

RELIGION OF REASON IN THE NEW AGE:  
ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI, HERMANN COHEN, AND MESSIANIC POLITICS

by

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*Abstract:* In my thesis, I call for a reassessment of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014), an influential exponent of New Age Judaism and a leading figure in American Judaism. I propose a more nuanced understanding of the intellectual genealogy of Schachter-Shalomi's New Age Judaism in North America by suggesting an important yet overlooked source of his theology, calling attention to the possibility that he has deep philosophical and historical roots in German-Jewish rationalism. Citing hitherto unnoticed historical, textual, and philosophical evidence, I suggest that key elements of Schachter-Shalomi's mystically inflected, seemingly anti-rational religious thought may be sourced from, and creatively reimagine, the work of one of Jewish modernity's arch-rationalists: the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). I argue that the messianic idea inherited from Cohen's "religion of reason" may serve as a major foundation for what I call the "messianic politics" of Schachter-Shalomi.

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## INTRODUCTION

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014) was among the influential leaders of American Judaism in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Born in Zhovkva (formerly in Polish Galicia) and raised in Vienna, Schachter-Shalomi came to the United States as a teenage refugee in 1941. Alongside his colleague Shlomo Carlebach, another well-known counter-cultural figure in American Judaism, Schachter-Shalomi first made history during the 1940s as a member of the earliest cohort of *shluchim* (“emissaries”) in the Hasidic Chabad-Lubavitch movement, spearheading efforts to increase religious observance among Jewish college students and laying the groundwork for what would become a vast, transnational network of outreach efforts. He would again make waves in the late 1960s, when—after building an accomplished career as a Hasidic rabbi—he was formally shunned by Chabad-Lubavitch leadership following a controversial lecture he delivered entitled “The Kabbalah and LSD.” Inspired by his experiments using psychedelic drugs with Timothy Leary, a Harvard psychology professor and psychedelic firebrand, Schachter-Shalomi publicly praised the religious value of LSD in his lecture, inciting an uproar with the coverage that his talk received in the Jewish press.

Schachter-Shalomi subsequently emerged as a key figure within the history of American counterculture, gaining notoriety as a charismatic and unconventional teacher of Hasidism who interpreted Judaism’s kabbalistic tradition for politically progressive audiences, providing theological language to support second-wave feminism and an array of causes broadly associated with the New Left (such as anti-war activism, environmentalism, and social justice, among others).<sup>1</sup> Schachter-Shalomi’s deepening immersion in American counterculture was also

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Evan Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 268.

accompanied by a move toward what one scholar describes as “freewheeling syncretism,” understood as an increased engagement with various religions from across the globe.<sup>2</sup> He engaged in interreligious dialogue with prominent teachers from diverse traditions, including Vajrayana Buddhism with the 14th Dalai Lama and Chögyam Trungpa, Sufism with Vilayat Inayat Khan and Muzaffer Ozak al-Jerrahi, Christian pacifism with Howard Thurman and Thomas Merton, and Vedānta with Srimata Gayatri Devi (to name a few noteworthy examples). His longstanding and well-documented exchanges with these teachers produced one of the most extensive records of interreligious dialogue by any figure in the history of modern Judaism. Indeed, in the 1970s, Schachter-Shalomi would draw on this eclectic background to create the Jewish Renewal movement, a syncretistic expression of American Judaism influenced by American thought, neo-Hasidic mysticism, Buddhist modernism, and New Age religion.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, the life and work of Schachter-Shalomi has emerged as an important object of scholarly interest in religious studies and Jewish studies. Existing scholarship tends to characterize Schachter-Shalomi as an exemplar of the New Age, a charismatic leader who professed an antinomian theology unmoored from the inherited authority of tradition and rejected the cerebral objectivity of modern rationalism. His Jewish Renewal movement is frequently described as a form of New Age Judaism, a quintessentially American new religious movement born out of 1960s counterculture.

In my thesis, I call for a reassessment of this leading figure in American Judaism. I propose a more nuanced understanding of the intellectual genealogy of Schachter-Shalomi’s

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh B Urban, “The Cult of Ecstasy: Tantrism, the New Age, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism,” *History of Religions* 39, no. 3 (2000), 296.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Schachter-Shalomi’s life and career, see *Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and the Origins of Post-Holocaust American Judaism* (exhibit), curated by Stephanie Yuhas et al., Norlin Library, University of Colorado at Boulder.

New Age Judaism in North America by suggesting an important yet overlooked source of his theology, calling attention to the possibility that he has deep philosophical and historical roots in German-Jewish rationalism. Citing hitherto unnoticed historical, textual, and philosophical evidence, I suggest that key elements of Schachter-Shalomi's mystically inflected, seemingly anti-rational religious thought may be sourced from, and creatively reimagine, the work of one of Jewish modernity's arch-rationalists: the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). A leading interpreter of Immanuel Kant in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a founder of a philosophical movement known as Marburg neo-Kantianism, Cohen is remembered today not only as the first (unconverted) Jew to be promoted to full professor of philosophy at a German university, but also as one of the most significant Jewish thinkers of the modern era and a leading proponent of what is often known as ethical monotheism—the idea that there is one God, that this God in some sense serves as the source or ground of ethics, and that ethical action represents humanity's fundamental religious obligation. Cohen appears in every survey of modern Jewish thought, and his philosophical *magnum opus*, the posthumously published *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1919), remains one of the most important philosophical accounts of Judaism authored in the last four hundred years. While this type of figure might seem to have little in common with a New Age rabbi immersed in Jewish mysticism and the American counterculture, I show that it may be in Cohen's rationalist reconstruction of Judaism that we find the roots of some elements of Schachter-Shalomi's theological vision.

## New Age Judaism

Before proceeding, it is worth clarifying my use of some terms that will be important to my argument, beginning with “spirituality” and “New Age Judaism”—amorphous terms which often elude attempts at concise definition. For the sake of generating provisional definitions, I will focus on the European and American contexts that informed Schachter-Shalomi’s work. While the term “spirituality” is sometimes used to refer to an attitude of concern for the human spirit or soul, and thus denotes an opposition to a concern for worldly or physical things,<sup>4</sup> this approach to spirituality/physicality is rejected Schachter-Shalomi and many of his contemporaries. The more relevant contrast for the purposes of this thesis is between “spirituality” and “religion,” as suggested by the large swath of Americans who describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.”<sup>5</sup> For the sizeable portion of Americans,<sup>6</sup> one scholar of American religious thought argues, the word “religion” has acquired the connotation of “organized religion,” a term associated with the trappings of rigid institutions, “lifeless rituals,” and orthodox dogma.<sup>7</sup> For these Americans, “spirituality” consists of “beliefs and practices that originate wholly outside our dominant religious institutions.”<sup>8</sup> Seen from this perspective, “spirituality” need not conform to the institutional norms and morality commonly associated with the church, mosque, synagogue, or temple. On this understanding, public religiosity is

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Thomas Long, “Phenomenology,” in *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900–2000*, Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 156.

<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>6</sup> A 2012 Pew Research Center survey reported that approximately 37% of Americans describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” See “Religion and the Unaffiliated,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, October 9, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 6, 99.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



replaced by private spirituality, and those Americans who identify as “spiritual but not religious” appear to “show a greater interest in personal religious experience,” expressing a desire for a “felt-sense of the sacred.”<sup>9</sup> Again, this approach to religious experience is frequently detached from communal worship and public ritual, opting instead for various private and personal expressions of “spirituality” that are determined by the individual.

In this thesis, the particular expression of spirituality—understood in the sense above—that I will address is often described as “New Age” spirituality, an eclectic constellation of beliefs and practices with roots in American metaphysical religion (including phenomena such as transcendentalism, spiritualism, and theosophy, among others),<sup>10</sup> encompassing a variety of movements which gained momentum in American counterculture during the 1960s and crossed over into popular culture during the ’70s.<sup>11</sup> A wide array of phenomena are associated with New Age movements, including (but not limited to) various forms of alternative medicine,<sup>12</sup> the development of psychedelic drug culture,<sup>13</sup> and the emergence of “psychological astrology” (interpretations of astrology that are psychologized along Jungian lines),<sup>14</sup> as well as the “human potential movement” (a blending of psychedelic culture with the theories of humanistic

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 496-98.

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Versluis, *American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 228.

<sup>14</sup> Michael York, “The New Age Movement as an Astrological Minority Religion with Mainstream Appeal,” in *Handbook of New Age*, eds. Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 411-412.

psychology advanced by Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Fritz Perls).<sup>15</sup> Various New Age movements are also characterized by a propensity toward religious syncretism, eclectically appropriating and hybridizing elements of religious traditions from around the world, particularly from the “Eastern religions” of Asia.<sup>16</sup>

Several prominent streams of New Age spirituality converged in the person of Schachter-Shalomi, leading many scholars—as noted below—to describe his Jewish Renewal movement as a form of “New Age Judaism.”<sup>17</sup> A few noteworthy vignettes will indicate these ties.

Schachter-Shalomi’s intellectual and spiritual trajectory was significantly altered in 1962 after using LSD with Timothy Leary, then a well-respected albeit unconventional psychology professor at Harvard who would lose his academic position several years later and go on to become the criminal fugitive and countercultural icon he is remembered as today.<sup>18</sup> After taking LSD with Leary, Schachter-Shalomi became preoccupied with the implications of “psychedelic experience.” He argued in the pages of *Commentary* magazine before a large section of the Jewish-American reading public that “psychedelic experience” was among the “most serious challenges to Judaism posed by modern thought.”<sup>19</sup>

While teaching “psychology of religion” at Brandeis University on a postdoctoral fellowship in 1968, Schachter-Shalomi befriended another influential psychologist associated with New Age movements, Abraham Maslow, a pathbreaking leader of humanistic psychology

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<sup>15</sup> Linda Sargent Wood, “Contact, Encounter, and Exchange at Esalen: A Window into Late Twentieth-Century American Spirituality,” *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (2008): 476. See also: Martin Ramstedt, “New Age and Business,” in *Handbook of New Age*, 192-95.

<sup>16</sup> Urban, “The Cult of Ecstasy,” 295-96.

<sup>17</sup> See the scholars discussed in the section of this introduction entitled “Schachter-Shalomi.”

<sup>18</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Edward Hoffman, *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 142.

<sup>19</sup> Zalman Schachter, “The State of Jewish Belief,” *Commentary* (August 1966), 138-39.

and an intellectual force behind the “human potential movement.”<sup>20</sup> Schachter-Shalomi accompanied Maslow on regular walks around Brandeis campus, strolls which were often an occasion for long discussions concerning Maslow’s theories of self-realization, peak experience, and spiritual growth. For his part, Schachter-Shalomi entertained Maslow’s musings about Jewish mysticism.<sup>21</sup>

Another example is Schachter-Shalomi’s 1975 book entitled *Fragments of a Future Scroll: Hasidism for the Aquarian Age*, which represents his attempt to synthesize Hasidism<sup>22</sup> with what he calls an “Aquarian headspace,” that is, with a vision of the future that anticipates the dawn of a new era and a global transformation of human consciousness, expressed in astrological jargon as the “Age of Aquarius.”<sup>23</sup> During these years, Schachter-Shalomi stirred controversy by publishing and preaching his theological support for Jews who practice “Eastern religions,”<sup>24</sup> a position which was reinforced by his time spent learning with Chögyam Trungpa,<sup>25</sup> widely recognized as one of the most influential exponents of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Trungpa built a large movement in North America and Europe, despite (or perhaps due to) his unique pedagogical approach of “crazy wisdom,” a method of teaching Buddhist philosophy and meditation in learning environments which were also a setting for periodic sprees

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<sup>20</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 166.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> On Hasidism, see chapter 1.

<sup>23</sup> Zalman Schachter, *Fragments of a Future Scroll: Hassidism for the Aquarian Age* (Germantown: Leaves of Grass press, 1975), 21, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Zalman Schachter, “Some Gurus Not Inimical to Judaism,” *Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, no. 4/74 (May 1974):

<sup>25</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, “For They Bow Down to Emptiness and the Void” in *Paradigm Shift: From the Jewish Renewal Teachings of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi*, ed. Ellen Singer (Lanham: Jason Aronson, 2000), 41.

of activities such as binge drinking and drug use (activities sometimes initiated by Trungpa himself).<sup>26</sup>

Stepping back for a moment, it must be noted that the trend toward New Age expressions of Judaism—that is, expressions of Judaism shaped by the broader trend of New Age spirituality described above—is much larger than Schachter-Shalomi and the Jewish Renewal movement that he founded. Jewish Renewal, we might say, is simply one noteworthy expression of this broader trend. Indeed, I have so far spoken of New Age Judaism in the singular, but it might be more accurate to speak of New Age Judaism(s) in the plural. For example, another influential form of New Age Judaism in North America is the Kabbalah Center, founded by Phillip Berg and based in Los Angeles.<sup>27</sup> Although there are significant differences between the Kabbalah Center and Jewish Renewal (including, for example, the sophisticated business model and savvy brand management of the Kabbalah Center), these phenomena have several features in common, both sharing a subjective turn toward personal religious experience and an antinomian shift away from the traditional norms of Jewish law, as well as an impassioned longing for a future era of global transformation that they sometimes refer to as the “Age of Aquarius.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, both Berg and Schachter-Shalomi articulate theologies of Jewish mysticism which seek to welcome non-Jews as full and equal participants into their communities.<sup>29</sup> Other examples include New

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<sup>26</sup> Katja Rakow, *Transformationen des tibetischen Buddhismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Chögyam Trungpa und die Entwicklung von Shambhala Training* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 210-211. See also Sandra Bell, “‘Crazy Wisdom,’ Charisma, and the Transmission of Buddhism in the United States,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 2, no. 1 (1998): 63.

<sup>27</sup> Boaz Huss, “The New Age of Kabbalah,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2007): 110.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-13, 120.

<sup>29</sup> Véronique Altglas, “The Challenges of Universalizing Religions: The Kabbalah Centre in France and Britain,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 1

Age developments in Israel, including beliefs and practices shaped by “spiritual tourism” in Asia (a backpacking circuit which serves as a de facto rite of passage for many young Israelis after completing their army service),<sup>30</sup> as well as the work of Yitzchak Ginsburgh, an American-born spiritual leader of hardline settlers in the West Bank who is also regarded as an authority on kabbalah in the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.<sup>31</sup> Ginsburgh practices and teaches “Jewish meditation” in order to connect with one’s inner “essence,” a bodily and spiritual essence which he claims distinguishes the blood of Jews from non-Jews.<sup>32</sup> He posits a mystical link between Jews and the Land of Israel, an inward connection to the land that precedes biblical religion and rabbinic Judaism. Therefore, he theorizes, biblical and rabbinic commandments may be violated if necessary in order to engage in a greater worship of the land.<sup>33</sup>

#### Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

In a broader project, we might further explore the stunning diversity amongst various forms of Judaism that are associated with the New Age movement in Israel and the United States. What is important for us now is that scholarship on New Age Judaism, especially on Schachter-Shalomi and the Jewish Renewal movement, has grown steadily in recent years and occupies an increasingly prominent place in Jewish studies and religious studies. Historical

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(2011): 27. See also Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 110.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 102. See also Yaakov Ariel, “Jews and New Religious Movements: An Introductory Essay,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 1 (2011): 16.

