

## Article

# “God Has Wrapped Himself in a Cloak of Materialism”: Marxism and Jewish Religious Thought in the Early Soviet Union

Isaac Slater 

Institute for Jewish Philosophy and Religion, Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS), Universität Hamburg, 20355 Hamburg, Germany; tsachisl@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Jewish religious life in the Soviet Union is typically the subject of dichotomous depictions that offer only a superficial rendering of this rich and complex environment. This paper aims to complicate this image by pointing out several religious thinkers who engaged with Communist and Marxist ideas and incorporated them into their religious thought, while upholding rabbinic culture. Among the figures and themes examined are Alter Hilewitz’s (1906–1994) Hasido-Marxism, Rabbi Avraham Yosef Guttman’s (1870–1940) crisis of faith, and Shmuel Alexandrov’s (1865–1941) use of Russian Nietzscheanism. Alexandrov was also the narrator who revealed these fascinating ideas to us in a rare collection of his letters, which possesses both a philosophical and a theological nature. These letters, which have received very little attention in previous studies, provide a small window into the conflictual world of rabbis and yeshiva students in the first decade of the Soviet Union. Reviewing the ideas generated in a struggle to make sense of one of the great crises of modern Judaism, and pondering questions of historical perspective and how empathy may distort it, this article wishes to go beyond the image of a defensive preservation of religious life and to re-envision this unique and innovative period of Jewish thought.

**Keywords:** modern Jewish thought; The Soviet Union; Evsektsiia; Kabbalah; Marxism; Communism; Shmuel Alexandrov; Alter Hilewitz; Avraham Yosef Guttman; Russian Nietzscheanism



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## 1. Introduction

Jewish religious life under the Soviet regime is often described using the language of heroic action, and deservedly so. Given the harsh measures that the regime took against traditional institutions and the constant threat of being labelled a “counter-revolutionary activist”, with all its social and economic consequences, the efforts made to maintain religious beliefs and practices are certainly worthy of admiration.<sup>1</sup> However, this heroic portrayal is prone to dichotomous depictions that offer only a superficial rendering of this rich and complex environment. People and ideas that do not fit the polarized depiction were often labelled as confused, or even as traitors to the cause by one camp or the other, or else outright forgotten (For example, see [Gershuni 1961](#), pp. 109–10, 126–31). This paper will focus on these individuals, who were caught on the margins and strove to define their identity in these complex circumstances. More specifically, it will focus on several religious thinkers who, while upholding rabbinic culture, engaged with Communist and Marxist ideas and incorporated them into their religious thought. Throughout the ages, rabbinic scholars used theology and religious philosophy as an important tool through which to interpret the world and historical events. In such times of crisis, of such a breakdown of traditional everyday life, this rabbinic language expressed the doubts and inquiries of those who tried to navigate and overcome that rupture. As illustrated throughout this paper, the drama of the 1920s Soviet Union led to a unique period of Jewish thought, in which unusual ideas were generated in a struggle to make sense of one the great crises of modern Judaism.

The hardship of Jewish religious life under the Soviet regime is well documented. Numerous studies have shown the gradual suppression of communities, the persecution of rabbis, cantors, sacramental slaughterers, and other religious functionaries, as well as the underground system of yeshivot and organizations operating in various ways which attempted to maintain religious life and customs against all odds (Rothenberg 1971; Gershuni 1961; Greenbaum 1988; Pinkus 1986, among others). What this picture is missing are the struggles that took place in the minds and souls of religious Jews at the time, the conflicts that accompanied the emotional strain of trying to maintain a forbidden identity. We know that such conflicts took place from known cases of rabbis who became Communists and harshly condemned their previous identity; when we consider the discrepancies in the times when different communal rabbis decided to resign from their positions, often leaving their old community altogether and migrating to a new place; and also when we consider how many students at underground yeshivot also studied at academic institutions and frequently visited Yiddish libraries and workers clubs.<sup>2</sup> This gap is especially striking when compared to the recent studies on Yiddish Soviet culture that have illustrated the conflictual journey of creating a modern secular culture that would undermine rabbinic culture, yet still wished to maintain certain Jewish attributes, and which was fascinated with the “old” culture, while trying to overcome it.<sup>3</sup>

So far, no such survey has been conducted regarding the Soviet rabbinic culture, and for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, very few published materials or public debates have survived from this persecuted culture thanks to the Soviet regime’s decades-long efforts to suppress them. That is not to say that Yiddish and Soviet intellectuals did not suffer at the hands of the regime, which was certainly the case during Stalin’s purges. However, during the 1920s, those secular intellectuals were able to publicly debate the nature of their Jewish culture, while their religious counterparts convened behind locked doors. Nevertheless, some studies have gathered the existing rabbinic materials, and this is where the aforementioned dichotomous depiction comes into play. Those studies have emphasized the ends of the spectrum—marked as the “young” secular Soviet-Yiddish culture on the one end, and the struggle to maintain the “old” rabbinic culture on the other—such that these two aspects are rarely brought into conversation with each other.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will focus on what happened in between these two poles and will examine the thought and ideas of people who took part in preserving the traditional rabbinic culture, yet also engaged with Marxist ideas. These voices are rarely heard, both because we lack the relevant sources from that period, and also because some of these individuals concealed the unorthodox ideas of their youth later in their lives.<sup>5</sup> These untold stories discussed below have been unearthed in a rare collection of letters that made it out of the early Soviet Union (meaning before the great purge of the 1930s), letters written by the maverick thinker Shmuel Alexandrov (1865–1941). Alexandrov is a fascinating figure who placed a high value on letters, especially his own. After the 1917 revolution, he lived in the Soviet Republic of Belarus and emerged as a figure to whom communal rabbis and yeshiva students turned with their philosophical queries.<sup>6</sup>

