.ac.il/>).

⁸ See Shraga Bar-Sella, “On the Brink of Disaster: Hillel Zeitlin's Struggle for Jewish Survival in Poland,” *Polin* 11 (1998): 77-93.

Of special interest to us here is his 1923 call for the formation of an elite Jewish spiritual fraternity to be called *Yavneh*, the most fully elaborated of these attempts at intentional community.⁹ He first announced it a series of stirring articles entitled “The Call of the Hour” in the pages of the Warsaw Yiddish daily *Der moment*, where Zeitlin had a weekly column. (He had been among the newspaper’s founders).¹⁰ These articles were followed up by two further essays in which he began to suggest more concrete steps for the formation of this would-be movement for the spiritual regeneration of Judaism and world Jewry. The fact that this series of articles was published in a vastly popular Yiddish daily suggests that Zeitlin was hoping to address a rather broad readership. All of these pieces are re-printed and translated into English for the first time in the links below.

Zeitlin longed for a rarified and spiritually regenerated Judaism, one based on his idealized vision of early Hasidism and tied also to an image which appears in the *Zohar*—the circle around Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai. (In those years, Zeitlin was beginning to translate the core text of Kabbalah from Aramaic into Hebrew.¹¹) But his romantic vision of a glorified neo-Hasidic community was one that very much belonged to Poland of the 1920s. The values of socialism, including supporting oneself by the dignity of one’s own labor and disdain for commerce as a form of exploitation, are very much part of the rules he composed for the community he sought to create. This idealistic religious community was to serve as a beacon for alienated Jewish youth, presenting Judaism to them as a highly moral and profoundly spiritual way of life. This stood in sharp contrast to the petty and divisive squabbling, as well as to the questionable ethical standards, that he saw in the existing Orthodox and Hasidic communities of his day.¹²

Zeitlin’s proposal for a Jewish spiritual revival in 1922 should be understood in historical context. The Jewish population of Poland, particularly to the south and east (in eastern Galicia and Volhyn), was caught between opposing armies during World War I, and further battered by the bitter Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Soviet wars in the

⁹ This call for a neo-Hasidic mystical fellowship further distinguishes Zeitlin from Buber. The latter, writing for a broader audience, was interested in the universal wisdom of Hasidism and how it could be absorbed by his readers. Buber was a Zionist thinker, interested in the revival of the Jewish spirit, even the Jewish people, and saw the ideals of Hasidism as representing the best values of that nation. But he was far from a *Yavneh* project, which meant creating a new Hasidic movement, in the more specific sense.

¹⁰ The Yiddish paper *Der moment* was published daily from May 1910–September 1939, and edited by Noah Pryłucki (1882–1941) and his father Tsevi Pryłucki. The vastly popular *Der moment* was associated with the Folkist party, and it argued for Jewish cultural, political, and linguistic autonomy in the Diaspora, though it also welcomed the work of Zionist writers. See Mendel Moses, “Der moment,” in *Fun noentn over: monografyies un memuarn* (New York: CYCO, 1956), II: 239–99; and Nathan Cohen’s entry in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, available here: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Moment_Der.

¹¹ Jonatan Meir, “Hithavuto ve-gilgulav shel mifal tirkum ubei’ur sefer ha-zohar le-Hillel Zeitlin,” *Kabbalah* 10 (2004): 119–57.

¹² Zeitlin, an active and sharp-tongued polemicist, was bitterly attacked by the leadership of Agudat Yisra’el, the party that dominated Orthodox Jewish life in central Poland and was represented in the Polish parliament by leading followers of the rebbe of Ger (Gora Kalwarja), the chief Hasidic group in the Warsaw region. For one of Zeitlin’s many responses to his Orthodox critics, see his “Mayn apikorses,” *Der moment* 149, 27 July 1924, 4.