<sup>31</sup> Tessa Satherley, “‘The Simple Jew’: The ‘Price Tag’ Phenomenon, Vigilantism, and Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh’s Political Kabbalah,” *Melilah* 10 (2013): 57.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds.*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 162.

accounts provided by scholars such as Yaakov Ariel and Dana Evan Kaplan locate Schachter-Shalomi and Jewish Renewal in the broader context of American Judaism. Ariel recounts the story of “Jews and new religious movements,” describing Schachter-Shalomi’s transition from Hasidism to neo-Hasidism<sup>34</sup> and Jewish Renewal in considerable detail.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, as part of a wide-ranging history of contemporary American Judaism, Kaplan casts Schachter-Shalomi as a leading figure in a cultural vanguard of Jewish “spirituality” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>36</sup> According to Kaplan, it was Schachter-Shalomi, who, in responding to the alleged disenchantment and existential alienation of bourgeois Jewish-American life in the suburbs, “formulated the central critique of contemporary American Jewish life: ‘Judaism today is oververbalized and underexperienced.’”<sup>37</sup> In turn, Kaplan claims, Schachter-Shalomi promoted New Age Judaism as an experiential approach to religion capable of revitalizing this “stale and spiritually stagnant” life.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the single most important work on Schachter-Shalomi and Jewish Renewal is Shaul Magid’s 2013 monograph *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society*. Magid explores “the intellectual roots of [Jewish] Renewal in the tradition of American pragmatism, specifically the pragmatism of William James, in order to highlight the extent to which [Jewish] Renewal is an American phenomenon: geographically, culturally, intellectually, and spiritually.”<sup>39</sup> Emphasizing pragmatism’s perspectival and intersubjective approach to the concept of truth, Magid argues that its philosophy provides the epistemological foundation for

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<sup>34</sup> I will discuss Hasidism and Neo-Hasidim in chapter 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ariel, “Jews and New Religious Movements,” 10-13.

<sup>36</sup> Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>39</sup> Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 59.

what he describes as the “theological pluralism” and “pragmatic piety” of the Jewish Renewal movement.<sup>40</sup>

Another significant piece of scholarship on Jewish Renewal is the work of Allan Arkush, a scholar of modern Jewish thought who is decidedly less sympathetic to Schachter-Shalomi’s New Age project than some other interpreters. Contributing to an edited volume *Jewish Polity and American Civil Society: Communal Agencies and Religious Movements in the American Public Square*, Arkush offers a useful, albeit (in his words) “benignly satirical,” assessment of some strands of Jewish Renewal thinking.<sup>41</sup> Tasked with offering an “investigation of the politics of Jewish Renewal,” Arkush “gently mocks” his subject matter as a colorful and eccentric departure from the tradition of “Judaism as it has hitherto existed.”<sup>42</sup> Written with a flair for humor and sarcasm, Arkush’s essay offers an insightful albeit partial analysis of the political ideology that underlies the Jewish Renewal movement, highlighting its historical relationship to socialism while also pointing toward the potential emergence of a “conservative Jewish politics” within the movement.<sup>43</sup>

Lastly, the Jewish Renewal movement of Schachter-Shalomi has been the subject of studies by Jonathan Garb and Boaz Huss, two leading scholars of Jewish mysticism. Both Garb and Huss claim that the New Age movements such as Jewish Renewal embody a religious

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>41</sup> Allan Arkush, “Jewish Renewal,” in *Jewish Polity and American Civil Society: Communal Agencies and Religious Movements in the American Public Sphere*, eds. Alan Mittleman, Robert A. Licht, and Jonathan D. Sarna (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 363-387. Arkush admits to the satirical nature of his “Jewish Renewal” essay in his review of Magid’s *American Post-Judaism* (humorously dubbed “All-American, Post-Everything”) in the Fall 2013 issue of *The Jewish Review of Books*: see Arkush, “All-American, Post-Everything,” *The Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Arkush, “Jewish Renewal,” 364; Arkush, “All-American, Post-Everything.”

<sup>43</sup> Arkush, “Jewish Renewal,” 382.

expression of “postmodernism.” Garb and Huss understand “postmodernism” (using a definition offered by Jean-François Lyotard) to refer to an “incredulity toward metanarratives”—that is, to postures that involve a deep-seated suspicion toward any system which “produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status...[by] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative.”<sup>44</sup> For example, Lyotard is troubled by what he describes as the grand narrative of the Enlightenment, claiming that the Enlightenment understood human history as a unified story and drew on this story to legitimate its own view of the world. On this view, the search for a universal moral order to govern human society, akin to the search for universal natural laws that govern the physical universe, is held to be a central tenet of the Enlightenment. The problem, Lyotard claims, is that this approach “does violence to the heterogeneity of [the world’s] language games”<sup>45</sup>—that Enlightenment thinkers impose a false unity on incommensurable cultures and modes of life, consequentially legitimating the use of violence in order to enforce its hegemonic discourse. Garb and Huss also draw on Jameson’s broader and more obscure definition of postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” which refers to a variety of cultural transformations that are taken to result from the development of advanced forms of capitalism. Jameson argues that these economic and technological developments—such as “the growth of consumerism, modern forms of credit, mass travel, expansion of global information systems, and the establishment of a world communication system”—expose the cultural homogeneity of nation-states to the radical diversity of global society, giving rise to a “kaleidoscope of modern pluralism.”<sup>46</sup> According to Jameson, this encounter with diverse forms

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<sup>44</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv.

<sup>46</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 99.



of life has striking consequences, yielding modes of aesthetic production that resist the unifying narrative structure that characterized modernist works. Instead, James argues, what emerges are aesthetic practices favoring “that pure and random play of signifiers that we call Postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage.”<sup>47</sup> For Jameson, the pluralistic aesthetics of postmodernism are characterized by frequent resort to the modes of “pastiche” (text composed of elements borrowed from other authors) and “bricolage” (improvised assemblage of available materials).

In the work of Garb and Huss, forms of Judaism that are identified with New Age religion—most notably the Jewish Renewal movement—are described as religious expressions of this type of postmodernism and late capitalist culture. These scholars suggest, first, that the renewed emphasis upon non-rational and mystical elements of human experience in the New Age movement reflects precisely the type of skepticism regarding grand narratives that is characteristic of postmodernism more broadly. For example, Garb suggests that Schachter-Shalomi’s apparent emphasis on mysticism over rationalism reflects “the erosion of the rationalist narrative” in the “postmodernist era,” that is, a rejection of a view of human history emphasizing the triumph of rational objectivity in favor of a newfound emphasis on inner experience and subjectivity.<sup>48</sup> Garb writes that “the erosion of the rationalist narrative facilitated the emergence of a variety of religious phenomena that did not obey the dictates of rationality,” namely “a vast and eclectic range of mystical, magical, and mythical trends” embraced by the New Age movement, all of which “have become a significant feature of contemporary global

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>48</sup> Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*, 101; Boaz Huss, “The New Age of Kabbalah,” 119.

culture.”<sup>49</sup> For his part, Huss calls attention to the “postmodern spirituality” of New Age religion, including the “Jewish Renewal movement and affiliated groups that present, quite consciously, a form of ‘New Age Judaism.’”<sup>50</sup> Huss writes that “collage, montage, bricolage and pastiche, which are the primary forms of postmodern aesthetics, are also typical of postmodern spirituality...[including] the aesthetics of the New Age and of contemporary Kabbalah.”<sup>51</sup>

### Reassessing Schachter-Shalomi

The scholarship outlined above has done much to illuminate our understanding of Schachter-Shalomi. In keeping with Ariel, Kaplan, and Magid, I acknowledge that dimensions of American religious life shape the work of Schachter-Shalomi, and that American pragmatism epistemically supports the pluralism of his New Age theology. Arkush’s concern with the emergence of “conservative Jewish politics” within the Jewish Renewal movement is also intriguing, in part because Schachter-Shalomi’s call for a return to the Jewish tradition after the Holocaust (a return to tradition which is nevertheless “radically different from a mere continuation of that tradition”) bears a certain resemblance to neoconservative responses to a perceived “crisis of modernity” as articulated by thinkers such as Leo Strauss and Daniel Bell.<sup>52</sup> Finally, it seems correct to suggest that Schachter-Shalomi’s New Age Judaism tends toward syncretistic projects of pastiche and bricolage. Consider the following jocular recommendation of “Zalman Schachter” (before his addition of “-Shalomi” to his surname) by the beatnik poet

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<sup>49</sup> Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*, 100-101.

<sup>50</sup> Huss, “The New Age of Kabbalah,” 112, 118.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>52</sup> Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 97; Daniel Bell, “The Return of the Sacred: The Argument about the Future of Religion,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 31, no. 6 (1978): 29–55.

Allen Ginsberg, found on the back cover of Schachter-Shalomi's 1975 *Fragments of a Future Scroll: Hassidism for the Aquarian Age*: "Zalman Schachter continues lineage of Reb Nahman transmitting essence teaching of available Hebraic High-Conscious ritual-like *davening* adapted thru Time's trans-shiftings to Turtle Island (Indian North America) for wandering tribes seeking End-of-Illusion Illumination thru International Tantra."<sup>53</sup> Although exaggerated and perhaps intended to be humorous, Ginsberg's praise celebrates the theological pastiche of New Age Judaism.

Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that this scholarship offers only a partial picture of Schachter-Shalomi's thought. What these studies share is an emphasis on the decidedly American nature of Schachter-Shalomi's work, and on his opposition to traditions of rationalist thought. By contrast, I wish to uncover crucial yet neglected element of his religious outlook, nuancing this American, anti-rationalist account of Schachter-Shalomi. In particular, I will argue that Schachter-Shalomi may also appropriate and reimagine the religious thought of Hermann Cohen, the leading German-Jewish rationalist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This claim might seem surprising for a number of reasons. Schachter-Shalomi is frequently remembered as a hippie rabbi who served as a spiritual leader of neo-Hasidism in North America. Cohen, on the other hand, is known as a sober and rational philosopher, sometimes invoked as the last great representative of a German-Jewish symbiosis which became something of a cautionary tale after the Holocaust. Whereas Cohen sought to defend what he sees as a pure form of monotheism, Schachter-Shalomi wholeheartedly embraced religious syncretism, incorporating non-monotheistic traditions into his theology. While Cohen's life and work stand at the very center of modern Jewish thought, Schachter-Shalomi is often cited as an

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<sup>53</sup> Schachter(-Shalomi), *Fragments of a Future Scroll*.

exemplar of Jewish counterculture.

Indeed, the prospect of a substantive connection between Cohen and Schachter-Shalomi might seem even more unlikely once we turn to the details of the former thinker's work. Cohen was a leader in the revival of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant in Germany during the nineteenth century known as neo-Kantianism. Kant's groundbreaking middle way between early modern rationalism and empiricism laid down the terms for much of modern philosophy, even as those terms were soon revisited and redefined for intellectual projects that bore little resemblance to Kant's own system. More than half a century after his death, many philosophical observers believed a "return to Kant" was urgently required to arbitrate between competing conceptions of truth generated by the empirical method of natural science, on the one hand, and the metaphysical speculation of German idealism, on the other. As summarized by one scholar, Cohen came of age at a time when "neo-Kantianism came into being as a tentative response and critical alternative *both* to idealist metaphysics *and* to naturalistic materialism."<sup>54</sup>

Neo-Kantianism as a philosophical movement was led chiefly by two competing schools based in Marburg and Baden.<sup>55</sup> Despite their differing interpretations of Kant, both schools were preoccupied with analyzing the "empirical sciences" in order to generate a theory of scientific knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Playing a central role in the Marburg school, Cohen begins with what he describes as a "fact of science."<sup>57</sup> He treats sensory experience as factual only when it has been methodically studied and incorporated into scientific knowledge. For Cohen, "stars are not given

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<sup>54</sup> Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Holzhey, "Cohen and the Marburg School in Context," in *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism*, ed. Reinier W. Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

in the sky, but in the reason of astronomy.”<sup>58</sup> His theory of knowledge adopts a posture of skepticism toward the data of ordinary sensory experience, such that the “fact of science” effectively replaces immediate sensory experience.<sup>59</sup>

Seeking the “foundations of truth” in scientific philosophy, Cohen takes the “fact of science” as his starting point in order to identify certain rational presuppositions which must be assumed for such a “fact” to be possible—rational presuppositions, that is, without which the claims of a given area of science would become incoherent (for example, concepts such as number, time, and space).<sup>60</sup> These concepts are understood, in the words of one contemporary scholar of Cohen, as “a priori laws of human thought [which] can ultimately explain the character of our experience” when experience is scientifically construed.<sup>61</sup>

After attempting to lay the philosophical foundations of natural science for the Marburg school, Cohen turns his attention to other fields of knowledge, including ethics and religion, attempting to logically elucidate a scientific philosophy for them, as well.<sup>62</sup> He returns to an ethical principle first articulated by Kant—the categorical imperative—which holds “I ought never to proceed except in such a way *that I could also will that my maxim become universal*

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<sup>58</sup> Hermann Cohen, *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1883), 127; following the translation in Holzhey, “Cohen and the Marburg School in Context,” 19.

<sup>59</sup> Holzhey, “Cohen and the Marburg School in Context,” 19.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 17; Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, 48; Reiner Wiehl, “Identity and Correlation in Hermann Cohen’s System of Philosophy,” in *Hermann Cohen’s Critical Idealism*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> Halla Kim, “How Transcendental is Cohen’s Critical Idealism,” in *Transcendental Inquiry: Its History, Methods and Critiques*, eds. Halla Kim, and Steven Hoeltzel (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 132.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Schwarzschild, “Introductory Essay for the Second Edition,” in Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (Atlanta: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9; Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 92.

law.”<sup>63</sup> Cohen understands Kant’s categorical imperative as a universal duty to comport oneself and one’s own actions in a way that takes seriously the idea of united humanity, regarding “your own person as well as any other not in the physical, racial, or narrowly constructed historical terms of individual existence, but exclusively as an embodiment of the eternal, world-historical idea of mankind.”<sup>64</sup> Kant’s categorical imperative is thus reworked into a cosmopolitan ideal, which forms a central pillar of Cohen’s ethical philosophy.

Kant made a major contribution to modern religious thought with his book *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, a work which sought to define a purely “rational system of religion.”<sup>65</sup> Cohen takes up a project similar to Kant’s with his monumental work, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. However, whereas Kant linked his rationalist philosophy of religion to Christianity and the New Testament, Cohen would focus on the Hebrew Bible and other classical Jewish sources. More specifically, Cohen rationalizes the traditional teachings of Judaism along philosophical lines and interprets away their mythical and supernatural content. For instance, “God” is not a supernatural entity for Cohen, rather, God serves (among other functions) as an archetype of human morality, an “idea of the good” which should guide human action.<sup>66</sup> In a similar vein, Cohen does not present the “messiah” as an actual person descended from the line of King David, someone who would be anointed to usher in a future Kingdom of

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<sup>63</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Hermann Cohen, “German Humanism and Jewish Messianism” in *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, ed. Eva Jospe (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1971, reprint 1997), 180.

<sup>65</sup> Lawrence Pasternack, “Kant’s ‘Appraisal’ of Christianity: Biblical Interpretation and the Pure Rational System of Religion,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015), 487, 489.

<sup>66</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 20; Cohen, “The Transcendent God: Archetype of Morality,” in *Reason and Hope*, 58, 60. To be sure, this is not the only role that Cohen’s God serves: for example, Cohen’s God also plays a key role in securing the possibility of realizing ethical norms in the world.