Previous research has identified Alexandrov’s letters and has described Alexandrov himself as a rare example of an attempt to reconcile the philosophies of rabbinic Judaism and historical materialism.<sup>7</sup> However, these studies focused on a few selected paragraphs, whereas a review of the full body of Alexandrov’s letters makes that claim highly problematic. Alexandrov rejected Marxism as a whole on several occasions, both before and after the revolution, while the segments that were perceived as supporting Marxism can and should be read as a historical theodicy that aimed to explain the divine plan behind the breakdown of religious culture, as will be explained in the fifth part of this paper. From that perspective, segments claiming that “God has wrapped himself in a cloak of materialism [ . . . ] behold, there are days which are coming in which the eyes of man will be opened to see the divine kernel which lies hidden in this process” (Alexandrov 1932, p. 73) are not affirming materialism itself, but rather God’s plan to bring about an age of universal religious belief from the depth of heresy.<sup>8</sup> As will be outlined later, the only kind

of Marxism that Alexandrov used as a philosophical source of inspiration was that of the Marxist “God-Builders.” What his letters do convey—a point that has been missed by previous studies—are his correspondents’ attitudes, which ranged from acknowledging some of the Communists’ claims to enthusiastically trying to reconcile Kabbalah and dialectical materialism, as we will soon see.

Unfortunately, we do not possess any complete letter that Alexandrov received during the Soviet period, but only the letters that he sent in response, which sometimes contain quotes from the letters he received, or convey some of the recipients’ worldviews. Alexandrov wanted to publish these letters, all of which were written between 1926 and 1929, and copied them into two notebooks that he then sent to Palestine. One of the notebooks was published as the third volume of his collected letters, titled *Mikhtavei Mekhkar Uvikoret* (Letters of Inquiry and Critique, (Alexandrov 1932)), while the other notebook was never published and remains in manuscript form (Alexandrov 1931). Taken together, the two volumes present a rare glimpse of a lively debate regarding the future of Judaism, in a period when this future was very much up in the air.

After this introduction, the second part of this paper will present a short historical survey in order to set the stage for the intellectual and moral challenges to be discussed later on. The discussion in part three will then turn to Shmuel Alexandrov and his notion of a spiritual rabbinate, an idea he presented to communal rabbis who turned to him for advice. This notion positions Alexandrov as a key person in a complex environment, where his efforts to give new life to the rabbinic institutions are accompanied by harsh criticism of the very establishment he wished to protect. That criticism echoes Communist claims regarding the deceptive nature of the clergy, a source of influence to which Alexandrov explicitly admits. The fourth part of the article will focus on the world of the young Alter Hilewitz, who had a heated correspondence with Alexandrov during 1926, when he was a student at an underground yeshiva and at the Belarusian State University. This part will dive into Hilewitz’s conflictual world and will focus on his notion of seeing Marxist philosophy and Habad theology as two sides of the same coin. The fifth part of the article will deal with Alexandrov’s correspondence with Rabbi Avraham Yosef Guttman, and the surprising suggestions he provided in an attempt to find a remedy for Guttman’s heretical ideas. This part will examine Alexandrov’s historical explanation of how materialism can help to bring about an age of belief, and also the way he integrates Russian Orthodox philosophy with a stream of Russian Marxist thinkers in order to formulate a new kind of Jewish religiosity. The conclusion will reconsider the historical perspective from which we tend to analyze this short and turbulent period and the intersection of Communist Marxism and Jewish religious thought, what a non-dichotomous depiction of such ideas might look like, and how this may affect future research.

## 2. Historical Background

As Eliyahu Stern has recently shown, the 1870s brought new life to the intellectual world of Eastern European Jewry, as different strands of materialism made their way through the Jewish press and public debates. Some of the intellectuals involved in these debates supported Marxist ideas, but by no means all or even most of them. For others, the material perspective was a way to rethink the everyday Jewish condition, and eventually, even Jewish identity (Stern 2018).<sup>9</sup> Though Stern focuses on the way in which this trend affected Jewish communities in the US and Palestine, Jewish materialism was no less apparent in its birthplace in Eastern Europe, where Zionists, autonomists, and Marxists struggled to win the support of the Jewish population. This struggle manifested itself in a Jewish cultural renaissance during the Russian revolution, which found itself reduced to a politicized Jewish-Soviet culture in the years following the revolution. As documented in a ground-breaking study by Kenneth Moss (Moss 2009), in the years after the October revolution, the diverse body of Jewish culturists had to grapple with party politics, and eventually, only those abiding by the cultural agenda of the Soviet state were able to continue to mold the new secular Jewish culture.

At the very same time, Jewish religious life under the newly formed USSR went through radical social and cultural changes. The Soviet regimes gradually abolished all religious educational systems, prohibited the operation of institutions such as *hadarim* or *yeshivot*, and encouraged the confiscation of synagogues and traditional learning halls for the benefit of the proletariat. The nationalization of industry, commercial businesses, and the healthcare and education systems gave the new regimes full control over citizens' access to employment, education, and healthcare services. Religious functionaries who continued to serve their communities were labelled anti-revolutionary activists and faced harsh limitations in access to different civil services (See [Shternshis 2006](#), pp. 14–21; [Gitelman 1972](#), pp. 298–318; [Sloin 2017](#), pp. 128–33).

