

Introduction

Holy Doubt: On the Utility of Uncertainty in the Faithful Life

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I've been thinking about doubt for a very long time. Ages ago, back when I was in college, I very proudly wrote a senior thesis for the philosophy and religion departments, humbly titled: "Making Difficulties Everywhere: Objective Uncertainty in [Kierkegaard's] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*." I was obsessed with uncertainty — with the ways that it destabilizes, undermines, undoes one's sense of security or wholeness. And the ways that it compromises faith, renders it shaky, toothless. But Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish existential philosopher (1813–1855), approached doubt in an altogether novel way and I was deeply compelled by his orientation. For Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, doubt or "objective uncertainty" is not the antithesis of faith.¹ On the contrary. It is actually constitutive of it. "If I want to keep myself in faith, I *must* continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty," he wrote in 1846.² One does not cognitively arrive *at* faith via rational certainty, he argued, but lives *in* faith precisely in the throes of uncertainty. Faith is not an epistemological project, but a relational one based on an awareness of the limits of epistemology. To be in faith, for him, is to be in a relationship with God that is predicated upon the continual awareness that one cannot know God.

"Objective uncertainty," on Kierkegaard's scheme, is rooted in the recognition that I cannot know with certainty (1) that God exists; (2) that God existed in time (a crucial doctrine for the Christian believer that he was); or (3) that

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Translated and edited by Howard V. Wong and Edna H. Wong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

2. *Ibid.*, 204.

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either propositions 1 or 2 should actually matter or personally implicate me at all. Given these severe limitations on human understanding, Kierkegaard's assertion that uncertainty is not just descriptive of faith, but a requirement of it is perplexing. How could that which seems to undermine faith effectively bring it about? How could the unknowability of God foster and feed a relationship with God? Kierkegaard argued that one must continuously "hold fast" the objective uncertainty, that it may never, indeed ought never, be overcome in faith. How can faith be conceptualized such that doubt is a constitutive, even nourishing, part of it?

I want to share with you some of my journey into these questions since those heady college days — a journey that took me from existential philosophy deep into the heart of Hasidism, a Jewish mystical movement that predated Kierkegaard and yet echoes some of the same concerns with doubt and holiness, faithlessness and faithfulness. My focus will be on the dialectic between faith and doubt, as articulated by three Hasidic thinkers, but I hope along the way to offer a glimpse into an often overlooked thread of Jewish thought and practice that is existentially alive, spiritually rich, and deeply resonant, I believe, for the contemporary seeker.

Let us begin with a *midrash* from Midrash Tanchuma (Ki Tissa). Regarding the grand revelation at Sinai, the Torah reports that Moshe stood on top of the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights (Ex. 24:38). The *midrash* asks, "How could there have been night, or darkness, in the presence of God? Wasn't it all light all the time?" The *midrash* answers rather cryptically that "40 days" refers to the Written Law and "40 nights" refers to the Oral Law. Interpreted literally, this would mean that during the day, God dictated to Moshe the words of the Torah, what would become The Five Books of Moses. And during the night, God dictated the seemingly less holy books of the Mishna and Gemara. But there's a deeper metaphor here and a broader statement about the nature of Torah, or spirituality, broadly construed.

The Jewish tradition offers at least two paths: Torah of the day and Torah of the night. Torah of the day is bright and clear. It contains the word of God, presumably from on high, received and embraced by people. It seems to come with its own authority and its own veracity. It presents itself as the unambiguous dictates of the unmistakable God... But then there's Torah of the night, the rest of the story. Not the words dictated by God to people, but the words that people have used over time to try to find their way through the fog toward divinity, toward clarity. This Torah is not clear and it is not clean. It is

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muddied, blurry, ambiguous, miss-able. It's where doubt reigns, where questions and uncomfortable uncertainties reside. Yet this too was at Sinai, the *midrash* indicates. This laborious, sometimes clumsy, process of grappling in the dark for truths has its roots in the holy of holies. This too is how revelation unfolds. Perhaps we toggle between day and night. Or perhaps we live predominantly on either side of the divide. But this *midrash* asserts that both clarity and unclarity, certainty and uncertainty comprise revelation itself.