God. In Cohen's account, the "messiah" refers rather to a "messianic age," a hypothetical time when humanity would be truly unified under a common morality and injustice would cease, an ideal which he posits is the goal of human history.<sup>67</sup>

Cohen develops these claims out of an engagement with classical Jewish sources, showing how such sources instantiate, and allow for the development of, these rationally construed religious concepts. In the words of his student Steven Schwarzschild, Cohen's "religion of reason" is thus a reconstruction of "universal human religion" from the sources of Judaism, a constellation of rationally valid concepts distilled from the Jewish tradition.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, although Cohen holds that "there can be only one rational religion," a rational religion which would be no less "necessary and universal" than scientific philosophy, he also argues that Judaism can make no exclusive claim to it.<sup>69</sup> As Schwarzschild writes, Cohen instead argues that "this one religion of reason could and should be crystallized from Judaism, to be sure, but also from Christianity and other religious, historical, and cultural configurations."<sup>70</sup>

None of this seems to resonate with the image of Schachter-Shalomi we encountered above: namely, the image of a mystically inclined, anti-rationalist figure. Nevertheless, dissimilar though they may seem, a side-by-side reading of Cohen's and Schachter-Shalomi's works reveals significant affinities between their religious visions, especially their messianically and politically inflected teleologies—that is, their visions of the *telos* or goal of world history. In some cases, in fact, Schachter-Shalomi even goes so far as to echo Cohen's language and scriptural citations. When read against the backdrop of Schachter-Shalomi's engagement with

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 21; David Novak, "Hermann Cohen on State and Nation: A Contemporary Review," in *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism*, 270.

<sup>68</sup> Schwarzschild, "Introductory Essay for the Second Edition," 18.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

German-Jewish culture in general and Cohen's thought in particular, this evidence points to the surprising conclusion that Schachter-Shalomi may have been profoundly influenced by elements of Cohen's rationalism, while also rethinking some aspects of Cohen's philosophy. Schachter-Shalomi's ethico-political thought may involve an appropriation and creative reimagining of German-Jewish rationalism.

My analysis of Schachter-Shalomi will focus on a close reading of his writings, primarily looking to his *Paradigm Shift: From the Jewish Renewal Teachings of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi*, his response to Richard Rubenstein's essay "Homeland and Holocaust" (found in the edited volume *The Religious Situation: 1968*), and articles on Jewish politics that Schachter-Shalomi published over the years in popular and scholarly periodicals such as *Judaism*, *Sh'ma*, *Commentary*, and *Tikkun*.

With respect to Cohen, the sources to which I devote the most attention are his *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, along with the essays on Judaism collected and translated in *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*. I also draw on contemporary scholarship concerning his work, especially the recent monograph *Paradox and the Prophets: Hermann Cohen and the Indirect Communication of Religion* by Daniel Weiss. Weiss offers a pluralistic, cross-cultural interpretation of Cohen's "religion of reason" that sheds light on the reworking of Cohenian rationalism found in the globalized Judaism of Schachter-Shalomi. I also engage Robert Erlewine's *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason*, which places Cohen in a constellation of thinkers who attempt to "reconfigure [Abrahamic monotheisms] and rationalize the basic structure of the monotheistic worldview."<sup>71</sup> In the conclusion of my thesis, I arrive at the unexpected conclusion that it is

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 44.



possible to productively understand Schachter-Shalomi as a subversive heir to Hermann Cohen and the religion of reason trajectory. Finally, I draw on the essays in Reinier Munk's edited volume *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism* as an indispensable reference for Cohen's broader philosophical and historical context, while Andrea Poma's *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* serves as a guide to the most technical and challenging features of Cohen's system.

Before moving on, I wish to be clear about the contours of my project. As noted above, I do not mean to reject the idea that Schachter-Shalomi's work is deeply rooted in his American context, or that there may be ways in which he can be productively described as a critic of rationalist traditions of thought. My goal, rather, is to offer a more nuanced, complex account of his work by recovering other, previously neglected dimensions of his thinking. In fact, my claim concerning the "Germanness" of Schachter-Shalomi and the Jewish Renewal movement is compatible with explorations of Jewish Renewal as an American phenomenon. Like so many contemporary American-Jewish genealogies, the Jewish Renewal movement has more recent American branches and older European roots. Nevertheless, without attending to the possibility that German-Jewish thought plays a significant role for Schachter-Shalomi's life and work, we cannot understand his contributions to contemporary American Judaism. Indeed, I understand the blurred lines between "Germanness" and "Americanness" in the Jewish Renewal movement to be, in important ways, a reflection of Schachter-Shalomi's own biography, especially the Viennese upbringing and education that continued to be an important element of his life story long after his migration to the United States as a teenage refugee.

### Chapter Outline

The first chapter of my thesis lays the groundwork for establishing the philosophical and

historical relationship between Schachter-Shalomi's New Age Judaism and German-Jewish rationalism. I survey Schachter-Shalomi's writings and lectures, reconstructing key elements of his theology with an emphasis on what I describe as his "messianic politics" and vision of the telos of world history. For necessary context, I begin with a preliminary overview of Hasidism and the "first wave" of neo-Hasidism. I then provide an in-depth treatment of the "second wave" of neo-Hasidism championed in the work of Schachter-Shalomi, highlighting the turn to regional and global federalism that stands at the core of Schachter-Shalomi's messianic politics.

In the second chapter, I will turn to an in-depth examination of Schachter-Shalomi's engagement with Cohen and the German-Jewish intellectual tradition. I argue that the theology of Schachter-Shalomi appropriates Cohenian rationalism for the purposes of his New Age Judaism, reworking Cohen's thought for the different circumstances of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Following a close side-by-side reading of Schachter-Shalomi and Cohen, I supply hitherto unnoticed evidence that Schachter-Shalomi was involved in the dissemination of Cohen's writings in North America. I then recount key elements of Schachter-Shalomi's intellectual biography which are often omitted in popular accounts of his life, namely, his formative education as a German-speaking Jew in Vienna, where he attended the lectures of the neo-Orthodox rabbi and German-Jewish philosopher Isaac Breuer as a teenager. I also discuss his longtime friendship with Steven Schwarzschild, a scholar of German-Jewish rationalism and leading expert on Cohen, a colleague with whom Schachter-Shalomi "shared quite a bit in common intellectually and spiritually."<sup>72</sup> After suggesting that Schachter-Shalomi can be understood as a thinker who is deeply rooted in the German-Jewish intellectual tradition, I look to the ways he creatively reimagines that same tradition.

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<sup>72</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal*, 201.

In my conclusion, I reflect upon the broader implications of Schachter-Shalomi's possible engagement with Cohen and suggest potential areas for future study. I raise questions about a prevailing assumption within the academic study of Judaism—namely, the alleged opposition between rationalism and New Age Judaism. I also argue that Schachter-Shalomi's thought might contribute to broader philosophical and cultural debates by pointing a way toward a renewal of what is sometimes described as the unfinished “project of modernity,” not unlike contemporary neo-Kantian thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 51. See also: Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” trans. Seyla Benhabib. *New German Critique*, no. 22 (Winter 1981): 11-13.

**CHAPTER ONE:**  
**THE MESSIANIC POLITICS OF ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI**

In my introduction, I discussed the curious figure of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and surveyed scholarly literature about his thought, along with the Jewish Renewal movement and New Age Judaism. Next, we briefly turned our attention to Hermann Cohen, who authored one of the most important philosophical accounts of Judaism in the modern period. At first glance, this appeared to be an unlikely juxtaposition: how could Hermann Cohen, the neo-Kantian sage of Marburg, be related to Schachter-Shalomi, the gonzo rabbi of American counterculture? The answer that this thesis will offer, I suggested, is that key elements of Schachter-Shalomi's mystically inflected, seemingly anti-rational religious thought may be sourced from, and creatively reimagine, Cohen's work. This thesis will thus call for a reassessment of Schachter-Shalomi's thought, calling attention to the possibility that he has deep philosophical and historical roots in German-Jewish rationalism.

In this first chapter, I set the stage for this reassessment by explicating key elements of Schachter-Shalomi's theology, showing that he develops what I will describe as a "messianic politics." Here I am referring to his attempt to mobilize the Jewish tradition's notion of a messiah and a messianic age to present a vision of a reimagined geopolitical order. Classically, the idea of the messianic age refers to redeemed time that will differ, in some significant way or ways, from the era we now inhabit. Faced with the ethical absurdity of accepting the present world as it is, Schachter-Shalomi mobilizes the messianic idea in order to perceive the world as it ought to be. That is, confronted with a present world order that he finds deeply problematic, he invokes messianism to generate an alternate political model. We will learn that he develops this messianic political vision by employing prophetic and rabbinic sources, supplying ancient and

medieval precedents for a Jewish cosmopolitanism. I will begin by exploring some of the broader developments in Jewish life that provide the backdrop for Schachter-Shalomi's thought. I will then discuss his vision of New Age Judaism, focusing on his messianic politics. I will conclude by considering possible sources for this political vision, engaging the work of Shaul Magid by examining the suggestion that American pragmatism may serve as one key influence. Although this claim has its merits, I will show in the second chapter that textual, philosophical, and historical evidence also points to the possibility of the strong influence of German-Jewish rationalism upon Schachter-Shalomi's thought, especially his approach to politics. Astonishingly, Schachter-Shalomi, an elder statesman of New Age Judaism, the bohemian scholar of Jewish mysticism who dropped LSD with Timothy Leary, who recited traditional Jewish prayers with Allen Ginsberg, and who relished lively conversations with the 14th Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, also used his considerable platform to advance an ethico-political program that he may have adopted from Hermann Cohen.

### Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism

As I noted in my introduction, Dana Evan Kaplan understands Schachter-Shalomi to be a leading figure of Jewish "spirituality" in North America during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>1</sup> Kaplan asserts that Schachter-Shalomi "formulated the central critique of contemporary American Jewish life: 'Judaism today is oververbalized and underexperienced.'"<sup>2</sup> Rather than making theological arguments defending the existence of God, Schachter-Shalomi claims to teach prayer and meditation in order to help his students have what he describes as a

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism*, 258-298.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

“spiritual experience” of God.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, Kaplan argues, Schachter-Shalomi promotes what he sees as a mystical approach to religion capable of responding to “the perceived superficiality of post-World War II suburban Judaism,” revitalizing its “stale and spiritually stagnant” life.<sup>4</sup> According to Schachter-Shalomi, to the extent that “most Jewish settings,” both liberal and orthodox, neglect “those inner experiences that lie at the heart of religion’s external forms,” they are woefully ill-equipped to address the needs of the contemporary spiritual seeker.<sup>5</sup> To bridge this gap, he taught “a mystical approach to Judaism” which purportedly “invites the infinite and operates at a higher level of consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, Schachter-Shalomi’s claim here is that he teaches his students how to “awaken” to the divine and become conscious of God in everyday life.<sup>7</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi’s mystical approach to Judaism is sourced, in part, from a movement known as Hasidism. A popular expression of Jewish mysticism, Hasidism originated in present-day Ukraine during the eighteenth century and quickly spread throughout Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> Among other things, it is remarkable for its popularization of kabbalah, an esoteric system of mysticism which had often been the province of elite rabbinic circles.<sup>9</sup> It also raised questions about strands in the Jewish tradition which extolled, above most other activities, the practice of poring over classical texts for long hours—the lofty occupation of a Torah scholar that was in some circles considered to be the ideal pursuit to which all Jewish men should aspire, but that in

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<sup>3</sup> Schachter-Shalomi with Joel Segel, *Jewish With Feeling: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice* (New York: Riverhead Hardcover, 2005), 5, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism*, 261.

<sup>5</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, xii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

<sup>8</sup> Adam Teller, “Hasidism and the Challenge of Geography: The Polish Background to the Spread of the Hasidic Movement,” *AJS Review* 30 (2006): 11.

<sup>9</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 2011), 344.

reality was unattainable for many due to factors such as the demands of earning a living. Emphasizing passionate longing for experiential communion with God (*devekut*), along with a model of deference—or even surrender—to a charismatic leader who serves as a direct channel between the human and divine realms (a *tzaddik*), Hasidism represented a challenge to this focus on textual virtuosity.<sup>10</sup>

The founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), is referred to as the “Baal Shem Tov,” an honorific title often rendered into English as “Master of the Good Name.” “Baal Shem” is an occupation that predates Hasidism in early modern Ashkenazic societies, the name for a person who served as the community’s folk healer and wonder worker.<sup>11</sup> A Baal Shem was considered to be an adept of “practical kabbalah,” a collection of magical practices such as using amulets, talismans, and incantations to bring about healing and miracles.<sup>12</sup> We know very little about the historical figure of Israel ben Eliezer, since the legendary accounts of his life which have been preserved by the Hasidic tradition are hopelessly hagiographic. It appears that Israel ben Eliezer began his career like a typical Baal Shem, but he is said to have gained a significant following with his magical abilities and spiritual powers (including exorcism, healing the sick, and fortune telling).<sup>13</sup>

It was primarily through the leadership of the Baal Shem Tov’s chief disciple, Dov Ber ben Avraham (d. 1772), more commonly known as the Maggid of Mezritch, that Hasidism gained momentum as a mass movement.<sup>14</sup> In Mezritch, a society of elite students gathered

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<sup>10</sup> Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 12, 172.

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Jan Doktór, “The Beginnings of Beshtian Hasidism in Poland,” *Shofar* 29 (2011): 46.

around the Maggid, bringing together a significant number of accomplished scholars and charismatic personalities who would subsequently scatter to establish Hasidic courts across Eastern Europe, spreading beyond Ukraine to Poland, Galicia, and Russia.<sup>15</sup> After leaving Mezritch, the leading students of the Maggid founded different branches of Hasidism, each advancing its own distinctive interpretation of Hasidic teachings and practices.

Although he wrote almost nothing, the Maggid's teachings were recorded and disseminated by his students.<sup>16</sup> In one of the earliest published collections of his teachings, *Maggid Debarav le-Ya'akov*, the Maggid preaches that everything in the world is made with sparks of the Divine Presence (*ha-Shekhinah*).<sup>17</sup> Divine potential is believed to reside in the husks of materiality, simply waiting to be released by the Hasidic practitioner. The Maggid states that God "commands us to lift up the holy sparks, since the purpose of worship is to bring about great pleasure in order to raise the lower levels to higher levels."<sup>18</sup> The category of worship is expanded beyond the performance of *mitzvot* (commandments) and the observance of *halakhah* (Jewish law) to include mundane physical acts, especially those involving pleasure, such as eating, drinking, and sex.

According to Shneur Zalman of Liadi, an influential disciple of the Maggid and founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Hasidism, the great *tzaddikim* (plural of *tzaddik*) merge with the divine intellect, using their constant mindfulness of the divine presence in this world as a vehicle to the "Ein Sof," the infinite, unknowable core of God, "through which they are nullified and absorbed in His blessed light."<sup>19</sup> The discovery of the infinite within the finite world is

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<sup>15</sup> Teller, "Hasidism and the Challenge of Geography," 11.

<sup>16</sup> Evan Mayse, "Beyond the Letters: The Question of Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch" (PhD Diss. Harvard University, 2015), 40.

<sup>17</sup> *Maggid Debarav le-Ya'akov* (Korets: 1781), 12:9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 113:1.

<sup>19</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya: Likkutei Amarim* (Zolkiev: 1798), 37:1.



believed to have profound psychological consequences for the Hasidic practitioner, whose sense of self is thought to be annihilated during his encounter with the infinite being of God.