Having said that, the dramatic changes brought about by the Soviet regimes did not erase hundreds of years of Jewish religious life in the blink of an eye. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the authorities claimed that they would uphold individual religious freedoms and enable every citizen to choose whether she or he would keep practicing their religious beliefs as long as they were not trying to convince others of these “misgivings.” Many major synagogues were confiscated, but most of the small ones continued to hold services. Some received the authorities' approval, while others operated as private initiatives, sometimes holding services in people's private homes ([Gitelman 1972](#), pp. 304–12; [Rothenberg 1971](#), pp. 170–80; [Bemporad 2013](#), pp. 114–19; [Gershuni 1961](#), pp. 56–65). The autonomous Jewish taxation of kosher meat helped to fund communal services such as butchers, cantors, and communal rabbis ([Bemporad 2013](#), pp. 119–30). However, as the years went by, Soviet propaganda and persecution took their toll, and religious communities grew smaller and older ([Gitelman 1972](#), pp. 314–15).

After an adjustment period, some communities developed an underground education system comprised of illegal *hadarim* and *yeshivot* operating in synagogues and private homes. The biggest and most successful of these systems was established in Belarusian cities, chief among them the capital city of Minsk, whose underground *yeshivot* attracted students from across the USSR. Students in the underground education system and members of societies such as *Tiferes Bahurim* (The Glory of Youth) included workers and university students, who lived doubled lives while grappling with two contested Jewish cultures. Minsk, for example, was not only one of the centers of rabbinic culture in the USSR, but also one of the centers of a young secular Yiddish culture that enjoyed the support of the Soviet regime. As part of the policy of “national form and Soviet content”, Yiddish was selected as the language of the Jewish masses, and in Soviet Belarus it was second only to Belarusian. The regime's support of this project was ambivalent from the start, as any kind of local or national creation was a potential source of “bourgeoisie ideology.” The members of the Belarusian Jewish section of the Communist Party, or *Evseksiia*, were previously members of the now-dismantled Bund, and were therefore under constant suspicion. The *Evseksiia* was responsible for most of the sanctions against Jewish religious figures and institutions, a struggle that was interlaced with the expansion of Yiddish culture. Confiscated *yeshiva* halls were turned into Yiddish schools and academies, while synagogues became workers clubs and theatres, where the younger generation was able to enjoy the new secular Jewish culture ([Bemporad 2013](#), pp. 51–111; [Sloin 2017](#), pp. 164–77; [Gitelman 1972](#), pp. 321–40; [Altshuler 1980](#), pp. 209–21).

While some of the contributors to the new secular culture abandoned the “old” rabbinic culture without looking back, others were more conflicted with regard to the place of tradition in the new cultural identity. Several Yiddish poets, while celebrating the dawn of a new, modern Jewish culture, were nevertheless ambivalent towards the obliteration of the traditional culture as the source of Jewish particularism ([Shneer 2004](#)). This ambivalence accompanied the Yiddish renaissance in some capacity, until its tragic end during the 1930s. A similar ambivalence can also be traced in the rabbinic culture of the time. Though most of the rabbinic efforts were dedicated to trying to preserve the traditional culture, rabbis and *yeshiva* students were not immune to the intellectual and cultural changes of the time. Both Marxist philosophy and Soviet propaganda broke through the cracks of



the traditional armor. Rabbis asked themselves whether holding on to their position was morally justified, and yeshiva students raised questions regarding Marxism's presumably "Jewish" nature. Some of these queries stand at the center of Alexandrov's letters, as rabbis and yeshiva students turned to him hoping to find relief for their crisis of faith.

### 3. Shmuel Alexandrov and the "Spiritual Rabbinate"

Shmuel Alexandrov (1865–1941), a graduate of the Volozhin Yeshiva, was born in Borisov, in present-day Belarus, and lived most of his life in the nearby city of Bobruisk. Alexandrov joined the religious Zionist Hamizrahi party shortly after its inception, but unlike other Zionist intellectuals of the time, he stayed in Eastern Europe through the twists and turns of time until the bitter end, when he was murdered by the Nazis in the Bobruisk ghetto. Though he kept his allegiances with both Zionism and rabbinic Judaism throughout his life, his ideas deviated considerably from both establishments. Following the ideas of Ahad Ha'am, Alexandrov criticized Herzlian Zionism for downplaying the cultural aspects of Jewish nationalism in favor of a focus on state-building. For Alexandrov, Zionism signified the start of a cultural revolution, as he predicted that the Jewish system of religious commandments would be abolished, giving way to a spontaneous ethics that was not governed by rules. In his eyes, both of these notions were part of a new and better understanding of the divine, revealed in the human conscience and shared by all nations alike (Luz 1981; Slater 2016a).

After most of his early articles went mostly unnoticed, Alexandrov turned to publishing philosophical letters, which makes his writings less systematic, but more illuminating historically, as his ideas were articulated in a discourse with other thinkers. He published three volumes of such letters, titled *Mikhtavei Mekhkar Uvikoret*, including letters to Avraham Yitzhak Kook (1865–1935), Ahad Ha'am (Asher Zvi Ginsberg, 1856–1927), Mikha Yosef Berdyczewski (1865–1921), and Moše Leib Lilienblum (1843–1910). The third volume, which was published in Jerusalem in 1932, contains letters from the late 1920s sent to various communal rabbis from Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Belarus. Before the revolution, Alexandrov's letters expressed harsh criticism of the mainstream rabbinic establishment, dubbing it too conservative and corrupt to handle the challenges of the time (Alexandrov 1907, pp. 14–16; 1910, pp. 36–38). This criticism continued after the revolution, when Alexandrov attacked the conservative fixation with religious commandments that benefited the rabbinic establishment financially (such as Mikvaot and certain standards of kosher meat), dubbing it "more materialist than the Communists" (Alexandrov 1932, pp. 77–78). As he was well known for his unusual stances, rabbis and yeshiva students who turned to Alexandrov expected unusual answers, which might explain the radical nature of these letters.