immediate postwar years (1919-1921). Significant antisemitic acts, including large-scale murder, were committed by both Polish and Ukrainian forces. Large numbers of Jews fled the region, continuing the ongoing process of urbanization. Warsaw in particular saw a great influx of refugees, including a large youthful population.¹³ Many of these were unemployed and unattached. Coming from traditional *shtetlekh*, some were also on the edge of deciding whether to abandon their religious way of life. At the same time, it was becoming clear by 1922 that the loudly-touted Minorities Treaty accepted by newly independent Poland would not amount to much, and that Jews both culturally and economically were very much on their own. Poverty and despair were widespread on the Jewish street. But in these same years of increasingly dire economic and political situations, Jewish society was still being dramatically transformed by the new intellectual currents of the first half of the twentieth century: nationalist and territorialist movements, linguistic ideologies espousing the renaissance of Yiddish and Hebrew literatures, secular and religious forms of Zionism, and the mass politicization of the ultra-Orthodox bloc. These various movements, and especially their robust and energetic youth cultures, formed a crucial part the historical backdrop of Zeitlin's project of spiritual renewal.¹⁴

Zeitlin's vision of *Yavneh* was also the subject of a privately published pamphlet called *Di teyve* (די תיבה) that appeared in 1924.¹⁵ *Di teyve* announces itself as published by the "religious-ethical circle *Yavneh* of the Ahavat Re'im Society," a group otherwise unidentified. This makes it sound as though *Yavneh* actually came into being for some brief amount of time following Zeitlin's call, although it is possible that the title-page pronouncement reflects Zeitlin's wish more than reality.

Di teyve opens with a small number of evocative Yiddish poems, which reveal Zeitlin's deep longing to draw near to the Divine, as well as his increasing frustration with the suffering of the Jewish people and God's seeming indifference to their plight.¹⁶ One of these, a prayer entitled "Our Wish," is accompanied by a note telling the reader

¹³ See Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet, eds., *Warsaw: The Jewish Metropolis: Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹⁴ See Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Gershon C. Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1919-1939* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996); Daniel K. Heller, "The Rise of the Zionist Right: Polish Jews and the Betar Youth Movement, 1922-1935," Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2012; and Zvi Gitelman, ed., *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003).

¹⁵ The title of this pamphlet is based on wordplay commonly found in Hasidic literature. In Biblical Hebrew *teyvah* is the word for "ark," but in rabbinic Hebrew it can also mean "word." Early Hasidic texts often reinterpret Gen. 6:16, "Make a light source for the ark," and Gen. 7:1, "Enter into the ark, you and all your household," to mean that one must illuminate and enter into the words of prayer with one's entire being; see, for example the commentary on Noah in *Degel maḥaneh Efrayim* (Benei Brak: Otsar arakhey ha-ḥasidut, 2013), 18-19; in *Or Torah* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2011), 25-26; *Or ha-me'ir* (Jerusalem 2000), vol. 1, *be-shalah*, p. 128; and *Kedushat levi*, ed. Michael Darbarmediger (Monsey 1995), vol. 2, *perushei aggadot*, 614. Zeitlin sees this new embrace of the word, and perhaps the entire project of *Yavneh*, as an ark in which to escape or transcend the flood that he saw overcoming Polish Jewry.

¹⁶ In 1931 Zeitlin published a collection of his poems in Yiddish entitled *Gezangen tsum eyn-sof* (Songs to the Boundless One), which included both original material and translations of works that had already appeared in Hebrew in the journal *Ha-tekufah*.

that it was “was recited in a small circle in Warsaw on the new moon of Shevat in 5684 [January 7, 1924].” In *Di teyve*, Zeitlin also published the above-mentioned rules, a list of fourteen “commandments for every true follower of *Yavneh*” (a fifteenth was added in a 1928 version found in *Sifran shel yeḥidim*).¹⁷ These admonitions are preceded by an “interview” that Zeitlin did with himself called “What Does *Yavneh* Want . . . ?,” which describes the new society as a renewed and more universalized version of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s spiritual path.

Alongside these we present a newly discovered manuscript signed by Zeitlin: a single-sheet four-sided signed text in which he describes more succinctly (brevity was not one of his virtues) and clearly the nature of the group and its intended function.¹⁸ In it he announces that some tens of Polish Jews have already signed on to the group and are living by its rule. He also refers to a forthcoming prophetic-mystical work of his that will serve as a guide to the group’s members. This is likely *Sifran shel yeḥidim*, published in 1928.