One of the few extant accounts of early Hasidism by an outsider was authored by Salomon Maimon (1753-1800), a noted Jewish philosopher who originally hailed from Lithuania. Around 1770, Maimon visited the Maggid's court. Summarizing the religious doctrine he encountered as "self-annihilation before God," he grew increasingly irritated during the several weeks he spent in Mezritch, decrying the "excessive merriment" of the Maggid's followers.<sup>20</sup> He was particularly disappointed with the rank-and-file adherents of Hasidism, whom he indicted for their base ignorance, including their extreme contempt for "the other sex" that he found shocking even according to the standards of the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Maimon was undeniably impressed with the Maggid and his inner circle, whom he called "men of enlightenment, who have attained a deep knowledge of the weaknesses of men and the motives of their actions," prudent leaders who "have devoted themselves to the art of ruling free men, that is, of using the will and powers of other men, so that while these believe themselves to be advancing merely their own ends, they are in reality advancing the ends of their leaders."<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, early Hasidic leaders possessed a grand sense of their own mission, often understanding themselves to be the elect within the elect, the rightful leaders of the Jewish people. Shneur Zalman, for example, attests to this attitude. He claims that in "every generation there are the leaders of the Jews [e.g. Shneur Zalman and his colleagues] whose souls are in the category of 'head' and 'brain,'" who are contrasted with "the masses and the ignorant" who are like the "soles of the feet," limbs meant merely to obey commandments of the brain.<sup>23</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>20</sup> Salomon Maimon, *An Autobiography* (London: Cupples & Hurd, 1888), 152, 169.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>23</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya: Likkutei Amarim*, 2:6

even as the early Hasidic leaders were upending the established hierarchies of rabbinic institutions throughout Eastern Europe, they installed a new regime revolving around the *tzaddik*, an autocratic system whereby a leader known as a *rebbe* ruled over his followers, often with absolute authority.

The influence of Hasidism spread far beyond its adherents. For the purpose of this thesis, the most important example is a literary movement known as “neo-Hasidism,” which emerged in Central and Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and undertook various revisions of Hasidism. In Poland, neo-Hasidic authors such as I. L. Peretz (1852-1915) and Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942) romanticized Hasidism as a quasi-socialist ethos.<sup>24</sup> The neo-Hasidic works of Martin Buber (1878-1965), an Austrian-born philosopher, offered an “existentialist interpretation of Hasidism,” presenting Hasidism as “a precursor to what became existentialist thought in the twentieth century.”<sup>25</sup>

Let us begin with Peretz, a Warsaw-based Yiddish writer who is counted among the most important figures in the development of modern Jewish culture, a literary celebrity whose stories captivated the Yiddish-reading public from “Buenos Aires to Birobidzhan.”<sup>26</sup> In a short story entitled “If Not Higher,” Peretz depicts a Hasidic rabbi as a humble worker who skips penitential prayers during the mornings before the High Holidays, sneaking away from the house of worship to disguise himself as a Russian peasant in order to anonymously chop wood for an impoverished elderly widow.<sup>27</sup> A Lithuanian opponent of Hasidism is cast as the story’s

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<sup>24</sup> Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, “‘The Great Call of the Hour’: Hillel Zeitlin’s Yiddish Writings on Yavneh,” *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (March 8th, 2016): 4.

<sup>25</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Hasidism,” *Commentary* (October 1961), 312; Magid, “Retelling Hasidism for the Twenty-First Century,” *Tikkun* (Summer 2012), 37-39.

<sup>26</sup> Ruth Wisse, “Introduction,” in *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Wisse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xiii.

<sup>27</sup> I.L. Peretz, “If Not Higher,” in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1954), 231-233.

antagonist. Unsurprisingly, this figure is portrayed as a curmudgeon with a bent toward book learning and punctilious adherence to the law. He grows indignant at the Hasidic rabbi's laxity with regard to reciting penitential prayers and resolves to catch him in the act of truancy. Eventually, however, the opponent discovers the Hasidic rabbi quietly helping the impoverished widow, and he is so moved by this unassuming display of piety that he asks to become a disciple on the spot, renouncing the vaunted intellect of the yeshiva world for the selfless devotion of Hasidism.<sup>28</sup>

In this and other stories by Peretz, one scholar observes, the conflict between Hasidism and its opponents "is portrayed as a socialist class struggle, with Hasidism representing the proletariat."<sup>29</sup> Portraying the Hasidic rabbi as a "a man of the people," Peretz's neo-Hasidic stories resonated with the "progressive and even revolutionary Jewish youth" of his day, as Alain Brossat notes in his history of Jewish radicalism.<sup>30</sup> Politically, Peretz had a much more complicated relationship to revolutionary politics, expressing his ambivalence toward the 1905 Russian Revolution while throwing his support behind the nascent Jewish Socialist Bund, an anti-communist movement that would eventually become the largest Jewish-Marxist party in Eastern Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Another neo-Hasidic writer who enacted a socialist rereading of Hasidism is Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942). A prolific author of pamphlets and articles in Warsaw's Yiddish and Hebrew press, he argued for a "Hasidism of the future," a renewed Hasidism which "will incorporate all that is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>29</sup> Nicham Ross, "I.L. Peretz's 'Between Two Mountains': Neo-Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernism" in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, ed. Sheila Jelen et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 115.

<sup>30</sup> Alain Brossat, *Le Yiddishland révolutionnaire* (Paris: Balland, 1983), 68.

<sup>31</sup> Adi Mahalel, "Weaving the Revolution: I.L. Peretz the Social Protest Writer," *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (May 22nd, 2016), 2; Brossat, *Le Yiddishland révolutionnaire*, 67.

healthy, pure, and honorable in socialism.”<sup>32</sup> According to Zeitlin, socialism must lend its class consciousness to the religious system of Hasidism, since “in the time of the Besht [Baal Shem Tov] the class conflicts among peoples were not yet so sharply defined [and] the demand for social justice had not yet been articulated with full seriousness and honesty.”<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Hasidism would offer up its methods of moral self-scrutiny for socialist purposes. Pious socialists should demand “justice of themselves,” working toward a future when “each person will think not about how to avoid being exploited, but rather how to avoid exploiting the other.”<sup>34</sup>

After Peretz, the “poetic and emotional appeal” of Hasidism deeply influenced Jewish *belles lettres*, particularly in Yiddish, Hebrew, and German, but it is Martin Buber who was credited for turning neo-Hasidic literature into world literature.<sup>35</sup> His retellings of Hasidic tales enjoyed broad readership among both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences and remain popular to this day. For Buber, “the core of hasidic teachings is the concept of a life of fervor, of exalted joy.”<sup>36</sup> According to Buber, the essence of Hasidism is this “life of fervor,” an approach that “endow[s] daily life with that constant, undaunted and exalted joy in the Here and Now, which can spring only from fulfilment in the present, not from hope in a future fulfillment.”<sup>37</sup> The Hasidic way of life, as told by Buber, constantly rediscovers meaning in the present moment, not waiting for a better future in a world-to-come. Gershom Scholem writes that “this far-reaching

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<sup>32</sup> Hillel Zeitlin, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*, trans. Arthur Green (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Hasidism,” 305; Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber’s Life and Work* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), xv.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken, 2013), 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

thesis constitutes the basis of Buber's existentialist interpretation of Hasidism as a perfect realization of the Here and Now."<sup>38</sup> Overcoming profound sorrow and despair, Buber's *tzaddikim* recover the joy of human existence in every moment, lifting up the "sparks of God that glimmer in all beings and all things."<sup>39</sup>

Buber also believed that experiencing a "life of elation, of fervor" was "the underlying purpose of all great religions and religious movements."<sup>40</sup> This has been identified by Leora Batnitzky as an "experiential-expressive" approach to religion, positing a universal experiential essence at the core of religion, "a model of generic religious experience."<sup>41</sup> By framing Hasidism in a manner that emphasized the experiential dimensions of the "Here and Now," he hoped to articulate a universal religious philosophy while also reclaiming an authentic sense of "lived experience" he felt was lacking in competing approaches to religion.<sup>42</sup>

#### The Second Wave of Neo-Hasidism and Schachter-Shalomi's New Age Judaism

A "second wave" of neo-Hasidism gained traction in the United States among Jewish-American youth during the 1960s. Its leaders were influential rabbis, professors, and musicians, including the scholar of Jewish mysticism and theologian Arthur Green, the folk singer and composer Shlomo Carlebach, and—most importantly for our purposes—Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.

Schachter-Shalomi's thought was deeply shaped by the diversity of American religious

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<sup>38</sup> Scholem, "Martin Buber's Hasidism," 312.

<sup>39</sup> Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 209.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism," *Commentary* (September 1963), 224.

life, which brought Judaism into conversation with a wide array of religious traditions.<sup>43</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi casts this encounter with other traditions as a fundamental element of his religious life, writing that “I wanted to learn from the spiritually experienced of other faiths: Sufi sheiks, Buddhist monks, Christian contemplatives, American savants. I received something from all of them.”<sup>44</sup> Based on these encounters, he develops—as we saw earlier—a syncretistic approach to “spirituality” that is characteristic of what is often described as the New Age.

Schachter-Shalomi’s New Age Judaism emphasizes the importance of subjectivity and consciousness. He claims to offer an “experience-based approach” to Judaism, one which tends to place inner experience at the center of religiosity.<sup>45</sup> Schachter-Shalomi does not posit the existence of God as a matter for “theological discussion,” but rather, as a matter of “personal spiritual experience.”<sup>46</sup> According to this view, the concept of “God” is a useful vehicle for “nurturing spiritual experience in our lives.”<sup>47</sup> For the individual practitioner, a concept of God need only be sound enough to temporarily withstand intellectual objections which might block attempts to practice prayer and meditation. In this vein, the preliminary task of Jewish “spirituality” would be to arrive at a “concept of ‘God’ that will allow us to say, ‘Okay, we accept this for now. We can drop the mental quotation marks around ‘God.’ Let’s continue our search for spiritual experience.”<sup>48</sup> Schachter-Shalomi thus presents a “pragmatic” view of God: for him, a concept of God is true insofar as it is useful for spiritual experience. We might also

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<sup>43</sup> On the distinction between “first wave” and “second wave” neo-Hasidism see Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 79. See also Magid, “Between Paradigm Shift and Jewish Renewal: The New Metaphysics of Jewish Renewal,” *Tikkun* 30, no. 1 (2015), 13.

<sup>44</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, xvi.

<sup>45</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

say that he adopts a phenomenological approach to the existence of God, not an ontological one: God appears to be real within the experience of a spiritual seeker, although an independent entity called “God” may or may not exist in objective reality.<sup>49</sup>

Scholars argue that the valorization of personal experience and subjectivity within New Age movements represents a form of protest against the “disenchantment of the world,” that is, a reaction to the near disappearance of “magic and spiritual mystery” from public life, a phenomenon which Max Weber linked to the rationalization of modern society along technological and economic lines.<sup>50</sup> In Europe and North America, the “progress” of societal rationalization was said to be accompanied by secular forces which devalue religion and metaphysics as anachronistic and irrational superstition. Christopher Partridge, a scholar of new religious movements, proposes that contemporary New Age movements turn toward the “experiencing self,” “inner subjectivity,” and “states of consciousness” in order to return a sense of “magic and spiritual mystery” to everyday life, thus effecting “re-enchantment.”<sup>51</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi exhibits a similar turn toward the experiencing self, claiming that individuals can awaken to a “higher form of consciousness.”<sup>52</sup> By way of a personal anecdote, Schachter-Shalomi illustrates his notion of spiritual awakening:

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Woodhead and Christopher Partridge, “Introduction,” in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1-15; Christopher Partridge, “Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions, and The Reenchantment of the West” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume I*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” in *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 13.

<sup>51</sup> Christopher Partridge, “Occulture and Everyday Enchantment” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II*, eds. James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tollefsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 3-4.

<sup>52</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 237.

Years ago when my daughter was young she once asked me, “Abba [Dad], when you’re asleep, you can wake up, right?”

“Right,” I answered.

“So when you’re awake,” she said, “can you wake up even more?”

That part of us that always seeks to awaken even more, I call soul. Judaism speaks of the soul as a spark of God.<sup>53</sup>

Reflecting his Hasidic background, Schachter-Shalomi suggests that human beings are imbued with a “spark of God,” a spark which can be lifted from the lower level of earthly existence to reconnect with its divine origin. Schachter-Shalomi claims that lifting up these holy sparks is a practice for the “spiritual seeker...whose soul is awake.”<sup>54</sup> Reworking Hasidic concepts in New Age language, he writes that a spiritual seeker awakens to “a higher level of spiritual consciousness [which] senses the divine just beyond the surface of everyday existence.”<sup>55</sup> As in the theology of his Hasidic forbears, the process of spiritual awakening described by Schachter-Shalomi culminates in self-annihilation before God, whereby an individual experiences her soul being absorbed into God. He affirms a teaching attributed to Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who claims that the “soul is that being that knows with certainty that God exists and that besides God nothing else clearly exists.”<sup>56</sup> Drawing on this idea, Schachter-Shalomi argues that an awakened spiritual seeker would see God everywhere she looks: on this view, nothing has a separate existence from God, and even more radically, nothing can be said to truly exist besides God. However, unlike the more traditional Hasidic theology of Shneur Zalman, the “experience-based approach” of Schachter-Shalomi insists that the “certainty that God exists and that besides God nothing else clearly exists” is limited to the subjective domain of inner experience, and leaves

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 27.



aside ontological claims about God’s existence “out there” in reality.<sup>57</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi’s emphasis on subjectivity and experience has numerous consequences for his approach to Judaism—for example, for his conception of prayer and ritual. One especially prominent element of this vision of Judaism, though, is a call for an epistemological shift toward “global consciousness,” with a corresponding imperative of a global ethic.<sup>58</sup> Schachter-Shalomi suggests that recent crises of world history (such as human-caused climate change, the mass migration of refugees, and nuclear proliferation) demand a theological and political “paradigm shift” toward global consciousness, a Copernican turn that reorients our worldview to the “cosmopolis,” soaring beyond national and religious boundaries to acknowledge the shared habitat of humanity: the planet.<sup>59</sup> As we will see, Schachter-Shalomi respects membership in particular national and religious communities. Nevertheless, he advances a cosmopolitan idea of global citizenship, according to which our sphere of communal responsibility extends not only to co-religionists and fellow inhabitants of a particular nation state, but also to all those who live in the world. He holds that “a vision of Earth that respects but transcends national and religious boundaries is part of the Torah of the future.”<sup>60</sup>

Focusing on this notion of global consciousness, Schachter-Shalomi observes world events with an eye toward their potential to engender a cosmopolitan outlook. One event that he sees in such terms is the civilizational milestone of viewing the Earth from outer space. Against the demoralizing backdrop of intractable humanitarian crises and looming ecological catastrophe, an iconic photograph of the globe (included below) is said to portend a different

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 177; Schachter-Shalomi, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption” in *Paradigm Shift*, 75; Zalman Schachter, “Response to *Homeland and Holocaust*,” in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, Donald R. Cutler (Toronto: Beacon Press, 1968), 82-84.

<sup>60</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 177

worldview:

This one single vision [of the planet] represented an immense shift of perspective, beckoning us to rise beyond social, political, cultural, or religious formulations of “us versus them.” [This photograph] clarified better than a thousand words how much humanity as a whole has to lose and how much our collective home is worth fighting for...We knew these things intellectually, but the sight of our planet in all its loveliness said it more eloquently than any scientific data or idealistic sermon could.<sup>61</sup>



“View of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17,” NASA, December 7, 1972.  
[visibleearth.nasa.gov](http://visibleearth.nasa.gov)

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 149.

Here, an aesthetic experience of viewing earth from outer space is said to have ethical and political meaning. Schachter-Shalomi argues that this photograph offers a global worldview, quite literally, one which transcends the boundaries of national and religious identity. Unlike the world map drawn by the cartographer, this picture contains no borders. From this perspective, a human being inhabits the earth as much as she inhabits her own country.