While the letters in manuscript were sent to various recipients, the letters that appeared in print in the third volume of *Mikhtavei Mekhkar Uvikoret* were intended for only three communal rabbis: Rabbi Avraham Yosef Guttman (1870–1940), Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Krasilschikov (1888–1965), and Rabbi Zeev Wolf Palay (born 1869).<sup>10</sup> All three turned to Alexandrov with queries as to what a religious leader should focus on in these trying times, the divine purpose in such a radical breakdown of traditional life, and even whether there was any point at all in continuing to hold a rabbinic position, considering the dwindling community and the high personal toll that the rabbi and his family had to endure. Following the line of his pre-revolutionary writings, Alexandrov advised his colleges not to lecture about halakha observance, but rather about Judaism's lasting values and ethics. Only this, he claimed, could stand in the face of Soviet propaganda. Only this could serve as the foundation for a new kind of rabbinate, a spiritual rabbinate.

The apparatus of the spiritual rabbinate is detailed in one of Alexandrov's letters to R. Krasilschikov, and is composed of two complementary stages (See Alexandrov 1932, pp. 77–78). The first is negative in essence, and is aimed at exposing the lies of the current rabbinic institution. For Alexandrov, only public condemnation of rabbinic injustices could regain the public's trust and convince them that Alexandrov and his peers would

not manipulate their flock for material gain. Alexandrov put this idea into action in his sermons during Shabbat services, in which he harshly attacked “those impudent dogs, the guardians of practical religion who are far from any sense of true belief. Only because of them has religion deteriorated, as everyone can see how these holy mice strive only to collect their breadcrumbs” (Alexandrov 1932, p. 85). This kind of criticism of the traditional rabbinate is directly borrowed from the arsenal of Soviet propaganda, as Alexandrov himself noted in another letter to Krasilshchikov:

The more I contemplate the spiritual condition of our people in this day and age, the more I realize that the Marxist perspective is right in explaining historical developments as products of class struggle for their economic wellbeing. That can explain how communal leaders, who have no godliness and love of the Torah in their hearts, are appealing to the masses’ orthodoxy in order to preserve their economic and material condition. (Alexandrov 1932, p. 64)<sup>11</sup>

The second stage of the apparatus is the countering motion: reclaiming the Jewish religion as something centered around belief, ethics, and righteousness, rather than institutions, and delivering that message to the public. If there was to be any hope of turning back the tide of secularization and fighting Soviet propaganda, Alexandrov claimed, it would be necessary to modernize and reshape the core of the Jewish religion. For him, the Soviet persecution actually presented a rare opportunity in that regard, as the war it had declared on rabbinic Judaism could clear the way for a new Jewish religious culture to emerge. The new culture would be built around a new theology, a theology that would not deny the break with old religious customs and beliefs, but rather aspire to create new ones from the ruins of the old.

Even though Alexandrov spoke about the need to revolutionize Judaism long before the 1917 revolution, he never put forward a coherent and systematic religious philosophy to serve as the foundation for such a change. Even in his later writings, he only established general guidelines, some of which are discussed below. One of the major points regards something that would not be a part of that new Judaism: the practical commandments. In Alexandrov’s view, one only needed to look around to realize that halakhic Judaism was already gone: there was no reason to think it would ever re-establish itself, and no point in trying to do so. This did not mean that religious Judaism should be abolished, but rather that it should change to focus around ethics and beliefs instead of around a strict set of rules. This is how Alexandrov puts it in a letter to R. Krasilschikov:

Practical Judaism will not be able to go back to what it was, simply because it is almost depleted [ . . . ] have our eyes darkened to see that from the sole of the foot unto the head there is no soundness in it? But spiritual Judaism is God created and eternal, and it is that Judaism that we should fight for. (Alexandrov 1932, pp. 75–76)

Needless to say, this reliance on the present condition is problematic, as Jewish beliefs and ethics were usually abandoned along with halakhic customs.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Alexandrov believed that this “spiritual Judaism” was eternal, and that its traces could be recognized even in the unlikeliest of places. When Rabbi Guttman lamented the efforts to revive Judaism as trying to resuscitate a dead man, Alexandrov answered that the Jewish identity lived on and could be identified in “the fight for a Jewish language” (Alexandrov 1932, p. 7). The language to which he referred was not Hebrew, but Yiddish, the language of the Jewish Soviets who were at the forefront of fighting the rabbinic establishment. Even so, Alexandrov claimed that “as long as their language is Jewish and not foreign, they are still in the realm of Judaism”.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Alter Hilewitz’s Hasido-Marxism

Even stronger sympathies towards Marxist ideology can be found in another series of Alexandrov’s letters, one that was addressed to Alter Hilewitz (1906–1994), then a student at an underground yeshiva and the Belarusian State University.<sup>14</sup> Raised in a Hasidic

family, Hilewitz was later renowned as a rabbinic historian of Jewish law. However, this was not until after he had left the Soviet Union for Palestine. Beforehand, he was a young student who sought to combine Habad dialectic theology with Marxist philosophy. In his memoir, Hilewitz writes that the 1920s was a period of double secrecy in his life. On the one hand, he concealed his studies at the yeshiva and his activities in the *Tiferes Bahurim* movement from the authorities, while on the other, he hid “a different kind of meetings” (Hilewitz 1981, p. 10) from his family and fellow yeshiva students. A key person in those meetings was the Yiddish poet Izy (Yisrael) Kharik (1899–1939), one of the prominent Yiddish poets of that time and a leading figure in the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia in Belarus.<sup>15</sup> Kharik’s poetry is characterized by an ambivalence towards the Jewish past. On the one hand, this past appears repulsive, as something that should be completely abandoned in order to create a modern Soviet society; on the other, it was also the source of every Jewish tradition and identity, and the destruction of that identity entailed human and cultural tragedies.