The existence of an active *Yavneh* group in Warsaw is also attested to by a letter Zeitlin wrote to Nehemiah Aminoach in Jerusalem in the summer of 1925. Aminoach was one of the founders of the Poel Mizrachi movement, the religious version of Labor Zionism. Aminoach and Zeitlin had met during Zeitlin’s single visit to the Land of Israel earlier that year, on the occasion of the opening of the Hebrew University. Zeitlin writes:

Now there is something I want to say to you. I think a small “*Yavneh*” group should be established in Jerusalem, a society of working people who will live in accordance with the fourteen principles that I set forth in my Yiddish composition *Di teyve*. Such a group already exists here in Warsaw, but I think that Jerusalem (or the Land of Israel altogether) is its true place. Members of *Yavneh* may belong to any political party, so long as they recognize the holiness of Israel and the exaltedness of true Jewish religious life. They should come together to fulfill in life those fourteen principles I set forth in *Di teyve*. For people like you, living by the work of your hands and filled with religious feeling and holy fire, it will be easy to live by those rules. [You should] join together for support, to defend these principles, and to distribute them among all the working people of the Holy Land. I am sending you a special package of thirteen copies (since thirteen is the numerical equivalent of *eḥad*) of *Di teyve* and ten copies of the seventh issue of *Mayn vort* (because it contains a letter to the members of *Yavneh* and there you will see their spiritual side).¹⁹ Along with these will be a few other booklets that I have published recently, including *Ha-ḥasidut* (in Yiddish), *Hillel Zeitlin’s bletlekh* (I am missing the first issue), and *Der sne*. And what do I want of you? Please distribute

¹⁷ A Hebrew translation of *Di teyve* by Natan Hofshi was published in Israel in 1962.

¹⁸ The manuscript, of unknown provenance, was advertised and sold by Asufa auction in 2014 and is currently owned by Arthur Green. A facsimile of it is reproduced in the links below.

¹⁹ We have been unable to locate any other record or extant copy of *Mayn vort* #7. A letter to members of *Yavneh* was printed in number 4, and is reproduced below. The numeral 7 is most likely an error, either by Zeitlin or the printer.

Di teyve and *Mayn vort* among your friends and try to establish a Yavneh society. [Members of] this group should take upon themselves to strive to live in the spirit of those ideas and principles outlined in *Di teyve*, and to meet each week (no less) to study together and discuss matters of true religion (here we study mainly the *Tanya* by the Rav of Liadi, the Kuzari, the works of the MaHaRaL, and similar things) and life in the spirit of Yavneh.²⁰

Here we learn uniquely of the existence of Yavneh as a group that met regularly for study in Warsaw. The record of its curriculum is also most revealing, giving us a glimpse into Zeitlin's own selection of Jewish religious classics.²¹

We do not know how long that group continued to function or what problems it encountered. Four years later, when Zeitlin published *Sifran shel yehidim*, he confessed that his prior efforts had failed, and that he was now attempting to revive them:

The Yavneh or Beney heikhala ["children of the palace"] groups that I suggest founding in this book are not to be confused with the Aḥdut Yisrael ["unity of Israel"] of which I have spoken frequently in the press. Aḥdut Yisrael is meant to absorb all within it, since it is of Jewry as a whole. The Yavneh or Beney heikhala groups (I call the elite within the elite Beney heikhala), if they are founded, will be societies of unique individuals dedicated to inward elevation and a quest for solutions to the ills of the nation and the world.

A small attempt was made in this matter in 1923-24, but that attempt did not succeed. A few pure and upright young people responded to my call in the press, but not people of clear consciousness and deep inner awareness.

What did not succeed in the years 1923-24 may succeed now.²²

These accounts present some difficulty in the dating of our newly-found manuscript. If the attempt of 1923-24 had already failed, who are the tens of Jews living in accordance with the *Yavneh* principles? If the manuscript was published as early as 1924-25, reflecting the same period as the letter to Aminoach, what is the "mystical/prophetic work" that is about to appear? Might *Sifran shel yehidim* have been ready by then, but the publication delayed by several years?

There is no indication that the second call for Yavneh was any more successful than the first.²³ In the 1930s Zeitlin became ever more absorbed both in his Hebrew

²⁰ Zeitlin to Nehemiah Aminoach, summer 1925, in *Sefer Zeitlin*, ed. I. Wolfsberg and Ts. Harkavy (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-rav Kook, 1944), 129.