I've always been drawn to the Torah of the Night and I have found its greatest expression in the works of Hasidism, a tradition that grapples explicitly with the underside of being human, that asks how one might seek light, God, and truth not in spite of, but in and through, the muck of life — through love and loss, exhilaration and alienation, vitality and numbness, conviction and resistance.

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We begin at the beginning, with the founder of Hasidism, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, better known as the Baal Shem Tov (or Besht), the Master of the Good Name. Living in Ukraine, from 1698–1760, the Besht was known as a healer and mystic. He believed in a highly democratic model for divine encounter — or *devekut* — available to anyone, anywhere, through just about any means. Most importantly for our purposes, the Baal Shem Tov believed that every part of every person ought to be used in the service of God, and that means even, or precisely, those parts that we often wish to discard or ignore in pursuing loftier ends. *Machshavot zarot*, literally “foreign ideas” — or distracting ideas, ideas that take one away from God — were to him both necessary and providential. They contribute to the fullness of a person's humanity and can actually be used as tools for spiritual development. Referencing Noah's ark that contained so much diversity, he argued that *everything* belongs on the arks of our lives. Every word, every letter, every thought, every feeling has a place. Even doubt. Even distraction. We need leave nothing behind if we are to have integrity and authenticity as our guides.³

3. See *Tzavaat HaRiVaSh*, 75.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslav (1772–1810)

The grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, born in 1772 and dubbed by Professor Art Green “the Tormented Master,” truly developed a Torah of the Night on the varieties and contours of doubt, and the ways that one might make use of it in the course of a faithful life. A primary site for this exploration is *Likkutei MoHaRaN*, chapter 64.

First, some preliminary kabbalistic concepts:

1. *Tzimtzum* (self-contraction) — According to Kabbalah, the first act of creation was Divine self-contraction. God had to step back in order to make space for finitude in the midst of God’s infinitude. The space left over from the contraction is what’s called the *challal hapanuy*, the vacant space or void. Into that void, the world was born.
2. *Shevirat ha’kelim* (the breaking of the vessels) — In the process of creation, too much Divine light was channeled into the material vessels of the world and they shattered. The result is that sparks of light were distributed amidst the shards, and hence there was “a sort of divinization of the material created order” (152).⁴

Rebbe Nachman uses the kabbalistic notions of *tzimtzum* and the resultant Void not just as a myth of origins, but as a metaphor for a deep paradox at the heart of the world. The paradox, as he understands it, is the following: God’s presence is necessary for creation itself to take place. But God’s absence is necessary for creation to be maintained. There couldn’t be a world full of God and there can’t be a world absent of God. This paradox of absence and presence anchors Rebbe Nachman’s treatment of doubt.

He begins by distinguishing between forms of doubt, or what he calls “*apikorsut*” (a word that is often translated as misbeliefs or heresies but is better understood in context as doubts).

The first kind of doubt is that which stems from *shevirat ha’kelim*, the breaking of the vessels. The root of this image is overabundance, too much God-presence, or Godliness gone haywire. This form of misbelief reflects mischanneled divinity, divinity that has overflowed from its legitimate expression into illegitimate forms and thus destabilizes one’s hold on truth. Any form of

4. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “Speech, Silence, Song: Epistemology and Theodicy in a Teaching of R. Nahman of Breslav.” *Philosophia* 30, 143–187 (2003), p.152.

competing religious belief, or any wisdom that does not negate Divine reality, but rather presents it through an alternative system, would be viewed as an expression of this type of challenge. Examples he offers include witchcraft and idolatry. I wonder if, in modern parlance, scientific data might fit in this category as well. All point to God, for Rebbe Nachman, but in and through means that appear alien, confounding, or undermining of faith.