Kharik grew up and operated in the Belarusian city of Zembin, Hilewitz’s hometown, and was actively recruiting Jewish youth to the Communist Youth Union (*Коммунистический Союз Молодёжи*), known as the Komsomol. Hilewitz described the tension created by Kharik’s pressure on him as follows: “It was a tremendous struggle, which I fought almost with no support. Frustration almost overcame me as I wrestled the different identities that sought to capture my soul” (Hilewitz 1981, p. 9). Another influence on young Hilewitz was that of Nikolai Michaelovich Nikolski (1877–1959), one of the founders of the department of ancient and medieval history at the Belarusian State University and a scholar who laid the foundations of religious studies in the USSR.<sup>16</sup> Nikolski, who applied the Marxist-Leninist method to ancient near-east religions, convinced Hilewitz to enroll in the department of Jewish studies at the university, where he was one of only a few non-Jewish teachers. During Hilewitz’s studies, which he completed successfully, he probably met another teacher in the same department: Hillel Alexandrov (1890–1972), Shmuel’s son, though he is not mentioned in the surviving fragments of Hilewitz’s correspondence with his father.<sup>17</sup>

We do not know much about the ideas that Hilewitz developed following the meetings with Kharik and his academic studies. Both his memoir and Alexandrov’s letters mention articles that Hilewitz wrote at that time, which in Alexandrov’s view exposed Hilewitz as an “absolute heretic” (Alexandrov 1931, p. 24). However, those articles were never published and it is difficult to rely on Alexandrov’s testimony on that matter, as I will explain below. At the same time, Hilewitz also strengthened his ties to Habad, was a central activist in several underground religious organizations (which caused him to be arrested multiple times), and even travelled to Leningrad to meet Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880–1950), Habad’s spiritual leader at the time (Hilewitz 1981, pp. 9–12). Whatever the case may be, when he left Belarus in 1936, Hilewitz left his “heretical” writings and beliefs behind him. He settled down in Palestine, where he taught in several yeshivas and contributed to Meir Bar-Ilan’s *Talmudic Encyclopedia*. His magnum opus, *Hikerei Zemanim* (1977–1991), is an examination of the origins of Jewish holidays and is accompanied by short reviews highlighting the author’s connection to Habad Hasidism. It seems that from this tangle of identities, Hilewitz chose to preserve just one: that of a rabbinic scholar of the history of Jewish law, who followed the spiritual leadership of Habad.

We may never fully understand Hilewitz’s notion of combining Hasidism and Marxism, as we do not have any of his writings from the 1920s. All we have are Shmuel Alexandrov’s letters to him, letters that contain fragments where Alexandrov is quoting parts of Hilewitz’s letters. Alexandrov often quoted segments of letters he received and then commented on them, which was his way of maintaining a philosophical conversation. We know from his other correspondence that he did not misquote or misrepresent his recipients, which would of course have been pointless in any case, as the recipients would have known what they had written. This is all to say that we can trust the fragments that Alexandrov quotes from Hilewitz’s letters, while keeping in mind that they are not necessarily the

parts that Hilewitz considered to be the focal points of his argument, but rather those that Alexandrov believed to be the most thought-provoking (or infuriating). As we lack any supporting information regarding Hilewitz's worldview in these years, the most we can hope to recover is Hilewitz's image as Alexandrov saw it, an image that went through twists and turns in the short period of the only five letters that have survived.

Initially, Alexandrov saw Hilewitz as a simple heretic, as mentioned above; but after several twists and turns, he concluded that he was merely a hypocrite, a man who constantly changed identities: sometimes he was "red", meaning a Marxist, and sometimes "black", that is to say a devoted orthodox Jew, all according to the needs of a specific time and place. Confronted by what he saw as shrewd hypocrisy, Alexandrov aborted the correspondence. It is likely that what Alexandrov perceived as hypocrisy was not a result of opportunism, but rather a genuine wandering through different identities, and a sincere attempt at reconciling them on Hilewitz's part. This attempt is evident in a fragment from the first letter that we have, where Hilewitz tries to convince Alexandrov of the need to integrate Marx's philosophy with traditional rabbinic Judaism, writing the following:

By now, Judaism has expanded and in its essence it can no longer limit itself to an abstract ideal that floats in the world of *Atzilut* and takes no substantial form in physical reality; like its Creator, it must manifest itself even in physical reality. Why would we seek to undermine the foundations of historical materialism, if it is indeed a Jewish phenomenon? (Alexandrov 1931, p. 13)

For Hilewitz, *Atzilut*, the highest and most spiritual of the four worlds according to Lurianic Kabbalah, represents traditional Judaism's seclusion from the realms of politics, social activism, and matter itself. However, following the same Kabbalistic sources, he claims that God resides not only in the spirituality of *Atzilut*, but also in the physical realm of *Assiah*, the lowest and most mundane of the four worlds.<sup>18</sup> As we will soon see, this is a key element of Hilewitz's monism: physical reality is just as divine as spiritual ideals, and any attempt to differentiate between the two is indicative of a limited, narrow understanding. Just like God Himself, Judaism should transcend this differentiation, accept historical materialism as a Jewish, even religious philosophy, and adopt practical Marxism as God's work in the social and physical spheres.