It is in light of this call for global consciousness that Schachter-Shalomi understands the status of particular religious traditions and nations. He describes the world's national and religious communities as distinct but interconnected vital organs within the body politic of humanity: "When we look at our planet itself as an organism, we realize that every expression of diversity on this planet is part and parcel of Earth. At the highest level we are all one. But nowhere in nature do we find pure universalism: the universal always expresses itself in the particular. The nations and faiths of the world are the organs of this planet."<sup>62</sup> The universal manifests within the particular, just as the totality of an organism rests upon its constituent parts. Particular national and religious identities cannot be abandoned for some abstract ideal of universal humanity, according to Schachter-Shalomi, because "the universal exists only within the particular. It does not exist independently. When we say that each nation and every people has something valuable to contribute to the world, then we need to understand what are the particular strengths, gems, and virtues of each nation. This is simply because we all need what each one of us has to offer."<sup>63</sup> On this view, every group's national and religious heritage is inherently valuable, representing a facet of truth not found in other collectivities. Universal truth is expressed through the "partial truths" of various nations and religions, different aspects which

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 184-85.

<sup>63</sup> Schachter-Shalomi and Daniel Siegel, *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist* (Victoria: Trafford, 2005), 161.

complement each other as a global consciousness gradually emerges.<sup>64</sup>

I would suggest that we can productively understand Schachter-Shalomi's "organic" and "global" theology as a form of what we might call "mystical pluralism." As we saw in my introduction, he claims to teach "a mystical approach to Judaism" in the sense that his vision of the Jewish tradition emphasizes the idea of "operat[ing] at a higher level of consciousness."<sup>65</sup> That is, although terms such as "mysticism" and "mystical" are notoriously difficult to define, Schachter-Shalomi sees his theology as mystical insofar as it tends to emphasize the centrality of inner experience at the core of religion. Indeed, he encounters other religions primarily on the level of "spiritual experience," evincing considerably less interest in what he describes as "mere observance, ritual, and dogmatic belief."<sup>66</sup> Yet Schachter-Shalomi's theology is also pluralistic in the sense that, from the very outset, it rejects the possibility of a generic religious experience or a universal experiential essence of religion. He acknowledges the significant differences between religions, differences which are shaped by language, culture, and history.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, even as he claims to discover universally relevant truths in other religions, he argues that those specific traditions possess value, insisting that the universal can only be discerned within the particular: to revisit the passage quoted above, he claims that "the universal exists only within the particular," and that "when we say that each nation and every people has something valuable to contribute to the world, then we need to understand what are the particular strengths, gems, and virtues of each nation."

Seeking precedents for his approach within earlier sources from the Jewish tradition,

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<sup>64</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 198.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Schachter-Shalomi cites the medieval Jewish theologian and poet Judah Halevi, who advanced the notion that Israel is like “the heart of the world.”<sup>68</sup> In his *magnum opus*, *The Kuzari*, Halevi states that “Israel among the nations is like a heart among its organs—it becomes quite ill from the illness of the other organs, and also considerably healthy from their influence.”<sup>69</sup> Impressed with his theological vision of a worldwide spiritual body, Schachter-Shalomi is nevertheless uncomfortable with what he calls the “strong racial leanings” of Halevi, who calls Israel an “elite creature” whose chosenness is hereditary and quasi-biological.<sup>70</sup>

It is, in fact, precisely in this break with the type of approach championed by Halevi that we begin to encounter the messianic dimension of Schachter-Shalomi’s thought that will be crucial to this thesis. Rather than follow his medieval predecessor, Schachter-Shalomi attempts to develop a notion of Jewish peoplehood that is neither biologically nor ethnically determined. His most extensive treatment of this issue reads as follows:

Except for some of our *kohanim*/priests, who can trace their lineage back for hundreds of generations, it’s not really possible to argue that Jews are a race. Our genetics are simply not pure enough to qualify for that definition. Furthermore, if race really were at the core of Jewishness, then how could any *bet din* [rabbinic court] ever authorize a conversion? The inadequacy of this is made clear by the way in which the [Jewish] tradition has equated the relationship between a teacher and student with that of a parent and child. And even if Jews in the diaspora can see themselves as somehow connected to citizens of the State of Israel, that is not enough to claim that Jews **are** a nationality.

In the end, we emerge as a scandal to all conventional possibilities. We are not quite religion, not quite race and not quite nation. Yet, we have the characteristics of them all. It is not honest to suggest, for example, that we could abstract a definition of religion from what Jews are because it would not describe what Buddhists are at all.

What we do have is a special and strong *malchut* [kingship]. What is important to

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<sup>68</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, 160.

<sup>69</sup> Yehuda Halevi, *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith*, trans. Daniel Korobkin (Nanuet: Philipp Feldheim, 2009), 2:36.

<sup>70</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Paradigm Shift*, 123; Halevi, *The Kuzari*, 1:27.

us is the kingdom of God and being citizens of that kingdom. That is why we have so many laws and things to do. We are the people who are preparing for the time when the whole world and all of humankind will see themselves as the kingdom of God.<sup>71</sup>

Here, the essence of Jewishness is neither race nor nationality, nor even “religion” in a generalized sense. Instead, Schachter-Shalomi defines the Jewish people as a group charged with “preparing for the time when the whole world and all of humankind will see themselves as the kingdom of God.” He defines the Jewish people by a messianic task, that is, uniting the entire world and thereby establishing a heavenly kingdom on earth.<sup>72</sup>

### Schachter-Shalomi’s Messianic Politics

Far from being peripheral to his thought, this emphasis on messianism constitutes a key element of Schachter-Shalomi’s vision. More specifically, by the late 1960s, he articulates a political theology which I refer to as his “messianic politics.” He proposes that the *telos* of world history is the emergence of regional and global federalism. The key texts here are essays entitled “State of Jewish Belief” and “Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*” written in 1966 and 1967, respectively, as well as “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” also written in 1967. Also of importance are later articles entitled “Entering Israel’s Second Yovel” (1998), “Judaism for a New Age” (2000), and “Requiem for a Dream” (2008).

Before diving into a detailed analysis of Schachter-Shalomi’s messianic politics, a word of caution is in order. Schachter-Shalomi is not what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls an “argumentative problem-solver,” that is, a logical thinker who methodically investigates a

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<sup>71</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, 160.

<sup>72</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 184-85.

problem and proceeds to construct a rigorous argument.<sup>73</sup> Rather, Schachter-Shalomi is closer to what Rorty calls an “oracular world-discloser,” a poetic thinker who envisages new worlds.<sup>74</sup> In other words, although Elie Wiesel praises Schachter-Shalomi as “an inspired interpreter of tradition and a...dreamer of ancient dreams,” notions like “argumentation” and “rigor” would certainly not be counted among his virtues.<sup>75</sup> As we read his work, then, we will sometimes have to reckon with the fact that he does not fully explain his reasoning.

With this caveat in mind, we can turn to the substance of his thought. Beginning in the late 1960s, and continuing throughout the rest of his career, Schachter-Shalomi proclaims a vision of a world government that is headquartered in Jerusalem. He refers to this global union of states as a “World Federation.”<sup>76</sup> Needless to say, Schachter-Shalomi is not a political philosopher. Nowhere does he undertake rigorous argumentation in favor of this world government, and his dreams of a future “World Federation” were in some ways just that—dreams. Nonetheless, one can plausibly reconstruct his thoughts on the subject matter by reading “The State of Jewish Belief” alongside his contemporaneous essay “Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*.” In the former text, Schachter-Shalomi seeks to identify “a new *ought* toward which we must flex in the tension of the *is*,” that is, an ethical imperative (an “*ought*”) which can transform the world as it “*is*,” an ideal which we should collectively strive to make real. This “new *ought*” would represent “the political framework that will permit the greatest freedom to various constituents.”<sup>77</sup> He claims that this “common civic framework” should be based upon

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<sup>73</sup> Richard Rorty, “Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 123.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, i.

<sup>76</sup> Schachter, “Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*,” 85

<sup>77</sup> Zalman Schachter, “The State of Jewish Belief,” 139.

“natural law,” ethical principles that are understood to be universal.<sup>78</sup> His understanding of this framework is pluralistic and inclusive: his ideal political structure would be a general covenant which “makes all sorts of [other] covenants simultaneous and compatible” in the sense of enabling and complementing, rather than replacing and eliminating, diverse sorts of political communities.<sup>79</sup>

Within months of writing “The State of Jewish Belief,” Schachter-Shalomi calls for the establishment of a world government in his “Response to *Homeland and Holocaust*,” a form of government which he refers to as “World Federation.” Although definitions vary, a “federation” is commonly understood as a system of government whereby power is divided and shared between (1) an overarching state with certain general responsibilities and (2) smaller constituent governments with local responsibilities.<sup>80</sup> The fact that Schachter-Shalomi’s impassioned plea for world government is written so soon after “The State of Jewish Belief” would seem to suggest that he arrives at an idea of “World Federation” as a candidate for the political system that he outlines in that earlier essay: as a candidate for a “common civic framework” that unites various local and regional political communities with a government based on “natural law,” protecting freedom and preserving diversity with a mode of governance that makes “all sorts of [other] covenants simultaneous and compatible.” His use of the word “covenant” (Hebrew: *brit*) is an apparent allusion to the Hebrew Bible, wherein the twelve tribes of Israel were purportedly unified within the Israelite kingdom by a Mosaic constitution, a common covenant that integrated existing tribal institutions into a larger national polity. Daniel Elazar, a scholar of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.; Schachter, “Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*,” 85.

<sup>80</sup> John Kincaid, “Federalism as a Mode of Governance” in *Federalism*, ed. Kincaid (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011).



Jewish political thought, has written that the Israelite polity was a “federalist system,” perhaps “the first true federal system in history.”<sup>81</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi then goes further, arguing for federalism not simply on general philosophical grounds, but also in light of contemporary political developments. Writing in view of the impending Six Day War, when issues such as the fate of Jerusalem seemed to hang in the balance, Schachter-Shalomi remarks that “partial redemptions, ‘liberations,’ are notorious causes for crusades. We must press for the internationalization of Jerusalem under United Nations (and hopefully World Federation) auspices and move the United Nations headquarters from New York to Jerusalem.”<sup>82</sup> He argues that “*a United Nations capital in Jerusalem instead of New York would be a move in the direction of the complete redemption*” [emphasis his].<sup>83</sup> He is advancing two claims here. He is suggesting, first, that the United Nations, the closest approximation to a governing body for the international community, should move its headquarters from New York to Jerusalem. But he is also suggesting that the United Nations might become a “World Federation”—that the provisional mode of global governance instantiated by the United Nations should become a genuine global federation, bringing together all nation states under one common civic framework.

Moreover, Schachter-Shalomi claims, this move would possess messianic import. In the passage quoted above, he explicitly casts the internationalization of Jerusalem in eschatological terms, writing that “*a United Nations capital in Jerusalem instead of New York would be a move in the direction of the complete redemption*”—that the move toward establishing Jerusalem as the capital of a world federation would be a step toward the dawning of a redeemed, messianic

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<sup>81</sup> Daniel J. Elazar, “Government in Biblical Israel,” *Tradition* (Spring/Summer 1973), 107.

<sup>82</sup> Schachter, “Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*,” 85

<sup>83</sup> Zalman Schachter, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” in *Paradigm Shift*, 77.

age. In fact, he speculates, “perhaps this is what is meant by [the oral tradition] ‘Jerusalem is destined to be spread among all the lands.’”<sup>84</sup> Invoking language from classical Jewish sources that refers to Jerusalem’s fate in the messianic age, Schachter-Shalomi is again suggesting that internationalizing Jerusalem and establishing it as the capital of a genuine world federation would signify a significant leap in the direction of the messianic era.

Unfortunately, the details of Schachter-Shalomi’s reasoning—his grounds for ascribing messianic significance to the internationalization of Jerusalem as the capital of a global federation—are not entirely clear. Part of the idea here may be that insofar as global federalism represents a mode of governance that would unify humanity while at the same time making space for difference and diversity, global federalism constitutes an ethico-political system that might create the conditions for the united world order he associates with the messianic era—that is, for what we earlier saw him describe as a “time when the whole world and all of humankind will see themselves as the kingdom of God.”

There may, however, be more to his reasoning. Although Schachter-Shalomi holds that Jerusalem is the spiritual capital of the Jewish people, he also claims that Jerusalem truly belongs to all of humanity, Muslims and Christians especially. Noting that Jerusalem is a deeply contested territory (indeed, among the most volatile geopolitical flashpoints in the world), he rejects the idea of exclusive Jewish sovereignty over the city, insisting that “*a Jewish Jerusalem would be good, but it would postpone the complete redemption*” [emphasis his].<sup>85</sup> He explains his meaning as follows:

The salvational value of a pilgrimage to a holy place is undermined when a pilgrim has to pour out his heart to God that he may free the place from the hands of infidels. We wish no Moslem or Christian to pray for another redemption. Their holy places must be their

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<sup>84</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” 77, quoting *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 7:5.

<sup>85</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” 76.

own. It is in our interest to keep the messianic spark contained in Christianity and Islam alive in order to motivate Moslem [sic] and Christianity to the age of the plowshare. *The messianic element demands that Moslem, Christian, and Jew need the messianic era as Moslem, Christian, and Jew.* Just as we cannot be asked to enter a redemption that excludes the very basis of our wish to be redeemed—Judaism—so others cannot be asked to give up their basis for redemption [emphasis his].<sup>86</sup>

According to Schachter-Shalomi's logic, insofar as "*the messianic element demands that Moslem, Christian, and Jew need the messianic era as Moslem, Christian, and Jew,*" and insofar as "it is in our interest to keep the messianic spark contained in Christianity and Islam alive in order to motivate Moslem [sic] and Christianity to the age of the plowshare," it is crucial that the "holy places" of Muslims and Christians "must be their own" and that these individuals not focus on "free[ing] the place from the hands of infidels." The idea here seems to be that humanity will move toward the messianic era only if individuals are motivated by their own religious traditions to pursue this goal, and that individuals will be motivated to pursue this goal only if they are able to freely engage in practices such as visiting their holiest sites. After all, the reasoning seems to run, if access to such sites is denied, then individuals might focus less on bringing about a messianic time of unity, and more on engaging in religious conflicts to "free" those sites from "the hands of infidels." In other words, in order to move toward the messianic era, an era of peace when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, Jews, Christians, and Muslims must be allowed access to their holiest pilgrimage sites in a way that respects their particular identities while also preserving their hopes for universal redemption. Global federalism with an internationalized Jerusalem would thus be a means of creating this state of affairs. That is, Schachter-Shalomi may be arguing that only an internationalized world capital in Jerusalem can calm the righteous indignation of the religious believer who laments a holy site languishing in

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 77.

the hands of infidels. From this perspective, only in the hands of a political body representing united humanity can Jerusalem live up to its folk etymology of the “city of peace.”

However we understand the details of Schachter-Shalomi’s reasoning, it is clear that he ascribes messianic significance to his call for an internationalized Jerusalem at the heart of a “World Federation.” Moreover, he argues, this vision of an internationalized, federalized Jerusalem is itself rooted in classical Jewish literature—more specifically, in what he sees as a stream of cosmopolitanism transmitted by prophetic and rabbinic literature. For instance, he cites a saying attributed to R. Yohanan in the rabbinic text *Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, which prophesies that “Jerusalem is destined to be spread in all directions.”<sup>87</sup> Schachter-Shalomi’s idea of Jerusalem as the capital of the world coincides with a nearby line from that same text: “Jerusalem is destined to become the capital (*metropolin*) of all states, drawing them toward her like a river.”<sup>88</sup> Schachter-Shalomi also makes frequent reference to the Hebrew Bible’s book of Isaiah, invoking lines in which this prophet—speaking in the voice of God—proclaims that “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7) and “all the nations shall flow towards it [Jerusalem]” (Isaiah 2:2). Schachter-Shalomi thus reminds his audience that Isaiah anticipated a time when the divine service in Jerusalem would involve all peoples, shining the messianic light of a world-to-come when the Lord will take “priests and Levites” from “all the nations” (Isaiah 66:21).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 7:5.