²¹ See also the YIVO autobiography from the 1930s that mentions participation in one of the Zeitlin groups of the 1920s: Rose Waldman, "A Hasid Turns Modern: A YIVO Autobiography, Conclusion," *In geveb* (January 2016), <http://ingeveb.org/blog/a-hasid-turns-modern-a-yivo-autobiography-5>.

²² Hillel Zeitlin, *Sifran shel yehidim* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1979), 5-6.

²³ Isaac Bashevis Singer attributed Zeitlin's failure to Zeitlin's desire to draw young Jews back to the house of study, a world that they had rejected so totally, that his call for an illuminated and renewed approach to Jewish learning went unheeded; see Isaac Bashevis Singer, trans. Robert Wolf, "Concerning Yiddish Literature in Poland (1943)," *Prooftexts* 15.2 (1995): 114.

translation of the Zohar and the prophetic call to repentance in the eye of the gathering storm. We no longer hear of *Yavneh*. One is left with the impression that the lack of response to his call was disappointing to Zeitlin, who struggled throughout his life with periods of depression and disillusionment. The failure of *Yavneh* left him more isolated than ever. It is also likely that aspects of his own personality, including his donning of the mantle of the prophet of doom, did not encourage others to come to his side.

In his *Demamah ve-kol*, published in 1936, Zeitlin asks himself:

“Where are the Bonim, Beney Yavneh, Beney heikhala, Beney ha-raz, and all the various *yehidim* (“special individuals”) of yours?

“The wind has blown them away; the stormy times have scattered them . . . but wherever they are, they are better than others.

“And for whom do you wait and hope today?

“For those whom I would like to call ‘Ve-’alu moshi’im.’

“And who will they be?”²⁴

There follows a long paragraph giving yet another description of Zeitlin's imagined vanguard: people freed from all doctrinaire views, dedicating themselves wholly to the Jewish people, holy fire burning in their hearts, forming a holy society to liberate the people, while “on their lips are whispered prayers that will carry them on the wings of great hope toward the messianic days that are approaching.” They are to devote themselves to the ten-point program described earlier in that work, including six suggestions for the physical salvation of Jewry and four devoted to its spiritual restoration.²⁵ Given the increasing desperation of the times (rabid anti-Semitism was becoming a dominant political force in Poland as well as across the German border), there is more emphasis on the political program, especially organization toward emigration, than was present in the 1920s documents.

Zeitlin's call for an elite and intimate religious brotherhood places him in a long tradition within the history of Jewish mysticism. His “rules” immediately invoke association with those of the circle around R. Moshe Cordovero and R. Isaac Luria in sixteenth-century Safed,²⁶ with the Ahavat Shalom circle (the original Bet El) around R. Shalom Shar'abi in eighteenth-century Jerusalem,²⁷ and with groups that crystallized

²⁴ Reprinted in the expanded *Sifran shel yehidim*, 123.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 84-92.

²⁶ For an interesting group of original Hebrew texts, see Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism: Second Series* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1908), 292-301. For English translation of this text and discussion see Lawrence Fine, *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, The Beginning of Wisdom* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1984), 30-77; Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 80-81, 300-58.

²⁷ The texts originally appeared in Aryeh Leib Frumkin, *Toledot hakhmei yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: Solomon Press, 1939), vol. 3, 47-54. See Pinchas Giller, *Shalom Shar'abi and the Kabbalists of Beit El* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8-9, 55, 85-93; Jonatan Meir, *Rehovot ha-nahar: kabalah ve-ekzoteriyut be-yerushalayim (1896-1948)* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2011), 19-73; Lawrence Fine, “A Mystical Fellowship in Jerusalem,” in *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period*, ed. L. Fine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 210-14.

around such figures as RaMHaL in Padua²⁸ and R. Nahman in Bratslav.²⁹ All of these, in turn, reflect the fantasy circle of devoted disciples surrounding Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai in the pages of the Zohar, and perhaps, through the mask of that fiction, the real circle of the Zohar writers in late thirteenth-century Spain.³⁰ Although rabbinic Judaism defined itself as a religion for married householders, rejecting the monastic option that had existed in Qumran, a thread of quasi-monasticism runs through all of these circles, as it is present in such diverse groups in time and place as the *Ḥasidey Ashkenaz* of the medieval Rhineland, the Mussarniks of nineteenth century Novarodok in Lithuania, and the Hasidim of Reb Arele Roth in Hungary and Jerusalem in the most recent century.