In both its ideals and its practice, Hilewitz claimed, Judaism is a tool of progress, as it is constantly destroying old cultures and building new ones. "Is it not very telling", he wrote to Alexandrov, "that the foundations of Idealism are Jewish, that the founder of mechanistic philosophy was Jewish (Spinoza), and the founder of Historical Materialism was also Jewish (Karl Marx); can we not see in it a connection to pure Judaism that from time to time appears on the historical stage with new ideas?" (Alexandrov 1931, p. 13; parentheses in original). As we have already seen, Alexandrov himself was no stranger to this idea, but the two diverged dramatically with regard to what new culture should be built next. Hilewitz sought a Marxist Judaism that was not necessarily secular, but a fabric woven from materialism and religiosity, a mixture evident in many short passages that Alexandrov quotes from Hilewitz's letters. These passages convey the notion that Kabbalistic theology and Marxist philosophy are but two sides of Judaism, whose power derives from its being a monistic philosophy that combines spirit and matter and in which no part of reality, whether the mundane or the sublime, is excluded from or reduced by it.

Nineteenth-century thinkers such as Aaron Shmuel Liberman (1845–1880) and Elia Benamozegh (1823–1900) had already tied Kabbalah to Marxist and universalistic aspirations, and twentieth-century Jewish thought expanded on this trend when thinkers such as Avraham Yitzhak Kook (1865–1935), Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1954), Leon Askenazi (1922–1996), and many others claimed Kabbalah as the centerpiece of their Jewish politics. Ashlag, in particular, is famous for promoting "altruistic Communism" through a new understanding of the Lurianic corpus,<sup>19</sup> and like him, it is no accident that Hilewitz likewise used Kabbalistic language to defend historical materialism. For him, historical materialism took the Hasidic worldview of Habad to its logical conclusion: if God is indeed one, if his presence is everywhere and in everything, then there is no difference between stating that "every-



thing is spirit” or “everything is matter”; it is all but one substance which manifests itself in every part of reality.

Hilewitz felt deeply connected to that substance and that he could not limit himself to preferring one side of reality over the other. When Alexandrov wrote to him that the improbable conjunction of Kabbalah and Marxism was a testament of a torn and embroiled soul, Hilewitz claimed that nothing could be further from the truth. He was merely a Jew who believed in metaphysical monism, and thus his soul was not torn, but rather whole beyond imagination, as it did not limit itself to spirituality alone. He thus wrote to Alexandrov:

My soul cannot bear any contraction, for its root and source are in the boundless and endless Infinite [*Ein-Sof*] prior to any contraction [*tsimtsum*] . . . If it engages with matters of the contracted ones, this is only because through engarbing itself in these things, it will ascend to its general root, which does not know of any division of worlds, but only absolute boundless unity . . . Through this illumination, all contractions are rendered null, for they only exist in relation to those who are themselves in a state of contraction . . . The holy sparks within them which descended in the shattering of the vessels [*shvirat ha-kelim*] in the aspect of parting branches [*anpin mitpardin*] will ascend to their source and root within the absolute boundless unity. (Alexandrov 1931, pp. 18–19)

Though manifested as a personal proclamation, this paragraph conveys Hilewitz’s conception of the divine withdrawal (*tsimtsum*) of the infinite light (*Ein-Sof*), a theme first presented in Lurianic Kabbalah and later discussed and rediscussed by Habad thinkers. According to this cosmology, creation was made possible by the contraction (*tsimtsum*) of the infinite divine light in order to make space for finite realms. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), the founder of Habad, famously supported the figurative—rather than the literal—interpretation of *tsimtsum*. He claimed that the infinite light did not actually withdraw or contract, but rather that it was only a figure of speech, a way to depict the concealment of the infinite light from human perception. In this view, God’s presence is still everywhere and anywhere; only human beings see the world as lacking this presence. Hilewitz stated that he could overcome this narrow perspective and reach the perception of “absolute boundless unity” where “all contractions are rendered null, for they only exist in relation to those who are themselves in a state of contraction”, meaning that contraction (or withdrawal) exists only according to a limited human perception.<sup>20</sup>

Alexandrov countered this by pointing out the paradox at the heart of Hilewitz’s argument: one cannot talk about an individual soul from a perspective of “absolute boundless unity.” Without any contractions, individual perception disappears, as it is only the illusion of contraction that enables one to think and speak as an individual, or to think and speak at all (Alexandrov 1931, pp. 20–21). For Alexandrov, even a figurative interpretation of the *tsimtsum* represents a rapture that human perception cannot overcome. The divine withdrawal, or contraction, stands at the core of individual perception, and any attempt to rise above it undermines perception itself. Following the theology of two Habad rebbes, Shmuel Schneersohn (1834–1882) and his son Sholom Dovber Schneersohn (1860–1920), Hilewitz perceived *tsimtsum* in a different way: not as rapture, but as a scale, an endless series of contractions, starting even before the major contraction depicted by Lurianic Kabbalah.<sup>21</sup> It was this series of seeming paradoxes, this continued discussion of the nature of infinity, that allowed Hilewitz to describe his soul’s journey to a monistic worldview. From the parting branches of contracted perception, he wished to ascend to the roots of the inverted tree of divinity, to a point where his individual soul could still sense the unity of all things, finity and infinity, spirit and matter.<sup>22</sup>

As these and a few others are the only fragments we have at our disposal when trying to piece together Hilewitz’s worldview in those years, it is difficult to advance a decisive explanation of them. I will nevertheless attempt to offer a possible coherent interpretation, one that takes into account Hilewitz’s affiliation to Habad Hasidism, and his acquaintance with its theology.