<sup>88</sup> *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:3. Yohanan employs the loanword *metropolin*, which Marcus Jastrow defines within the Hebrew/Aramaic lexicon as “metropolis, capital, city.” See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim: The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Trübner, 1895), 770.

<sup>89</sup> See Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 229; Schachter-Shalomi, “Entering Israel’s Second Yovel,” *Tikkun* (April 1998), 64.

In fact, Schachter-Shalomi continues, this vision of federalism should shape not only the political arrangements surrounding cities such as Jerusalem, but also the concrete practices of military organizations and nation states. He recommends that all soldiers serving in the United Nations peacekeeping force in Jerusalem be required to renounce their national citizenship and become “world citizens.”<sup>90</sup> He also calls on the state of Israel to lead the way towards this new mode of politics by bestowing a portion of its citizen-soldiers to serve in this United Nations peacekeeping force. In this way, Schachter-Shalomi writes, “Israel will become the first ‘no nation’ under United Nations auspices. There is no worthier vocation of the kingdom of servitors and the holy folk than to serve peace.”<sup>91</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi’s commitment to this vision would continue even after his confidence in the United Nations waned. In the 1990s, he revisits his 1960s portrayal of the United Nations as the vehicle of messianic redemption, lamenting that “the United Nations is today not the instrument it could have become then.”<sup>92</sup> Although the current prospects for global federalism may seem even more remote than they had been just a few decades earlier, Schachter-Shalomi nonetheless charges the Jewish state with a reframed ethico-political task which is no less utopian. “If we could take Isaiah’s future vision into the present,” he writes, then the state of Israel should strive to become “the United States of the Middle East,” forming a regional federation with neighboring countries which could serve an antechamber to global federalism.<sup>93</sup>

It is important to be clear about what Schachter-Shalomi is advocating. On one influential reading of this thought (by Shaul Magid), Schachter-Shalomi’s approach to the state of Israel is

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<sup>90</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” 77.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Introductory Note to *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>93</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Entering Israel’s Second Yovel,” 66.

best described as post-Zionist or diasporist in the sense that it ascribes little value to the existence of a Jewish nation state. Magid writes the following:

Neither Schachter-Shalomi nor [Arthur] Green include nationalism (Zionism or otherwise) as part of their theological worldview. Theirs is a decidedly post-Zionist or diasporist metaphysics. Schachter-Shalomi and Green both offer different “metaphorical” readings of Israel or the Jew to expand one’s possible inclusion in Judaism or the Jewish people beyond purely ethnic lines...For Schachter-Shalomi, the Gentile qua Gentile can find a place inside a globalized Judaism, and he argues that Judaism must make room for that.<sup>94</sup>

I agree with Magid’s assessment regarding Schachter-Shalomi’s “diasporist” and “globalized Judaism,” but I would add that Schachter-Shalomi’s political theology includes Zionism, in the sense of including support for the continued existence and flourishing of Israel (understood as a Jewish state), while also seeking to transcend Zionism via regional and global federalism. In his May 1967 appeal for the internationalization of Jerusalem, Schachter-Shalomi writes:

*Jerusalem would be surrounded by Israeli territory [emphasis his]. The currency of Israel would be hardened, employment increased, and security guaranteed. In dealing with Jerusalem and the holy places, one of the most benign myths in the world—that of the city of peace and goodwill—is placed in the service of these objectives. Just as the Vatican brings commerce, money, and pilgrims to Rome, which is only part of the world, how much more would Jerusalem enjoy these when it belongs to practically the whole world.*<sup>95</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi seeks the continued existence and flourishing of the Jewish state, but argues against those streams of Zionism which hold that Jerusalem must be the undivided capital of Israel. Schachter-Shalomi affirms the Jewish share of Jerusalem, but advances the cosmopolitan vision of the city as the theologico-political world capital and federal district of the “larger body

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<sup>94</sup> Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 110.

<sup>95</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” 78.

of nations.”<sup>96</sup> The global consciousness of Schachter-Shalomi’s New Age Judaism, a vision of the planet “that respects but transcends national and religious boundaries,” manifests itself as a messianically charged federation.<sup>97</sup>

### Pragmatist Possibilities?

What should we make of Schachter-Shalomi’s position? Beyond the biblical and rabbinic precedents that he cites (as well as his invocation of Halevi), do we have any indications of the sources that shape his messianic politics?

One place to begin is with his American context. As noted in my introduction, recent scholarship on Schachter-Shalomi and Jewish Renewal has emphasized the roots of New Age Judaism in a trajectory of American philosophical and religious thought that includes transcendentalism, pragmatism, and theosophy.<sup>98</sup> In particular, we saw Magid stress the considerable affinities between the New Age Judaism of Schachter-Shalomi and the American pragmatism of William James. On Magid’s reading, Jamesian pragmatism advances the claim that “truth” is mediated by subjective experience. Rather than attempting to demonstrate the truth of various propositions through non-empirical philosophical proofs or restrict truth claims to the inductive logic and falsifiable hypotheses of natural science, James puts forth a “pragmatic” theory of truth.<sup>99</sup> In his theory, ideas are true insofar as they help us explain other parts of our experience.<sup>100</sup> The resonance with Schachter-Shalomi should be clear: as we saw earlier in this

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 77; Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish with Feeling*, xvi.

<sup>97</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish with Feeling*, 177.

<sup>98</sup> Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 63.

<sup>99</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, 1909).

<sup>100</sup> Morris Dickstein, *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 99.

chapter, a concept of “God” is true for Schachter-Shalomi insofar as it is useful for spiritual experience.

According to Magid, “Schachter-Shalomi articulates in a distinctly Jewish voice the pragmatism and ‘sympathetic’ religiosity espoused by William James in the early decades of the twentieth century.”<sup>101</sup> Magid suggests that the mystical pluralism of Schachter-Shalomi “can arguably be rooted” in a pluralistic form of pantheism introduced by James in his *A Pluralistic Universe*.<sup>102</sup> In the philosophy of James, pantheism (the idea that God and the universe are essentially one) is made serviceable to the notion of pluralism. For James, God is identified with “the absolute sum-total of [all] things” in the universe, yet the manifold array of forms in the universe are diverse and heterogeneous, hence “pluralistic.”<sup>103</sup> Although James accepts the pantheistic equation between God and universe, he emphatically rejects the notion of an Archimedean point, a hypothetical “view from nowhere” which would allow one to grasp the totality of the universe from an impartial perspective.<sup>104</sup> He dismisses the idea of a universal vantage point, claiming the approaches to truth are sundry and multiple.

If we accept the genealogy proposed by Magid, then it seems possible that James might constitute a source not only for Schachter-Shalomi’s mystical pluralism, but also for his messianic politics. James writes in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

*What at bottom is meant by calling the universe many or by calling it one? Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality may be externally related... Things are “with” one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word “and” trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. “Ever not quite” has to be said of the*

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<sup>101</sup> Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 73.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-65.

<sup>103</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 350.



best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. *The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom.* However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity. [emphasis mine]<sup>105</sup>

Here we can recall Schachter-Shalomi's adamant insistence upon the irreducible particularity of national and religious communities within the global body politic, ordering the nations and the religions of the world according to the idea of "World Federation," a cosmopolitan and universalist idea that nonetheless includes pragmatic and pluralistic approaches to truth. As we saw, Schachter-Shalomi observes that "nowhere in nature do we find pure universalism: the universal always expresses itself in the particular."<sup>106</sup> Perhaps, then, Schachter-Shalomi's messianic politics owes an important debt to Jamesian thought. Perhaps it is possible to trace a line from Schachter-Shalomi's messianically tinged federalism to James's vision of a "federal republic."

I acknowledge that American pragmatism epistemically supports the pluralism of Schachter-Shalomi, and I do not discount the possibility that his emphasis on federalism may have Jamesian antecedents, as well. However, in the following chapter, I trace the intellectual genealogy of Schachter-Shalomi's New Age Judaism along an additional trajectory, pointing to another possible modern philosophical source for Schachter-Shalomi's theology: Hermann Cohen and German-Jewish rationalism.

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<sup>105</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 321.

<sup>106</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 184-185.

## **CHAPTER TWO:** **GERMAN-JEWISH RATIONALISM AND ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI**

In the first chapter, we saw Schachter-Shalomi's New Age Judaism giving voice to what I described as a "messianic politics." An archetypal hippie rabbi and neo-Hasidic icon who was known for preaching the merits of religious syncretism and psychedelic experience, Schachter-Shalomi also articulated a politico-messianic vision revolving around global and regional federalism. This federalist vision makes claims on both the state of Israel and the United Nations, and (as we saw) has—or, at least, is taken by Schachter-Shalomi to have—precedents in prophetic and rabbinic sources. As I concluded, this vision may also reflect the influence of Jamesian pragmatism.

In this chapter, I propose an additional source for Schachter-Shalomi's politics—one which has so far escaped notice, but which I argue is crucial for any critical understanding of his theology. Based on a wide array of evidence, I will argue that Schachter-Shalomi may have been profoundly influenced by the work of the German-Jewish rationalist figure Hermann Cohen. I will begin by considering the striking conceptual and textual affinities between and Cohen and Schachter-Shalomi. Next I will reveal how Schachter-Shalomi was involved in the dissemination of Cohen's thought for English-speaking audiences, and then look to the formative role that German-Jewish culture played in Schachter-Shalomi's life. Given this evidence, I will conclude by suggesting that Schachter-Shalomi may be appropriating, yet also reimagining, the thought of his German-Jewish predecessor. He may rework Cohen's philosophy to confront events such as the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel, reimagining German-Jewish rationalism in light of the new historical circumstances in which he finds himself.

## Messianic Visions

As I discussed in my introduction, works such as Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* interpret classical Jewish sources through the lens of philosophy in order to provide a rationalist reconstruction of Judaism, generating a religion of reason—a constellation of rationally valid concepts distilled from the Jewish tradition. He writes the following: “we do not shrink from the argument that reason must rule everywhere in history.”<sup>1</sup> Cohen holds that the totality of world history, including the history of religion, can be understood as a rational phenomenon when analyzed according to the concepts of science and philosophy. Cohen posits that “insofar as reason is the beginning of all human consciousness,” that is, to the extent that rational thought is what distinguishes human beings from other animals, “all peoples indeed participate in the religion of reason.”<sup>2</sup> All human beings have a share in reason, regardless of their time and place.

As Daniel Weiss has argued, Cohen maintains that “reason” is universal “but not necessarily uniform” across various cultures.<sup>3</sup> Cohen argues that becoming “conversant with science and philosophy” is the “indispensable limiting condition” for the development of a religion of reason.<sup>4</sup> He speaks about science and philosophy as “the common property of all civilized peoples” in an important passage that is worth quoting at length:

The Greeks bestowed upon the sciences a peculiar character that distinguishes it from the speculation, however profound, of other peoples. Similarly, the Greeks stamped upon the sciences, which they borrowed from the Oriental peoples, the stamp of the specific method of science. Their philosophy brought forth their science, and, in a certain sense, their science brought forth their philosophy. This science, and especially this philosophy, became the common property of all civilized peoples. Although the Jews resisted Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. See Weiss, *Paradox and the Prophets*, 71.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 8.

science, they could not resist their philosophy. Indeed, they produced the religion of reason, and to the degree that the share of religion in reason brings with it positively the essence of reason, this homogeneity unavoidably demands that religion be connected, if not with science, yet with philosophy. We should not gloss over the fact that the concept of philosophy is changed and distorted if not practiced as scientific philosophy; but the universal character of reason, even if science is excluded, connects religion with philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

For Cohen, the Greeks of antiquity borrowed the sciences from “Oriental peoples,” which they developed and disseminated throughout their vast empire until it became “the common property of all civilized peoples.” He proposes that whenever a people internalizes the truths of science and philosophy, especially scientific philosophy, they can produce a religion of reason from the sources of their own tradition. Even if science has not yet taken root within a given culture, “the universal character of reason” that grounds “universal human consciousness” connects all peoples to philosophy, so in principle, the kernel of the religion of reason abides in all cultures.<sup>6</sup>

The religion of reason is thus presented as both universal *and* culturally contingent, a seeming contradiction at first glance. Cohen’s religion of reason must unfold from the source material of particular religio-cultural traditions because his provisional idea of religion lacks substantive content until it enters into the data of human culture. Cohen states that “the universal human consciousness unfolds in a manifold variety, represented in the consciousness of different peoples” with their “many religions.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the manifold variety of religions are unified by the “universal character of reason.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, the heterogeneity of human culture is conceptually

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 9.

grounded in the homogeneity of universal reason, corresponding to Cohen's concept of "plurality within totality."<sup>9</sup>

Cohen resolves the paradox of "plurality within totality" through his correlated ideas of monotheism and messianic politics<sup>10</sup> Thought to overcome the theological-political heterogeneity of polytheism, the idea of one God introduces (for Cohen) the cosmopolitan notion of one humanity into world history: "Humanity, in its unity, is the analogous concept to the unity of God."<sup>11</sup> On this model, the concept of one, unique God is correlated to the concept of one, united humanity: the unity of God is conceptually analogous to the unity of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

Building on this idea, Cohen maintains that the messianic task of Judaism is to proclaim the idea of monotheism to the nations of the world, and to contribute to actualizing the unification of all peoples in world history (even though, on his view, this unification is never fully realized). For example, he writes that "the *cosmopolitan* idea is expressed even more strongly...[and] the idea of the unification of all the peoples is advanced...when the antagonism of the peoples has been conquered by the messianic idea....Then they will recognize their unity."<sup>13</sup> Holding that monotheism entails the unity of humanity, Cohen argues that the actualization of that unity—the actualization of a condition in which all of humanity recognizes the one God and the morality of which this God is the archetype—is the historical *telos* to which monotheism points, and that this *telos* can thus be understood in messianic terms—as the messianic era envisioned by the Jewish tradition.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 360-61.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20, 37, 215.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 274.

For Cohen, this means that the Jewish people becomes, in effect, a self-consuming artifact whose moral universalism overcomes its national and religious particularism. After all, if the goal of the Jewish people is a condition in which humanity attains the degree of unity outlined above, then the goal of the Jewish people is a condition in which the commitment to monotheism that now marks Jews as distinct becomes the common property of all humanity: in his words, “all nations, even those from the remotest isles, must draw near to Jerusalem,” and “nor must there remain any distinction between the children of Israel and the sons of strange lands.”<sup>14</sup> This also entails, however, that religion cannot be disentangled from politics, for on Cohen’s view, “confederated mankind represents man’s Messianic future.”<sup>15</sup> For Cohen, if the messianic era would involve a humanity united under monotheism and universal morality, then a federation of states would begin to instantiate this unity and can be said to possess messianic significance, offering the beginning of an approximation of the (never-fully attained) unification of messianic times. Politics thus becomes a vehicle toward the unified humanity of the messianic era. In Cohen’s words, “messianism becomes a factor in world history” when nation-states harmonize and “the state matures before our eyes into a confederation of states.”<sup>16</sup> Likening the state to an organism, he holds that the nation-state grows progressively toward the telos of united humanity, “the legal form of which is the federation of states:”<sup>17</sup> federalism is the system of world order that allows for “plurality within totality,” one which “can find no contradiction in the manifold variety of the peoples united in it.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, he claims “the government of the world as the setting of an end [goal] for the world, and the realization of it, in the world, is the meaning

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<sup>14</sup> Cohen, “Religious Postulates,” in *Reason and Hope*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, “The Transcendent God: Archetype of Morality,” 60.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 361.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

and content of monotheism,”<sup>19</sup> and “the government of the world is fulfilled in the messianic Kingdom of God.”<sup>20</sup>

There are, of course, clear differences between Schachter-Shalomi and Cohen. The emphasis on “reason” that we have encountered in Cohen, for example, seems to stand in contrast to the emphasis on mysticism and experience we encountered in Schachter-Shalomi. Similarly, Cohen’s emphasis on the importance of monotheism seems to have little in common with the syncretistic approach advocated by Schachter-Shalomi, according to which all traditions—even non-monotheistic ones—offer universally relevant truths.