Zeitlin's quest to establish *Yavneh* was not the only such effort in Poland during these turbulent years. In the 1920s R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piasecne, a traditional but highly creative Hasidic leader, wrote a pamphlet entitled *Bney maḥshavah tovah*.³¹ In this short work R. Shapira outlined the basic principles and structures of a close-knit mystical fellowship. He calls this group the *ḥevraya*, in obvious reference to the circle of students around Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai in the Zohar. This fellowship was meant to be a part of his larger project of spiritual renewal for Hasidism, which Shapira felt had lost much of its original vitality by the early twentieth century. The text of *Bney maḥshavah tovah* was distributed to a select group of R. Shapira's disciples and was not intended for public circulation.³² The fellowship was meant to be an elite group, though Shapira writes that entrance must be granted to anyone regardless of their profession, provided that the person is an honest and committed seeker.³³

²⁸ Jonathan Garb, *Mekubal ba-lev hase'ara: R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2014), especially 52-55, 59-72, 83-99, 123-52, 201-25.

²⁹ See Lawrence Fine, "Spiritual Friendship as Contemplative Practice in Kabbalah and Hasidism," in *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Cultural Histories*, ed. H. Eifring (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 61-75; Joseph Weiss, "R. Abraham Kalisker's Concept of Communion with God and Men," in *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, ed. D. Goldstein (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), 155-69.

³⁰ See Yehuda Liebes, "How the Zohar was Written," in *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 85-138; and Liebes, "The Messiah of the Zohar: On Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai as a Messianic Figure," in *Studies in the Zohar*, 1-84; and Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows From Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 29-84, 105-110.

³¹ Zvi Leshem has demonstrated that *Bney maḥshavah tovah* was written during the 1920s, and certainly before 1928; see his discussion in Zvi Leshem, "Between Messianism and Prophecy: Hasidism According to the Piaseczner Rebbe," PhD dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 2007, 5, n. 14. On the importance of this work and its publication, see Daniel Reiser, *Hamar'e kemar'a: tekhnikat ha-dimyun ba-mistika ha-yehudit ba-me'ah ha'esrim* (Los Angeles: Hotsa'at Keruv 2014), 179-80, and especially n. 380; and Reiser, "To Rend the Entire Veil: Prophecy in the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piasecna and its Renewal in the Twentieth Century," *Modern Judaism* 34 (2014): 11-12. The title may mean something like "children of a heightened" or "intensified consciousness," in reference to the contemplative exercises outlined within. See also James Maisels, "The Self and Self-Transformation in the Thought and Practice of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapira," PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago 2014.

³² R. Shapira himself recommends that the *ḥevraya* must be a hidden society that is not publicized, lest it engender negative feelings or its members become haughty and prideful; see *Bney maḥshavah tovah*, 57-58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10.

Benei maḥshavah tovah is filled with devotional advice on how the members of the group should cultivate a rich inner world of prayer and study. R. Shapira offers a number of contemplative and visionary exercises, embodied practices that are intended lead the seeker to a higher level of mystical attainment and intensify his religious life. The objective of this group, Shapira writes, is as follows:

Our utmost desire is to become a child [of God, not just a servant], as in “You are children of Y-H-W-H your God” (Deut. 14:1). In our divine service, through study, prayer, and the rest of the commandments, [we long] to feel the closeness of Y-H-W-H, like the child who rejoices in greeting his parent after many years of separation . . .³⁴