To the challenges that arise from these places, there are answers to be found, he argues. They might not be easy, but they are available, since the divine spark, the reality of God or at least of mystery, is still maintained in these philosophies. It just needs to be interrogated and reordered. Speech, which lies at the root of the biblical notion of creation, is still an avenue that is open. The letters must just be re-sequenced, so to speak, to bring these uncertainties into alignment with already-accepted notions of truth.

But there is a second category of doubt for Rebbe Nachman and it is one which stems from the *challal hapanuy*, the Void, that mythical place from which God has withdrawn. As Professor Shaul Magid points out, this is not the problem of the absence of divine presence, but the presence of divine absence. That is, not that I feel distant from God, but that I feel God's nonexistence. Magid writes: "The anguish and anxiety that permeated [Rebbe Nachman's] life as well as his discourse suggested that his experiences were not of the absence of God's presence, but the presence of God's absence; the void is not a lacuna between the two dimensions of God, but the possibility of the nonexistence of the transcendent God, which makes the immanent God an illusion" (Magid 503).⁵

What kinds of questions are grounded in the Void? Any doubt concerning the existence of God; Any doubt concerning the creation vs. eternity of the world; The problem of theodicy or evil; And finally, since for Rebbe Nachman the goal of creation was "the manifestation of Divine compassion, anything that offers contrary indication might also be viewed as stemming from the vacant space."⁶

Of the emotional experience of the *challal hapanuy*, Rebbe Nachman writes:

"Inside of the Void, there is heavyheartedness [*kevedut lev*]... because one

5. Shaul Magid, "Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Nahman of Bratzlav's *Likkutei MoHaRaN*," *The Harvard Theological Review* (October 1995), p.503.

6. Goshen-Gottstein, p. 159.

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stays in utter perplexity regarding God, and one cannot find God, as God has removed God's divinity from there in order to enable creation to exist" (LM 64:6). The experience of the Void is total depression. One has fallen into a Godless pit and there is no easy way out.

How might one respond to a question from the Void? In the words of Alon Goshen-Gottstein: "...no question can be answered that is grounded in the vacant space. There is no possibility of overcoming *consciously* the paradox of God's simultaneous existence and non-existence. There is no way of giving verbal articulation, and hence of thinking, in a field in which there is no speech, since it antedates the linguistic creative process."⁷ The kabbalistic myth of self-contraction all happens before God speaks the world into being. The Void is thus a pre-linguistic space, not accessible to rational thought or language itself. Its doubts can be traversed, but *they cannot be linguistically resolved*. Indeed, Rebbe Nachman points to God's response to Moshe in the Talmud, in Tractate Menachot 29b, when God is confronted by Moshe's own theodical doubts as he witnesses the great sage Rabbi Akiva flayed alive. Moshe asks, "*zo Torah v'zo sechara?*" This is the Torah and this [torture] is its reward? How could that be? God responds: "*Shtok. Kach ala bamachshava.*" Be silent. So it arose in my mind.

For Rebbe Nachman, silence is everything. Silence is the response to the Void. It is not the negation of speech, but a transcendence of thought into a higher state of being. "*Kach ala bamachshava.*" This is how you raise your consciousness, says God. In the words of Goshen-Gottstein, "Moses is [thus] told that there is no way of reasonably answering the enigma presented by R. Akiva's fate. The only thing to do is to rise to a higher state of consciousness that transcends speech, and therefore the conscious articulation of the problem. This ascent of consciousness is not an avoidance of the question. Rather it is an ascent to its metaphysical root of being. The question can be tackled — not answered — only on the level of being, and not on the level of thought".⁸

This pregnant silence is itself a kind of faith. A faith that crosses over the Void but does not flatten it. A faith that incorporates the Void, without violating it, without answering it, without running away from it. It's a faith that honors the ways in which doubt is itself constitutive of creation itself. It's

7. Ibid., p. 158.

8. Ibid., p. 165.

embedded in the very fabric of the universe. It's foundational to our myth of existence. Indeed, the Void at the heart of doubt is also the very life-force that enables the world to come into being. Our creativity, generativity, productivity all rest on the paradox that is the *challal hapanuy*.