Nevertheless, despite their apparent differences, there are striking conceptual affinities between Cohen’s arguments and Schachter-Shalomi’s claims. As we have just seen, for Cohen, establishing the kingdom of God and a united humanity is the messianic task of Judaism and the *raison d’être* of the Jewish people. Likewise, we recall that in the theology of Schachter-Shalomi, Judaism and the Jewish people are distinguished only by a “special and strong *malchut* [kingship]. What is important to us is the kingdom of God and being citizens of that kingdom...We are the people who are preparing for the time when the whole world and all of humankind will see themselves as the kingdom of God.”<sup>21</sup> Just as Cohen understands Judaism and the Jewish people in terms of a messianic task focused on the unity of humanity, so too does Schachter-Shalomi replace the ethnically and racially inflected perspective of a figure such as Halevi with a cosmopolitan and messianic account of Judaism and Jewish communal existence.

Compare, as well, Cohen’s messianic vision with Schachter-Shalomi’s. As we have just seen, Cohen takes a federation of states to begin to instantiate his messianic vision of a united

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 274, 396.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.

<sup>21</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, 162-163.

humanity, insisting that “confederated mankind represents man’s Messianic future.” This resonates strongly with the vision of a messianically significant “World Federation” that we saw Schachter-Shalomi develop in my first chapter. As we learned, Schachter-Shalomi suggests that global federalism is a “common civic framework” based upon “natural law,” an overarching covenant which “makes all sorts of [other] covenants simultaneous and compatible.”<sup>22</sup> As such, a “World Federation” includes the diversity of multiple covenants within its one universal covenant. Likewise, the “organic” political theology of Schachter-Shalomi preserves the particularity of national and religious communities as they are integrated into the body politic of humanity, theorized as a world state organized according to a federalist structure. Schachter-Shalomi writes that “when we look at our planet itself as an organism, we realize that every expression of diversity on this planet is part and parcel of Earth. At the highest level we are all one. But nowhere in nature do we find pure universalism: the universal always expresses itself in the particular. The nations and faiths of the world are the organs of this planet.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, for Schachter-Shalomi, it is crucial to “press for the internationalization of Jerusalem under United Nations (and hopefully World Federation) auspices and move the United Nations headquarters from New York to Jerusalem” precisely because “*a United Nations capital in Jerusalem instead of New York would be a move in the direction of the complete redemption*”—because internationalizing Jerusalem and establishing it as the capital of a genuine world federation would signify a significant leap in the direction of the messianic era.

The affinities between the messianic politics of Cohen and Schachter-Shalomi run still deeper than this conceptual resonance, for Schachter-Shalomi goes so far as to echo some of

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<sup>22</sup> Schachter, “The State of Jewish Belief,” 139; Schachter, “Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*,” 85.

<sup>23</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 184-85.



Cohen's language and scriptural citations. One crucial text here is the "Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*" essay discussed earlier. The background for this piece is the work of one of Schachter-Shalomi's contemporaries, the Jewish thinker Richard Rubenstein. Entitled "Homeland and Holocaust," Rubenstein's essay seeks to take stock of the religious and political predicament in which Jews found themselves after the Holocaust. After the events of World War Two, he argues, "no people has less reason to believe in abstract moral principles, human virtue, or international institutions than do the Jews. *One of the supreme ironies of contemporary religious history is that the people who gave the world the prophetic vision of universal brotherhood and peace must effectively renounce its own heritage if it is to survive.*"<sup>24</sup>

Responding to Rubenstein, Schachter-Shalomi offers distinctly Cohenian reflections. The key lines from Schachter-Shalomi's essay read as follows:

*Jews are responsible not only for themselves but also for goyim [non-Jews]. Their responsibility as the chosen people (chosen to be responsible and to be a kingdom of priests) must work paradoxically to eliminate their own chosenness by delegation of the responsibility to others who will also become God's people—Germans, Arabs, and Russians included.*<sup>25</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi is once again presenting key elements of his messianic politics, imagining a future in which humanity comes together in a federalist structure that preserves the particularity of national and religious communities even as they are integrated into the body politic of humanity: while he does not explicitly use the word "federation" here, the vision is one in which Jews, Germans, Arabs, and Russians come together to form a united "people."

Compare this passage from Schachter-Shalomi to Cohen's essay "Religious Postulates," published in 1907. Cohen writes the following:

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Rubenstein, "Homeland and Holocaust," in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Schachter, "Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*," 81.

Inasmuch as the One God is the God of all mankind, He cannot be the God of only one nation. No matter how limited one's notions of the Messiah—who represents an age, the so-called “days of the Messiah”—one cannot possibly deny that the Messiah for Israel must also be the Messiah for all nations. Along with the Jews, therefore, all nations, even those from the remotest isles, must draw near to Jerusalem. Nor must there remain any distinction between the children of Israel and the sons of strange lands. For the latter, too, will someday become priests and Levites.<sup>26</sup>

Both Schachter-Shalomi and Cohen cast the Jewish people a kingdom of priests charged with the messianic task of total redemption, understood as the creation of a united humanity. More interestingly, Schachter-Shalomi and Cohen make this case in strikingly similar language. Both figures cast the task of the Jewish people to bring about the messianic future as a project in which Jews have so powerfully united humanity that they have, in effect, eliminated important elements of their own distinctiveness. Just as Schachter-Shalomi insists Jews that “must work paradoxically to eliminate their own chosenness,” so too does Cohen stress that Jews must contribute to the erasure of “any distinction between the children of Israel and the sons of strange lands.” Similarly, both figures cast the united humanity toward which Jews should work as one in which all nations serve God and can therefore be understood as modern-day versions of the priests and Levites—groups responsible for divine worship in the Hebrew Bible. Just as Schachter-Shalomi calls for Jews to work toward a future in which “goyim” would also become “priests,” so too does Cohen insist that Jews should seek to bring about a situation in which “the sons of strange lands... someday become priests and Levites.”

Indeed, if we look to other essays by Schachter-Shalomi, we discover that he presents his cosmopolitan vision by echoing some of Cohen's scriptural citations. Cohen's comment in “Religious Postulates” about how “all nations, even those from the remotest isles, must draw

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<sup>26</sup> Cohen, “Religious Postulates,” 47.

near to Jerusalem” may refer, at least in part, to the statements in the book of Isaiah that “all the nations shall flow towards it [Jerusalem]” (Isaiah 2:2) and that “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7). Similarly, Cohen’s remark that non-Jews will “someday become priests and Levites” seems to allude to the statement in Isaiah 66:20-21 that God will eventually take “priests and Levites” from “all the nations.” As we saw in my first chapter, Schachter-Shalomi cites precisely these verses in some of the texts that present his cosmopolitan vision of the messianic era.<sup>27</sup> Consider, for example, his use of Isaiah 66:21 and Isaiah 56:7 at the beginning of his essay “Entering Israel’s Second Yovel,” published in 1998 in order to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the state of Israel:

When our Prophets spoke of the future, they gave us a vision of Zion and Jerusalem that is yet to be fulfilled, saying: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples (Isaiah 56:7)”...[and] “Even from them [the non-Jews] shall I [God] take priests and Levites (Isaiah 66:21).”<sup>28</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi is presenting his vision of the future age by alluding to verses that echo Cohen’s own citations.

Finally, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the fact that Cohen presents his messianic vision as one in which “along with the Jews...all nations, even those from remotest isles, must draw near to Jerusalem.” Cohen’s vision here is a decidedly non-Zionist one: writing well before the establishment of the state of Israel, he rejects the idea of a Jewish state, advancing the claim (among others) that the existence of a Jewish commonwealth would inhibit the Jews from spreading monotheism and bringing about a united humanity.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it is notable that Schachter-Shalomi, too, casts the Middle East as a key location in the production of a united

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<sup>27</sup> See my discussion of Schachter-Shalomi’s use of rabbinic and prophetic sources in chapter 1.

<sup>28</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Entering Israel’s Second Yovel,” 64. See also Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, 229

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, “Religion and Zionism,” in *Reason and Hope*, 171.

humanity. According to his messianic politics, “a United Nations capital in Jerusalem instead of New York would be a move in the direction of the complete redemption.” Moreover, on this vision, the state of Israel should lead the way towards world citizenship, bestowing a portion of its citizen-soldiers to serve in the United Nations peacekeeping force, renouncing their national citizenship to become “world citizens.”<sup>30</sup> Schachter-Shalomi writes that “Israel will become the first ‘no nation’ under United Nations auspices. There is no worthier vocation of the kingdom of servitors and the holy folk than to serve peace.”<sup>31</sup> Just as Cohen’s Jewish people becomes part of a universal humanity, so too do Schachter-Shalomi’s Israeli citizens become world citizens.

#### The German-Jewish History of Schachter-Shalomi

Already, then, we have reasons to suspect a connection between Cohen and Schachter-Shalomi. These suspicions only become stronger when we look beyond the conceptual and textual affinities between our two thinkers and consider Schachter-Shalomi’s biography.

One striking piece of evidence is supplied by Eva Jospe, a major translator and editor of Hermann Cohen’s writings into English. In her preface to the edited volume *Reason and Hope*, a 1971 translation of some of Cohen’s writings on Judaism, Jospe thanks “Zalman Schachter” for his “generous help in locating the sources of several obscure textual references.”<sup>32</sup> The “Zalman Schachter” mentioned here is the same figure who would go on, just a few years later, to add “-Shalomi” to his last name. Before founding Jewish Renewal, it seems, Schachter-Shalomi was involved in the dissemination of Cohen’s writings in North America. Schachter-Shalomi was not simply a thinker who echoed Cohen’s claims and language; rather, he was a thinker who was

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<sup>30</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” 77.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jospe, Preface to *Reason and Hope*, 13.

directly engaged with Cohen's works.

In fact, this collaboration with Jospe was far from the first time that Schachter-Shalomi found himself wrestling with German-Jewish culture and thinkers. On the contrary, if we look at his life before and after arriving in the United States, we discover not only an education steeped in German-Jewish literature, but also encounters with exponents of German-Jewish thought in Europe and America.

Schachter-Shalomi was born in Polish Galicia in 1924.<sup>33</sup> When he was one year old, his family emigrated to Vienna, where his parents were eager to acculturate to Austrian society and spoke exclusively German in the home. Throughout his childhood and adolescence in Vienna, Schachter-Shalomi attended schools where German was the primary language of instruction. He writes that "my parents initially enrolled me in public school instead of a yeshiva. It was their well-meaning attempt to help spur my successful assimilation into wider Austrian society."<sup>34</sup> Schachter-Shalomi recalls that Yiddish was "alien" to him as a young child, such that he had difficulty communicating with his older Yiddish-speaking relatives when they would visit Vienna from Poland.<sup>35</sup>

By fifth grade, after his parents' financial situation stabilized and they could afford the cost of tuition, Schachter-Shalomi was pulled out of public school and placed in the private Dr. Rabbiner Chajes Gymnasium, where secular and Jewish subjects were taught within a "cosmopolitan" and "socialist-Zionist framework."<sup>36</sup> The curriculum included "mathematics and science, Latin and Germanic literature, and modern Hebrew."<sup>37</sup> After the day was over in

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<sup>33</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

*gymnasium*, Schachter-Shalomi attended an Orthodox afternoon Hebrew school. Once again, German-Jewish culture played a significant role in his studies. While he developed an appreciation of German high culture through his formal education, he also was a voracious consumer of German “low” culture, becoming an avid reader of pulp fiction around the time of his *bar mitzvah*, especially the mystery and detective novels of Karl Friedrich May.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, Schachter-Shalomi’s exposure to German-Jewish culture was not limited to his experience as a native German speaker whose formal education took place in Jewish schools where German was the language of instruction, but was also shaped by personal encounters with leading exponents in German-Jewish thought. Already as a teenager in Vienna, for example, Schachter-Shalomi attended the lectures of Isaac Breuer (1883-1946), a prominent leader of German-Jewish neo-Orthodoxy.<sup>39</sup> Born in Papa, Hungary, but raised in Frankfurt, Breuer was the grandson of Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808- 888), a founder of German-Jewish neo-Orthodoxy whose thought was profoundly steeped in the philosophy of Hegel.<sup>40</sup> For his part, Breuer was a rabbi and religious philosopher who adopted a neo-Kantian orientation. He was something of a rarity among neo-Kantian Jewish philosophers during this period: he evinced no attraction to Cohen or the Marburg school, preferring instead to align himself with the rival school of neo-Kantianism based in Baden, led predominantly by non-Jewish thinkers whose work rarely if ever engaged Jewish themes.<sup>41</sup>

Looking back on his adolescent intellectual pursuits, Schachter-Shalomi writes that “I was especially influenced by [Breuer’s] apologia titled *The World as Creation and as Nature*, for

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir*, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Alan L. Mittleman, *Between Kant and Kabbalah: An Introduction to Isaac Breuer’s Philosophy of Judaism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

it successfully seemed to defend traditional faith against the onslaught of science.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, this influence seems to have been significant enough that Schachter-Shalomi would later encourage others to study the German-Jewish thinker. In a conversation with me, Alan Mittleman—the author of the definitive book-length treatment of Breuer’s philosophy available in English<sup>43</sup>—related how he chose to write a doctoral dissertation, and later a book, on Breuer after a throwaway comment made by Schachter(-Shalomi) in Philadelphia during the late 1970s. Then a professor of Judaic Studies at Temple University, Schachter(-Shalomi) described Breuer as an important German-Jewish philosopher who had so far been neglected in Anglophone scholarship, and suggested that Mittleman, who was a doctoral student at Temple, ought to consider writing his dissertation on his thought.

Moreover, Schachter-Shalomi’s encounters with exponents of German-Jewish thought continued after he arrived in North America. In his autobiography, Schachter-Shalomi speaks of his friendship with Stephen Schwarzschild (1924-1989), a leading scholar of Hermann Cohen and German-Jewish rationalism. Schwarzschild was born in Frankfurt (the same year as Schachter-Shalomi) but raised in Berlin. Like Schachter-Shalomi, he fled Europe as a teenager for the United States and would go on to earn a doctorate from Hebrew Union College (the flagship seminary of the Reform movement). Schwarzschild “presents himself as a disciple of Hermann Cohen,”<sup>44</sup> writing influential works such as an introductory essay for the English edition of *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*.<sup>45</sup> And yet he was also close to Schachter-Shalomi, who wrote in his memoirs that “during the early 1960s, I became friendly

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<sup>42</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Mittleman, *Between Kant and Kabbalah*.

<sup>44</sup> Menachem Kellner, “Introduction,” in Steven Schwarzschild, *The Pursuit of the Ideal: Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzschild*, ed. Kellner (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 8

<sup>45</sup> See Schwarzschild, “Introductory Essay for the Second Edition.”

with Stephen Schwarzschild, who lived in Fargo, North Dakota. He had a European background like mine, and though our temperaments were rather different, we shared quite a bit in common intellectually and spiritually.”<sup>46</sup> One of Schachter-Shalomi’s key interlocutors was also one of Cohen’s philosophical heirs.