The last paragraph is a testament to the power that Hilewitz found in Marx's monistic philosophy as addressing all of the world and humanity's aspects, first and foremost those of Hilewitz himself. For him, simple religion tears the human being in half, as it addresses only the conscience and intellect, while neglecting his physical and social urges and labeling them as stumbling blocks in the psyche's way. The power of Marxist philosophy lies in explaining the human being as a whole, as built from the bottom up, so to speak; from the physical and social to the intellectual and psychic. Marx's theory helped Hilewitz to rediscover his physical and social self, to see himself as an integral part of the physical world around him. However, unlike Marx, Hilewitz saw this materiality as divine in essence, perhaps even as the highest form of divinity.

This is where Habad theology comes into play. Much like Marxism, Habad theology is based on a dialectic notion of matter and spirit. However, whereas Marxism sees the intellect as a product of material and social forces, Habad theology sees it the other way around: matter originated from the divinity and was created when God, as the total spirit, contracted Himself; according to some Habad thinkers, this matter is destined to return and to become pure spirit when the physical world fulfils its mission and returns to being consumed by the divinity through an act of self-negation.<sup>23</sup> Just as Marx saw that ideals are nothing but an illusion in service of class struggle, the Habad notion of acosmism claimed that physical reality is nothing but an illusion, as divine self-contraction was nothing but an epistemological shift in human consciousness, hiding the fact that the divinity remained all-encompassing as it was. From that perspective, matter is nothing but an illusion, a notion reiterated by Hilewitz in his letters to Alexandrov.

As studies by Dov Schwartz have shown, Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn, Habad's fifth rebbe, took that dialectic to its extreme conclusion as he claimed there was no metaphysical contraction and no emanation or sublimation of pure divinity, which still resided in every place and every being in all its infinite might (Schwartz 2010, pp. 200–6). This notion of extreme acosmism is echoed in Hilewitz's letter when he mentions that "all contractions are rendered null, for they only exist in relation to those who are themselves in a state of contraction" (Alexandrov 1931, p. 19). Where Hilewitz deviates from that notion is in his identification of this all-encompassing divinity with Marx's all-encompassing materialism. For Hilewitz, these are not opposite positions, but two sides of the same coin, two sides of the same monistic entity, the source of life and existence, an infinity to which Hilewitz felt especially related. His first two letters to Alexandrov reflect a strong confident personality, certain in its unique attitude towards this divine monism. Hilewitz presents himself as a rare thinker in his ability to rise above conflicting narrow conceptions of matter and spirit, and to reunite these scattered fractions of religion and heresy, Kabbalah and philosophy, national and class identities.

That confidence and self-assurance did not last. After Alexandrov furiously responded to these ideas, condemning Hilewitz's ideas as heretical and as being opposed to the "spiritual nature" of Judaism, Hilewitz retracted and claimed that he only put forward hypothetical ideas to be adopted by Soviet Jews. Alexandrov denied the retraction as a plain lie, referring to Hilewitz's lost Yiddish articles as proof of his presumably heretical beliefs. From that point, the relationship between the two deteriorated when Hilewitz accused Alexandrov of not being pious enough and of disparaging halakhic laws, while Alexandrov accused Hilewitz of being a cynical hypocrite who changed identities according to whichever way the wind was blowing. Alexandrov then refused to continue their correspondence (Alexandrov 1931, pp. 24–29).<sup>24</sup> This brief and packed exchange of ideas is anything but a coherent presentation of religious philosophy, but it does illuminate the conflicts and inner struggles of a young generation trying to make sense of this multitude of Jewish identities, unique to the USSR of the 1920s. However small an example, it is a testament to the fact that yeshiva students varied in their attitude towards Communism and Marxism, and while some firmly rejected them, others attempted to find a middle ground and even highlighted the theological value of Marxist philosophy.

## 5. Avraham Yosef Guttman and Shmuel Alexandrov: Heresy, Belief, and Russian Nietzscheanism

Another sort of struggle was that of the communal rabbis, perhaps the center of the Jewish *Kulturkampf* of the 1920s. As mentioned in the opening parts of this article, throughout this decade, communal rabbis were under constant strain and were operating under tremendous pressure on both them and their families. Alexandrov's letters to various communal rabbis reveal the theological and spiritual challenges that accompanied these daily social struggles, and I discussed some of his answers in the second part of this paper. This part of the paper is dedicated to the especially rich theological correspondence between Alexandrov and Avraham Yosef Guttman, who, when the correspondence took place, was the rabbi of Pavlograd, Ukraine. This correspondence is the longest and most detailed series of letters we have from Alexandrov's Soviet period, and it starts at a point of crisis, when Rabbi Guttman was considering resigning from his communal position.

Notwithstanding the social reasons that factored into this decision, Guttman was making a moral argument: How could holding a rabbinic position be ethically justified? I will let him explain the problem in his own words (again, quoted by Alexandrov in his response):

In these times, only two kinds of people can continue to hold a rabbinic position. The first is a simple honest believer, if such can still exist, so simple and naïve that he has no doubt that this whole process of "creating a new world" and the "destruction of Judaism" is nothing compared to the making and maintaining of one true believer, even if he were the last one. The second option is to hold a rabbinic position while acknowledging that the Jewish world is burning to ashes. While watching this endless burning, this rabbi keeps a quiet heart because this terrible fire is keeping him warm, as he uses it to feed himself and his loved ones. (Alexandrov 1932, p. 5)

For Guttman, only a naïve rabbi could believe that his individual religious actions could have an overall dramatic effect; one would have to be blind not to see that religious Judaism was dying and had no future under the Soviet regime. A sensible rabbi needed to ask himself whether he was not cynically maintaining his position only to make a living, sometimes at the expense of an elderly and impoverished community. In this claim, Guttman affirms a common Soviet trope of accusing rabbis of exploiting their flock, revealing that the challenge posed by Soviet propaganda was not merely a political and social one.<sup>25</sup> Rather, it was a challenge that brought into question the moral basis of traditional rabbinic leadership. Guttman refused to overlook this facet of his position, and thus saw no moral justification in continuing to hold it.