The goal of our holy fellowship is for you to be transformed into a person of spirit (*ish ha-ruah*) and [contemplative] thought—not ordinary thought, but pure and intense thought (*maḥshavah tehorah ve-ḥazakah*). Overcome your [ordinary] senses and a new, holy sense will be revealed within you. As you recite, “Blessed art Thou, Y-H-W-H, our God and Ruler of the world,” you will see the “Thou” and the “Ruler of the world.” Your eyes will open wide of their own accord, seeing the Ruler of the world who surrounds the entire cosmos, and yourself. You will penetrate and gaze upon the world that separates it from the Thou, the Ruler that surrounds it. Your eyes will become stronger, and you will see Y-H-W-H filling all the worlds. The One, O Thou who is the Ruler of the world, will be before you, and you will melt in delight.³⁵

Benei maḥshavah tovah also includes fourteen “points of instruction and rules” (*sefer hadrakhah u-khelalim*). It is in these specific admonitions that the distinctions between his fellowship and Zeitlin’s project become increasingly visible.³⁶ Shapira’s rule was clearly written for a different audience. It addresses individuals who were living within the Hasidic community and longed to develop a more profound inner life. His more traditional “points” refer to certain books that the seeker should study and how these works should be approached, describe an impassioned experience of prayer, and promote a type of mindfulness and attentiveness to all of one’s actions. Shapira does not warn as explicitly against political involvement, but elsewhere he says explicitly that the goal of the group is to rise up above ordinary human society and that it would not be a place of meting out honors, nor would it have a defined hierarchy.³⁷ Zeitlin’s *Yavneh* and its implicit critique of society, on the other hand, were addressed to a broader audience of Warsaw Jews, those alienated from the Hasidic community but still open to tradition. It was in the highly politicized atmosphere of secular Jewish Warsaw that he felt the need to insist that *Yavneh* rise above party loyalties. His identification with, even glorification of, the working class is striking. He preached against the spiritual malaise

³⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁵ Ibid. 32.

³⁶ Ibid., 48-54.

³⁷ Ibid., 8.

of empty materialism and assimilation, extolling the virtues of a life unencumbered by luxury and unsullied by the exploitation of other workers.

We cannot be sure if Zeitlin and R. Shapira knew one another, but it is hardly imaginable that they did not meet. They were both very well-known public figures and lived not far from one another, and both were eventually imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto. Zeitlin was certainly aware of R. Shapira's teachings, and he published an admiring review of the latter's only published work, *Hovat ha-talmidim*.³⁸ We do not know whether Zeitlin might have read *Bney mahshavah tovah*, given its extremely limited distribution, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. It also seems likely that R. Shapira was aware of Zeitlin's writings about *Yavneh*, especially those that were widely available in the Yiddish press. The fact that both offered lists of fourteen points certainly suggests that whichever published later (most likely R. Shapira) was aware of the other's works.

The memory of Zeitlin's dream of a renewed Hasidic community was mostly buried in the ashes of the Warsaw ghetto, along with his translation of the Zohar and so much else. It would be unfair to say, however, that his efforts bore no later fruit. Zeitlin's *Di teyve*, including especially his "monastic" rule, greatly impressed the young Zalman Schachter, then still a Chabad Hasid, when Shmuel Bergman introduced him to Natan Hofshi during a Jerusalem visit, probably in the late 1950s. Schachter's original design for *Bnai Or* as a Jewish quasi-monastic community, although mostly shaped by his contacts with Christian monastics and named for the newly discovered Qumran document, was very much influenced by his reading of Zeitlin.³⁹ That vision in turn influenced the creation of Havurat Shalom in Boston, where Schachter was a visiting member in its crucial founding year (1968/69);⁴⁰ this community served as the model for the ensuing Havurah movement. Thus it is fair to say that a spark of Zeitlin's fire is present in both the Havurah and Jewish Renewal movements,⁴¹ two great attempts at

³⁸ This essay, first published in 1934, was reprinted in the posthumous expanded version of *Sifran shel yehidim*, 240-44.

³⁹ Zalman Schachter, "Toward an Order of Bnai Or," *Judaism* 13.2 (1964): 185-97. Schachter discussed this influence in personal conversation with AG. While the ascetic, pietistic community of the Essenes have long been known through the writings of Josephus, this fascinating connection between Jewish Renewal—and the rebirth of Jewish spirituality in the second half of the twentieth century—and the Qumran ruins and Dead Sea Scrolls is deserving of further research.

⁴⁰ The present author (AG), was a founding member of Havurat Shalom.