For Rebbe Nachman, Jews, known as *ivrim*, have a unique capacity *la'avor* — to pass over the Void. We're known as a rather talkative bunch, and yet we are endowed with a legacy of deep silence, of an ability to sit with uncertainty. We might do this through *shtika* (quiet) or, says Reb Nachman, we might do this through *niggun*, through wordless song, for it too is meta-linguistic or supra-rational. We can sometimes find our way to other side of irresolvable doubts by singing our way there.

In sum, again I quote Goshen-Gottstein: "When detached from its cosmological and kabbalistic moorings, R. Nachman still offers us a teaching. It is a teaching that admits the impossibility of adequate intellectual solutions to fundamental religious paradoxes. It is a teaching that speaks of being, rather than thinking. Most of all, it is a teaching that speaks of process. For it is only through the transformation of consciousness and the gradual entry into the mode of being that is attained through faith that one can discover another way of being, that does not provide answers to the deepest questions of human existence, and yet in its own way is itself their answer."⁹

This is Torah of the Night. It is a theology and a cosmology and an anthropology that makes room for the fullness of the complicated human experience. It is an orientation toward faith that does not whitewash doubt, but instead lifts it to center of the faithful life. To contend with God and to contend with the world demands that one contend with the paradox, the void, the unintelligible parts of life that render us speechless. And we need not respond to all of that with more and more words, or more and more easy answers. We don't have to explain it all away. Because we can't explain it all away. We can sit silently or sing softly, as we behold and make space for that which flouts language and defies thought. The willingness to own those realities (as supra-rational phenomena) and to live with them gently: that is Rebbe Nachman's gift of faith.

9. Ibid., p. 176.

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (1801–1854)

Rebbe Nachman died in 1810 in Uman, Ukraine. In 1801, another Hasidic Rebbe was born in Izbica/Izbitz, Poland, who would go on to found a dynasty of his own, the Izhbitzer-Radziner dynasty. This was Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, a student of the great Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859). He would become known for, and as, his most famous work of Hasidism called the *Mei HaShiloah* (translated as *The Living Waters*). As we further our exploration of holy doubt, I'd like to share with you another paradigm offered by this Izhbitzer Rebbe.

The first of the Ten Commandments reads as follows:

אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:

“I am the Lord your God who took you out from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.” (Exodus 20:2)

God introduces Godself to the Jewish people at Sinai as the one who redeemed them from slavery. The *Mei HaShiloach* points out poignantly that in doing so, God used a particular form of the word “I” — *Anochi*, in place of the more conventional *Ani*. He writes:

The text does not say “*Ani*,” for if it had done so, it would have suggested that the Holy Blessed One revealed all of His light to Israel, in its fullness, and that thereafter they would not have been able to go deeper in His words, for He had already revealed everything. Thus the [letter] *kaf* [separating *ani* from *anochi* — ed.] teaches that it was not in its fullness, but rather an image, a likeness, of the light that God will reveal in the future. (*Sefer ha-Zemanim* 19f.)

What lies between the words *anochi* and *ani* — both meaning I — is one small Hebrew letter, *kaf*... but what an important letter it is! *Kaf*, or the sound *ki* or *chi*, is a prefix in Hebrew, meaning ‘like,’ or ‘as if.’ Just adding that one letter before any word changes its meaning from the thing in itself to *like* the thing itself. So in introducing Godself in this way, at the moment of greatest intimacy, says the Izhbitzer, God was actually communicating to the people only a likeness of God. *Ki-ani*, or *kmo-ani*. It’s *as if* God revealed Godself, when in fact there was only partial disclosure.

Indeed it seems that this tiny, crucial gap between *ani* and *anochi* was itself

the revelation. At the very moment when God seems most close, most unmistakably clear, the *kaf* comes to halt us from certainty, to stave off unchecked access. Alas, we cannot know the *ani*, the selfhood, the essence of God. We must always stand at a remove (as the Jews did at the foot of Mount Sinai). We must always contend with ambiguity and uncertainty. To be in an honest relationship with God is to truly understand that one cannot be in an unmediated, unclouded, uncompromised relationship.