### The Heir of German-Jewish Rationalism

I began by highlighting the striking conceptual and textual affinities between Cohen and Schachter-Shalomi. I then showed that Schachter-Shalomi was involved in the dissemination of Cohen’s thought for English-speaking audiences, and that German-Jewish culture played a formative role in Schachter-Shalomi’s own life. Unless the foregoing textual, historical, and philosophical evidence is just a set of extraordinary coincidences, we are left with the conclusion that Schachter-Shalomi may have been influenced by Cohen and his German-Jewish rationalism. Engaged with Cohen’s writings and steeped in German-Jewish culture, Schachter-Shalomi may have found in his predecessor a constellation of concepts and language that he imported into his own writings: a vision of a Jewish people defined by its messianic task, a notion of a messianic age understood in federalist terms, and language and scriptural citations that could be deployed to express these ideas.

Yet even as Schachter-Shalomi may be appropriating crucial ideas from Cohen, he also reimagines them. In particular, while he seems to be taking up key elements of Cohenian rationalism, he also seems to be doing so in the midst of historical circumstances that differed from the towering sage of Marburg. In 1914, on the eve of World War I, Cohen could speak of his cosmopolitan vision for humanity with optimism, saying “we are confident, too, that it will

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<sup>46</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir*, 201.



be possible to restrain those alarming elemental forces which manifest themselves in the hostilities and conflicts of nations and impede their progress toward mankind's goal."<sup>47</sup> Even while writing *Religion of Reason* during World War I, in view of numerous circulating proposals for what would eventually become the League of Nations, Cohen earnestly believed that messianic history was unfolding "before our eyes."<sup>48</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, on the other hand, was a Jewish thinker working after the shocking manifestation of "those alarming elemental forces," including events, such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima, which undermined faith in the rational progress of humanity. The repeated eruption of world war during the twentieth century, accompanied by unprecedented forms of mechanized violence, appeared to issue the strongest possible refutation to cosmopolitan ideals. It became increasingly difficult to defend the "progress" of humanity. Were the nations of the world progressing toward the goal of a united humanity, or were they simply progressing toward a more technologically sophisticated barbarism?

Jewish proponents of cosmopolitanism were particularly embattled. The "German-Jewish symbiosis" that Cohen famously embodied was dealt a tragic blow with the Holocaust. Having once served as a model for Jewish citizenship on the European continent, the cosmopolitanism of liberal German Jewry became a cautionary tale for future travelers on the road to united humanity. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Rubenstein embodies this new form of skepticism toward universal ethics after the Holocaust: "*One of the supreme ironies of contemporary religious history is that the people who gave the world the prophetic vision of universal brotherhood and peace must effectively renounce its own heritage if it is to survive.*"<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cohen, "The Transcendent God: Archetype of Morality," 61.

<sup>48</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 361.

<sup>49</sup> Rubenstein, "Homeland and Holocaust," 50.

In light of these developments, Schachter-Shalomi's messianic politics can be understood as an attempt to maintain the type of cosmopolitanism present in Cohen, but to do so in a way that attends to human conflict and barbarism. As we saw, Schachter-Shalomi emphasizes the enduring possibility of violence even in his federalist vision, assuming the need for a United Nations peacekeeping force in Jerusalem and providing guidelines for how this force should be constituted: as we saw, he recommends that all soldiers serving in the United Nations peacekeeping force in Jerusalem be required to renounce their national citizenship and become "world citizens,"<sup>50</sup> and he calls on the state of Israel to bestow a portion of its citizen-soldiers to serve in this United Nations peacekeeping force.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, he attends to the limits of the quasi-federalist bodies around him, lamenting that "the United Nations is today not the instrument it could have become then"<sup>52</sup> and shifting his focus from global to regional federalism.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in presenting his vision of a cosmopolitan future, he offers examples that force his readers to confront the reality of human conflict. Writing in May 1967, Schachter-Shalomi names particular ethnic-national groups—"Germans, Arabs, and Russians"—who must also be included in the Jewish vision of messianic humanity.<sup>54</sup> In view of the Holocaust and the Cold War, as well as the simmering tensions in Israel-Palestine leading up to the Six Day War, Schachter-Shalomi seems to be naming the three most visible adversaries of Jews in the United States and Israel as precisely those groups who must also be included within the elect of God. As utopian as Schachter-Shalomi's vision may seem, then, it is a vision that reimagines Cohen with an eye toward experiences of violence and conflict.

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<sup>50</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, "Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption," 77.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Introductory Note to Ibid., 75.

<sup>53</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, "Entering Israel's Second Yovel," 66.

<sup>54</sup> Schachter, "Commentary on *Homeland and Holocaust*," 81.

Consider, as well, the issue of Zionism. Cohen died in 1918 and lived in a world where any hopes for a modern Jewish state could be readily dismissed as the folly of madmen and misguided youth. He confidently asserts that there is “a dividing wall between our Messianic Judaism and Zionism.”<sup>55</sup> He turned to biblical prophets for validation: ““And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples, As dew from the Lord’ (from Micah 5:6). The establishment of a state of our own is incompatible with the Messianic concept and with Israel’s mission.”<sup>56</sup> Cohen objects to Zionism in both philosophical and religious terms: if Jews are charged with the messianic task of uniting the nations of the world under the banner of humanity, how could they bring about such a unification within the garrisoned walls of a nation-state in the Middle East?

Schachter-Shalomi, however, turns to Cohen from the standpoint of a world where a Jewish state was an indisputable fact of history. Apprehending that fact, Schachter-Shalomi reworks Cohen’s anti-Zionist universalist messianism into a universalist messianism that is compatible with Zionism. As we saw in chapter one, he takes his messianic vision to be one in which an internationalized, federalized “Jerusalem would be surrounded by Israeli territory,” and in which “the currency of Israel would be hardened, employment increased, and security guaranteed.”<sup>57</sup> Schachter-Shalomi may thus appropriate Cohenian messianic federalism, but he also reimagines it for a world in which the state of Israel is an established fact rather an unlikely aspiration. The founder of Jewish Renewal, we might say, may be a descendant of Cohen—if not a legitimate heir, then at least an enfant terrible.

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<sup>55</sup> Cohen, “Religion and Zionism,” 171.

<sup>56</sup> Cohen, “Religious Postulates,” 48.

<sup>57</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, “Jerusalem and the Complete Redemption,” 78.

## CONCLUSION

The first chapter of my thesis laid the groundwork for establishing the possibility of a philosophical and historical relationship between Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's New Age Judaism and German-Jewish rationalism. I surveyed the works of Schachter-Shalomi, reconstructing key elements of his theology with an emphasis on what I describe as his "messianic politics," an ethically and politically inflected vision of the telos of world history. Given the Hasidic background and training of Schachter-Shalomi, I began with a preliminary overview of Hasidism, focusing on texts including a collection of discourses attributed to the Maggid of Mezritch and a central treatise of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement authored by Shneur Zalman of Liadi. I then turned to the "first wave" of neo-Hasidism, reviewing the quasi-socialist readings of Hasidism found in the work of I.L. Peretz and Hillel Zeitlin, as well as the existentialist interpretation of Hasidism by Martin Buber. Against this backdrop, I proceeded to offer an in-depth treatment of the "second wave" of neo-Hasidism championed in the work of Schachter-Shalomi. After addressing his "experience-based" approach to religion, I looked beyond his emphasis on "inner experience" and considered its political and ethical implications, highlighting the move toward regional and global federalism which stands at the heart of Schachter-Shalomi's messianic politics while noting relevant biblical and rabbinic precedents along the way. Lastly, I unpacked the American context of Schachter-Shalomi's thought, noting the link between his New Age Judaism and Jamesian pragmatism that has been identified in the recent scholarship of Shaul Magid, and I considered the possibility that James may constitute one source for Schachter-Shalomi's federalist vision.

In the second chapter, I looked beyond Schachter-Shalomi's American context to examine another potential antecedent for his thought: the work of Hermann Cohen. Drawing on a

wide range of conceptual, textual, and historical evidence, I suggested that Schachter-Shalomi may be appropriating Cohenian rationalism for the purposes of his New Age Judaism. Specifically, by offering a close side-by-side reading of Schachter-Shalomi and Cohen, supplying hitherto unnoticed evidence that Schachter-Shalomi was involved in the dissemination of Cohen's writings in North America, and considering the formative role of German-Jewish culture in his own life, I argued that the messianic idea inherited from Cohen's "religion of reason" may serve as an indispensable foundation for the ethico-political program of New Age Judaism. Finally, after demonstrating that Schachter-Shalomi can be understood as a thinker who is deeply rooted in the German-Jewish intellectual tradition, I looked to the ways he creatively reimagines that same tradition, especially in light of the radical challenges posed by historical events such as the Holocaust and the creation of a Jewish state.

Where does this leave us? Taking a step back, my thesis offers a reassessment of an influential figure in American Judaism, while also gesturing toward broader implications for a variety of debates. As we saw in my introduction, the historical accounts of Jewish counterculture offered by Ariel and Kaplan, no less than the philosophical reconstruction of New Age Judaism undertaken by Magid, emphasize the distinctly American character of Schachter-Shalomi's work. By contrast, I am calling for a significantly more nuanced and complex understanding of the intellectual genealogy of Schachter-Shalomi and New Age Judaism in North America by calling attention to the possibility that his New Age Jewish thought has important yet overlooked roots in German-Jewish rationalism. To be sure, I acknowledge that there are crucial American dimensions to his thought: as I argued in the first chapter, aspects of Schachter-Shalomi's "experience-based" approach can be productively understood in terms of Jamesian pragmatism. But this is only part of the story. On my reading, the intellectual

genealogy of Schachter-Shalomi and his New Age Judaism is like so many other contemporary American-Jewish genealogies, having more recent American branches and older European roots. We should, I would argue, speak simultaneously of the German-Jewish rationalism and American pragmatism of Schachter-Shalomi.

It seems to me that my analysis may have broader implications, as well. As we saw in the introduction, the critical analyses of Garb and Huss hold that the various forms of Judaism associated with the New Age movement are best understood as religious expressions of “postmodernism,” irrational and mystical trends which signal the decline of the “rationalist narrative” in the modern period. My reading of Schachter-Shalomi as a New Age thinker deeply engaged with the philosophical tradition of rationalism challenges this view, so prevalent within Jewish studies, that there is a strong opposition between rationalism and New Age Judaism. As we saw, a scholar such as Garb suggests that Jewish Renewal’s apparent emphasis on mysticism over rationalism reflects “the erosion of the rationalist narrative” in the “postmodernist era,” that is, a rejection of a view of human history emphasizing the triumph of rational objectivity in favor of a newfound emphasis on inner experience and subjectivity. Garb writes that “the erosion of the rationalist narrative facilitated the emergence of a variety of religious phenomena that did not obey the dictates of rationality,” namely “a vast and eclectic range of mystical, magical, and mythical trends” embraced by the New Age movement, all of which “have become a significant feature of contemporary global culture.”<sup>1</sup> Yet throughout his career as an exponent of neo-Hasidism and New Age Judaism, Schachter-Shalomi accepts and revises Cohen’s rationalist telos of world history. That is, with regard to Schachter-Shalomi’s messianic politics, New Age Judaism does not seem to represent a decline of a rationalist metanarrative, but rather,

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<sup>1</sup> Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*, 100-101; see also Huss, “The New Age of Kabbalah,” 119.

recapitulates and refigures some of its key elements.

To be sure, as I noted in my first chapter, Schachter-Shalomi was first and foremost a poetic thinker. While he echoes argumentation and logic of Cohen's rationalism, he does not seek to reproduce Cohen's method in his own writings. Rather, he appropriates elements of rationalism for his imaginative interpretation of the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, I propose that Schachter-Shalomi's theology might be said to occupy a place within what Robert Erlewine has called the "religion of reason trajectory" of modern religious thought. Erlewine defines this "religion of reason trajectory" as "the attempt to reconfigure [Abrahamic monotheisms] and rationalize the basic structure of the monotheistic worldview" with an eye toward ameliorating the intolerance often generated by a commitment to concepts such as election, an intellectual project inaugurated in the modern period by Moses Mendelssohn and subsequently developed by Kant and Cohen.<sup>2</sup> Schachter-Shalomi's project of appropriating Cohenian rationalism in service of a cosmopolitan future, while also grounding his work in classical Jewish sources, seems to resonate with this project. Indeed, Schachter-Shalomi emphasizes the concept of natural religion—the concept of a set of religious truths universally accessible to all individuals solely on the basis of rational reflection—in a variety of works. For example, acknowledging the dimensions of "natural religion" in his mature theology in *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, Schachter-Shalomi writes that "for many years, I agreed with those who said that natural religion, the religion we attain through observation and intellect, is lower and that revealed religion is higher. Now, I find myself more in agreement with those who say what is so special about Torah is how well it reflects natural religion."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Schachter-Shalomi explicitly

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<sup>2</sup> Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, 111.

names Maimonides's philosophical *magnum opus*, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, as an antecedent for his *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*.<sup>4</sup> At the very least, then, a more robust understanding of the relationship between rationalist thought and New Age Judaism stands as a desideratum for Jewish studies in the academy.

Indeed, I would suggest that my thesis regarding the possibility of a Cohenian, rationalist element of New Age Judaism may have implications that extend beyond the fields of Jewish studies and religious studies. In particular, I would propose that the picture of Schachter-Shalomi developed here may gesture toward the work of thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, a German critical theorist and public intellectual widely regarded as the leader of the second generation of the Frankfurt School. In a now-famous debate with the postmodernist Lyotard, Habermas defends what he takes to be the ethico-political project of the Enlightenment against the trenchant critiques of postmodernism. Habermas acknowledges that the grand narratives of modernity have fallen into disrepute and that the monumental works produced by modernism have largely disintegrated.<sup>5</sup> Yet rather than perceive this historical failure as a cue to abandon the goals of modernity or the "Enlightenment narrative," he sees the urgent need for a return to what he describes as the unfinished "project of modernity," that is, the pursuit of a rationally organized society based upon the universalistic foundations of law and morality.<sup>6</sup> He rejects the notion that the catastrophes and barbarism of the twentieth century prove that the Enlightenment quest for "universal ethics and morality" is a lost cause, and he seeks to learn from the "mistakes of those extravagant programs which have attempted to negate modernity."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2, 110, 292.

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," 42.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," 11-13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9, 11.



Building on Habermas, I would suggest that Schachter-Shalomi's work, understood as a reimagining of Cohenian rationalism, might offer one potential path forward for restoring and pursuing this Enlightenment project.<sup>8</sup> When the edifice of modernity crumbled after the catastrophic violence of the twentieth century, and the faith in the "progress" of humanity was destroyed, Schachter-Shalomi returned to the ruins, determined to rebuild. He dreams of a better world, and—citing another famous dreamer, Theodor Herzl, who said, "if you will it, it is no dream"—proclaims "may we see it in our day."<sup>9</sup> In Schachter-Shalomi's turn to his German-Jewish past, perhaps we have a vision relevant for our future.

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is interesting to note that in an argument that converges with Habermas, Andrea Poma writes that "reference to Cohen in postmodern culture is possible...It is a question of rediscovering the tradition of modernity," a philosophical tradition that Cohen referred to as "rationalism." See Andrea Poma, *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen's Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 352.

<sup>9</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, "Entering Israel's Second Yovel" *Tikkun* (April 1998), 67.

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