⁴¹ Arthur Green, "Renewal and Havurah: American Movements, European Roots," in *Jewish Renaissance and Revival in America: Essays in Memory of Leah Levitz*, edited by E.P. Fishbane and J.D. Sarna (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 145-64; and Green, "Havurat Shalom: A Proposal," *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship in Theory and in Practice*, ed. J. Neusner (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1972), 149-54, as well as the various short studies and reflections collected in that volume. See also Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer & Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Chava Weissler, "Worship in the Havura Movement," in *The Life of Judaism*, ed. H.E. Goldberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 79-91. See also Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

the spiritual regeneration of North American Judaism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.⁴²

The purpose of the present study is to bring together and present in one place all the key documents relating to the dream and the execution of Zeitlin's *Yavneh* community, both in the Yiddish or Hebrew original and in English translation.⁴³ These include the following:

1. [“The Great Call of the Hour \(part 1\),” *Der moment* 14.125, June 1 1923, p. 4.](#)
2. [“The Great Call of the Hour \(part 2\),” *Der moment* 14.131, June 8 1923, p. 3.](#)
3. [“The Great Call of the Hour \(part 3\),” *Der moment* 14.143, June 22 1923, p. 3.](#)
4. [“To All Those Who Want to Build ‘Yavneh’ \(part 1\),” *Der moment* 14.222, September 28, 1923, p. 4.](#)
5. [“To All Those Who Want to Build ‘Yavneh’ \(part 2\),” *Der moment* 14.224, October 1 1923, p. 3.](#)
6. [“What Does Yavneh Want?,” *Di teyve*, 1924, pp. 5-9.](#)
7. [“Admonitions for Every True Member of Yavneh,” *Di teyve*, 1924, pp. 10-15.](#)
8. [Manuscript \[date unknown\].](#)
9. [“A Letter to the Members of Yavneh,” *Mayn vort* 4, February 1925, pp. 6-7; and ‘The Mystery of Thought’, *Sifran shel yehidim*, Warsaw 1928, pp. 14-16; reprinted in Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 14-16.](#)

We conclude our introduction to these texts about Zeitlin's vision for *Yavneh* with Symcha Bunem Urbach's heartbreaking testimony of a mystical gathering that took place near the end of Zeitlin's life. The explicit goal of this assembly was neither spiritual uplift nor personal transformation. On the eve of the Second World War, Zeitlin called together a group to pray, in an effort to stave off the impending destruction of European Jewry, a disaster that he saw approaching with rapid footsteps.

⁴² We should also note the remarkable contemporary revival among the Chabad and Bratslav groups, and their success in translating in an effort to reach those outside of the Hasidic community; see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), especially 33-38; Chaim Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward; A Biography of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Brooklyn: Kol Menachem, 2014); Naftali Loewenthal, “The Baal Shem Tov's *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* and Contemporary Chabad ‘Outreach,’” in *Let the Old Make Way for the New: Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Eastern European Jewry Presented to Immanuel Etkes*, ed. David Assaf and Ada Rapoport-Albert, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2009), 69-101; Yoram Bilu and Zvi Mark, “Between Tsaddiq and Messiah: A Comparative Analysis of Chabad and Breslav Hasidic Groups,” in *After Spirituality: Studies in Mystical Traditions*, ed. Philip Wexler and Jonathan Garb (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 47-78; Zvi Mark, “Contemporary Renaissance of Braslav Hasidism: Ritual, *Tiqqun* and Messianism,” in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2011), 101-16.

⁴³ The authors wish to thank Ri Turner and Jordan Schuster for their work in producing an excellent first draft for the translations of “The Great Call of the Hour” and “To All Those Who Want to Build ‘Yavneh’.” Earlier translations of the passages from *Di teyve* appeared in Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 37-49.

This happened two months “before the calamity,”⁴⁴ two months before the outbreak of the War. As one of his disciples who frequented his house, I was called to Zeitlin’s abode for a special gathering. On the invitation slip was inscribed: “This relates to the very existence of the people of Israel” . . .

Very much surprised by these words, I came to his home. There I beheld a sight that was quite extraordinary, even for me. My surprise was to increase manifold.