Perhaps it is for this reason that when Moshe approaches God — Moshe who is identified by the Torah as the human being with the most access to God — we are told in Exodus 20:18:

וַיַּעֲמֹד הָעָם מֵרָחֹק וּמֹשֶׁה נָגַשׁ אֶל־הָעֲרָפֶל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים:

...Moshe approached the thick cloud where God was.

To truly encounter God at Sinai, Moshe had to enter the *arafel*, the fog, the place without flashing lights and crashing sounds. The place of cloudiness, maybe even a little darkness. Maybe in the absence of seeing, space opened up for more authentic vision. Moshe entered the fog because “*sham ha'Elokim*,” there God could be found, in the in-between space, in the domain of opacity, of uncertainty, in the blurry space of not fully knowing and not fully seeing.

The Ishbitzer Rebbe makes clear that this *arafel* reflects both a truth about God and a necessity of spiritual growth. God gifted us with the mists of misunderstanding so that we might “go deeper in His words.” Through incomplete revelation, human beings are left to disclose and disclose some more, ever-searching for greater understanding and greater intimacy. But that search will always be asymptotic. For only *Anochi*, or *ki-ani*, may be found on the other side.

Contemporary rabbi (and Maharat teacher) R. Herzl Hefter calls this “The Theological Uncertainty Principle.” He writes:

Total comprehension of the Divine leaves no room for human development and is a distortion of the revelation. This is because God and [God's] Will are infinite and we mortals are finite with limited capacity to understand. Insisting upon perfect knowledge of God and [God's] Will is necessarily idolatrous in that the “perfect perception,” at the end of the day, turns out to be but a projection of ourselves. We will be guilty of creating God in our own image....

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He continues:

The ramifications of the Ishbica¹⁰ approach are monumental on both the individual-religious and national-narrative planes. On the individual-religious plane, prior to this approach we [might have] equated certainty and steadfast faith as being more “religious”. In fact, according to the “Theological Uncertainty Principle” of the Mei HaShiloah [and R. Ya’akov Leiner] the exact opposite is true. Uncertainty is an essential part of the God-created spiritual topography which we inhabit. It is precisely in the landscape of uncertainty where we develop as religious beings.

On the national-narrative level, Ishbica teaches us that a system with pretensions to explain all in the most certain terms must be naïve and ignorant of the complex and constantly changing world in which we live. The Theological Uncertainty Principle renders a Jewish tradition not obsessed with reconstructing eras of perceived perfection, [but] rather engaged in the constantly changing present with its infinite possibilities and surprises. But even more importantly, the uncertainty principle provides an opening for authentic humility and a more profound faith in God.¹¹

Here we have yet another compelling Torah of the Night that anchors uncertainty at the root of faith. Revelation is but an intimation of a God who can only be known through a cloud “as if.” And so doubt is actually, in a sense, correct theology. It is also humble practice that bolsters spiritual growth. Uncertainty then is not something to be overcome. It is not even something to be traversed a la Rebbe Nachman. As Kierkegaard said, we must actively, willfully “hold fast to the objective uncertainty” if we are to abjure idolatry and embrace the holy *Anochi*.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943)

There is one final Hasidic rebbe to present, a more contemporary figure dear

10. An alternative spelling of Izbica/Ishbitz.

11. See <http://www.har-el.org/2014/06/02/i-am-the-lord-your-god-thoughts-about-divine-revelation-for-shavuot-rabbi-herzl-hefter/>.

to my heart, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczko, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto. Born in Grodzisk, Poland in 1889 and executed by the Nazis in 1943 in the Trawnicki labor camp, Rabbi Shapira, or The Piaseczner Rebbe, led his community of Hasidim through some of the darkest hours of modern Jewish history. Despite or maybe because of the increasing threats around him, as he lost his entire family to the Holocaust, he continued to teach and preach amidst the horror of the Holocaust. He collected his weekly wartime sermons (from 1939–1942) — which he titled “Torah Novellae from the Years of Fury” (*Chidushei Torah m’shtot ha’zaam*) — and buried them in a milk can before he was deported. They were found in the rubble of the ghetto after the war by a Polish construction worker and later printed in Israel (in 1960) as *Esh Kodesh*, or *Sacred Fire*. This Rebbe surely knew a thing or two about doubt. His whole book, in fact, could be read as one long, varied meditation on the nature of doubt (and suffering) and how to live with it. I will share just one small teaching, a teaching that, like the Ishbitzer’s, hinges on that one Hebrew letter, *kaf*.

This teaching is dated April 13, 1940, on the occasion of the Torah portion of Metzora from the book of Vayikrah read on that Sabbath. Metzora concerns some rather obscure, arcane, arguably bizarre material, detailing laws around *tzaraat*, usually translated as leprosy. This ailment could apparently strike not only human bodies, but also garments and homes. The Torah is quite concerned with the sins that give rise to these conditions and the states of impurity that result from them. Priests (*Kohanim*) would need to be deployed to purify afflicted subjects. Rabbi Shapira’s interest was in *tzaraat ha’bayit*, leprosy of the home.

The Torah states in Vayikra 14:33–35:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְכֶם לְאֶחְזָה וְנִתְתִּי נֹגַע צְרָעַת בְּבַיִת אֶרֶץ אֲחֵזְתֶּכֶם: וּבָא אֲשֶׁר-לּוֹ הַבַּיִת וְהִגִּיד לַכֹּהֵן כִּנְגַע נֹרָאָה לִי בַבַּיִת:

33 The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 34 When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you possess, 35 the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, “Something like a plague has appeared upon my house.” [“*ki’negah nir’ah li ba’bayit*”].

Upon entering the Land of Israel, the Israelites were destined to experience this phenomenon of afflicted homes. The language of verse 34 is subtly prescriptive to this effect. It refers not to a situation that *might* arise in response

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to human behavior, as the other cases of *tzaraat* indicate, but to one that will arise, seemingly regardless. “When you to come to the land,” says God, “I [will] place a lesion.”

Picking up on this surprising prescription, Rashi offers the following *midrashic* explanation (from *Vayikrah Rabbah* 17:6):

“And I place a lesion of *tzaraat*.” This is [good] news for them that lesions of *tzaraat* will come upon them, because the Amorites had hidden away treasures of gold inside the walls of their houses during the entire forty years that the Israelites were in the desert, and through these lesions, [the priest] will demolish the house and find them. (Rashi on Lev. 14:34)

In contrast to the other forms of *tzaraat* that announce the presence of sin, *tzaraat ha-bayit* actually announces blessing. The homes that the Israelites would come to inhabit were treasure troves, says Rashi, filled with the riches of their previous inhabitants lodged deep in their walls. The hidden goods would only be revealed through the destruction that *tzaraat ha-bayit* demanded. Hence its presence was a “*besorah tova*,” a great tiding, offered by God to the Jewish people.

To clarify, regarding this form of leprosy, the journey from diagnosis of impurity to purification involved many steps. First, an individual who suspected that his or her home was afflicted would report to the priest: “*ki’negah nir’ah li ba’bayit*” “Something like a lesion has appeared to me in the house” (Lev. 14:35). Then, after clearing out the home to avoid contamination of its objects, the priest would come to ascertain its status. If indeed it appeared to contain *tzaraat*, he would quarantine the house for 7 days. After this week, he would assess the spread of the affliction. If it had continued to spread, all stones affected would be removed and replaced. Then another 7 day waiting-period would be observed, after which the priest would return. If he observed further spread of the *tzaraat*, then the entire house would be demolished. All of this would be followed by a sacrificial purification process.