Zeitlin was sitting at a table, and there was a group of ten people around him. They included the religious writer and legendary figure, Israel Stern, well-known Kabbalists from Warsaw, and a few Bratslaver Hasidim. In a hushed voice both deep and warm, suffused with quiet pathos, in the tone of a seer of visions and looking like a man who is “not present,” Zeitlin said to us: “My beloveds, I behold a great catastrophe before me. It is growing nearer and creeping to the gates of the state of Poland. The Nazi enemy is approaching, and it will, heaven forefend, totally destroy the Jewish community on the banks of the Vistula.⁴⁵ It will move from city to city, from town to town, from community to community, and it will slaughter us all. It will tear off the heads of elders, smash the skulls of children, and destroy us all, leaving behind no survivors or remnants.

A heavy silence reigned following his words. Suddenly Stern arose, shaken and pierced, and asked with passion, “What must we do to avert this evil?”

“I see no other way,” said Zeitlin, “except to pray, to pray, and to pray once more!”

He had assembled us, he added, to establish a fellowship of ten people, *mekhavenim* (“people of intense prayer”), who would unite with a single heart and fall before the blessed One in prayer, prayer that would break through the heavens, prayer that would open the closed gates . . . (He gave me these words in the form of an article entitled “*Mekhavenim*,” which I published in the journal *Der nayer ruf*) . . .

Zeitlin then got up and began to read chapters of Psalms with great passion and trembling, rivers of tears flowing from his eyes: “The prayer of a poor person, when he is faint” (Ps. 102:1), “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me” (Ps. 22:2) . . . We sat together astonished and amazed, for Zeitlin’s prayer shook our very heartstrings.

(This whole incident, which I beheld with my own eyes, seemed even to me like an exotic spectacle, and I put it out of my mind. For this I beat my breast and cry out my sin.)

⁴⁴ Amos 1:1.

⁴⁵ A poetic way of referring to all of Poland.

This was our final meeting. (For various reasons I did not see him again. He went off to a summer residence, and I left Warsaw at the very beginning of the war and the German conquest). But some two months later I was an eyewitness to the catastrophe that Zeitlin had foreseen with his spirit, that came down upon the heads of Polish Jewry. With my own eyes I saw holy communities go up in flames, Jewish towns transformed into graveyards, the heads of sages torn asunder, the skulls of children split open, and Zeitlin's call echoed in my ears. It had been a voice of "desolation in the wilderness . . ." ⁴⁶ During my days of wandering through the destroyed villages and forests of Poland, I was reminded of Zeitlin's prayer.

"To pray, and to pray once more"—that was the final testament of Reb Hillel Zeitlin, may the memory of the righteous be a blessing. This was the final chord in the melody of his life . . . ⁴⁷

In a testimony published after the war, chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto Hillel Seidman related that Zeitlin called a similar meeting in the Warsaw Ghetto immediately before Rosh Hashanah in the fall of 1941. ⁴⁸ This gathering, which took place soon after Zeitlin's wife had been deported and after the death of his son, included many of the same elements. It was preceded by a stirring written invitation, and during the event a group of deeply religious individuals surrounded the wizened Zeitlin, who then delivered a prophetic address that was at once an exhortation to repentance and a prediction of Messiah's imminent arrival. Seidman notes the tragedy of the gathering in retrospect, standing as it did on the eve of Jewish Warsaw's destruction. Yet he too recalls the tremendous, even mystical power of Zeitlin's assembly, noting with particular reverence the force and passion of the old man's heartrending prayer. ⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See Jeremiah 17:6; Psalms 102:18.

⁴⁷ Symcha Bunem Urbach, *Toledot neshamah ahat* (Jerusalem: Shem ve-yafet, 1953), 170-71. Translation ours.

⁴⁸ Hillel Seidman, *The Warsaw Ghetto Diary* (Tel Aviv: Umah u-moledet, 1946), 295-98.

⁴⁹ For more on Zeitlin's spiritual activity in the Warsaw Ghetto, see Hillel Zeitlin, "Evaluating the Ghetto: Interviews in Warsaw, 1941," in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Lucy S. Dawidowicz (New York: Behrman House, 1976), 218-21; and a letter from the 1942 that was published posthumously in *Bleter far geshikhte* 1.1 (Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 1948), 183.