The Piaseczner Rebbe raised a compelling question about this elaborate destructive process. If it’s so clear, as per Rashi, that what appears to be an affliction is actually a blessing in disguise, why such a complicated and elongated procedure to arrive at its revelation? Why not just tear down the walls immediately and expose the riches hidden within?

The Rebbe answers: Because even when something is “*l’tovah*” (for the

best), even when it will reveal itself over time as an occasion for opening or healing or clarity, we must still pause to really honor the uncertainty and the pain that that so often inflicts. No matter how many explanations we might come to have to make the disorientation “worth it”; no matter how many ways we might have to retrospectively redeem or recontextualize that which unsettles, in the here-and-now it just hurts. It is just anguish or inconvenience or isolation or confusion. So for seven days we hold that. And then some. We suspend speculation about the meaning of things. We resist resolution. And we just sit *shiva* for the loss and the insecurity that comes from that. We mourn for the ways in which we’ve been uprooted. We breathe, cry, just pause. And then, only then, might we be prepared to reveal the blessings that lay hidden deeply (sometimes very deeply) inside of such experiences.

The Piaseczner concludes:

And so the law states: A person must say, “Something like a lesion has appeared to me in the house” (Lev. 14:35). *Ki’negah nirah li*. Even if he is a scholar and knows the exact definition of a leprous mark, he must still use the phrase “like a lesion” — for, as we said above, a person is never able to tell whether what is happening to him is a [blessed] challenge or a [meaningless] injury. All he can say is that it looks like an affliction. Even if the truth, as the Torah announces, is that what God is doing with us is for the good of Israel. (*Esh Kodesh*, Metzora 1940)

A person locked in his or her own hardship or doubt or confounding disappointment can never really know what lays on the other side of it. The Torah does not ask us to leapfrog over that pain or to explain it away, but rather to sit with it and wait. The treasures behind the walls will likely come, says the Rebbe, but only with time and a little bit of breaking down.

Here we have one final Torah of the Night, contending not just with intellectual doubt, but with deep existential pain. Pain that comes not from propositional uncertainty, but from lived experience that testifies to abandonment, destruction, loss. The image is one of homelessness, total vulnerability. And the Piaseczner’s reponse is to just hold it there. *Ki’negah. Ki*. I can’t ever fully know God and I can’t ever fully know my fate, so the faithful stance opens up space to pause and to sit with the raw reality of irresolution.

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Keren IV

Here we have three Hasidic thinkers — Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, and Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno. Three approaches to holy doubt. Three Torahs of the Night. For Reb Nachman, doubt is embedded in the very fabric of the universe and is in fact essential for its maintenance. To be in faith is to contend with the Void, not by overcoming it, but by traversing it through silence or song. For the Izbitzer Rebbe, uncertainty is just correct theology. I cannot know the “*ani*” of God. I can only know the “*anochi*,” the *ke-ani*, the likeness of God. So to be in a place of doubt is to be in a place of honesty and ripe for spiritual growth. Finally, for the Piaseczner Rebbe, the stakes of doubt are not only theology, but psychic wholeness. How can I live with searing doubt, even when it compromises the ground beneath my feet, the shelter above my head? How can I engage existentially with the uncertainties that break me?, he asks. And he answers with a “*kaf*.” By pausing to honor all that is unknown and making space for the pain that that uncertainty sometimes yields.

These are but three voices from a majestic Hasidic tradition, a tradition marked by unvarnished honesty, attention to human complexity, embrace of grit and grace. It is a spiritual orientation that welcomes embodiment, values vulnerability, celebrates fallibility, and sees authenticity in ambiguity. It embraces a rich Torah of the Night.

The journal that you have before you continues in this tradition. Using the varied frames of textual exegesis, theology, and *halakhic* inquiry, our writers, all graduates of Yeshivat Maharat, each grapple, in their own ways, with the tensions — the creative, beautiful, and sometimes painful tensions — that arise when the Torah of the Day meets the questions of the night. Enjoy the journey into the *arafel* (fog).