Alexandrov considered this to be a grave misunderstanding, and he gathered all the tools in his philosophical arsenal in his attempt to reverse Guttman's decision. Chief among them was a radical individualistic theology, which claimed that Guttman should see the aforementioned naïve rabbi in a new light, and that a person who stood firm in the face of devastation could actually bring about a new Judaism, which would rise from the ashes of the old. This is how he explained his position:

Do you really believe, my dear friend, that the position of the first rabbi you described has no grounds? [ . . . ] If such are your thoughts, I believe that you are wrong and that one thought regarding pure sublimity would refute your position. Since the divine is infinite, there is no difference between how one man is measured relative to the divine and how a whole world with all its creatures is measured relative to it. Both are finite in the face of infinity [ . . . ] The Talmudic phrases "The whole world was created for me" (T. Sanh. 37:1) and [ . . . ] "The whole world exists in the merit of one righteous human being" (T. Yoma 38:2) are not empty words; they possess real meaning. Devout believers and honest religious philosophers can sense that meaning. This doctrine has a solid basis in the theory of the individualists in general and in Nietzsche's theory of the *Über-*

*mensch* [*adam elyon*] in particular. That is the doctrine of Judaism in all its various aspects throughout history. According to this, God can destroy many worlds and create better ones, assisted by the *adam elyon* who will survive the upheaval, because the *adam elyon* works with God to create the world. (Alexandrov 1932, p. 5)

During the second decade of the twentieth century, Alexandrov abandoned his vision of gradual cultural change in Judaism, which would be carried out by Zionist institutions, and started to think in terms of a small circle of individuals working together in order to revolutionize Jewish culture (Slater Forthcoming). What began as fragmented ideas before the First World War turned, during the Soviet period, into an individualistic philosophy that put the individual's relationship with the divine at the center of the metaphysical and historical drama. The quoted passage thus reflects a new stage in Alexandrov's individualistic turn. As is obvious from the letter, Alexandrov agreed with Guttman that the rabbinic culture was doomed. However, the political drama of the revolution and anti-religious persecution were only a background for the real drama, merely a tool in the divinity's hands for finding the individual (or individuals) who could take part in the creation of a new world, which in Alexandrov's terminology meant a new Jewish culture. Such a person would become God's co-partner—a co-creator, if you will, a recurrent idea in Alexandrov's writings from the Soviet period—if he could only see beyond the here and now, and understand the essence of individual Judaism.

As a point of reference, Alexandrov is using Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the *Übermensch*, which seems farfetched considering his religious aspirations. The gap between Alexandrov's mysticism and Nietzsche's atheistic philosophy is mitigated when we consider the anonymous "individualists" and "honest religious philosophers" mentioned in the letter. From Alexandrov's manuscript writings, we learn that he borrowed this individual mystic synergy from the Russian "God-Seekers", a heterogeneous group of Russian Orthodox thinkers who, among other ideas, offered a religious interpretation of Nietzsche's individualistic atheism (Alexandrov 1931, pp. 55–56). The God-Seekers were a varied group of intellectuals who rebelled against the tide of positivism and materialism that threatened to undermine idealism and religious beliefs at the end of the nineteenth century. In order to address this challenge, thinkers such as Vladimir Solovyov (1852–1900) and Nikolai Berdelyev (1874–1948) combined German Idealism, Christian Orthodoxy, and various esoteric traditions to create a new strand of religious thought. Among the esoteric traditions adopted by these thinkers were Jewish and Christian Kabbalah. Combined with Solovyov's enthusiastic defence of Judaism and the rabbinic tradition, this group ignited the imagination of several Jewish thinkers, most notably Hillel Zeitlin and Shmuel Alexandrov.<sup>26</sup>

Alexandrov was especially interested in the God-Seekers' interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy. Following Solovyov, perhaps the most important mystical Russian thinker in the late nineteenth century, thinkers such as Berdelyev and Dmitry Merejkovsky (1865–1941) sought to combine Nietzsche's *Übermensch* or the *Chelovekobog*, meaning the Godly man, with the Christian *Bogochelovek* or Humanly God, which they saw as the two sides of Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> Alexandrov, who very much appreciated this branch of Russian Orthodox philosophy, incorporated these ideas into a Jewish philosophical framework, following his claim that Judaism should use the theosophical knowledge accumulated by Christian traditions for its own purposes.<sup>28</sup>

This point of view, Alexandrov tells Guttman, should change how one looked at rabbis who ignored political situations and focused on their private condition and their small congregation. The real drama of the time was not happening in the streets and public venues; rather, it took place inside a person's soul and in his connection to the divine. It was the struggle to continue to believe that would eventually define this period of upheaval. A true believer, Alexandrov claimed, should focus on that struggle and not despair. He should continue as if everything he did, every child he taught, was essential in shaping a new world and a new belief.



This response from Alexandrov led Guttman to postpone his decision to leave his position, and the conversation between the two continued for a few more months of intensive theological and social discussions. Besides the idea of the spiritual rabbinate reviewed above, these letters explored the notion of *adam elyon* or the religious *Übermensch*, the messianic figure who would rise from the ashes of Marxist atheism and bring the dawn of a new religious consciousness. In one of his letters, Alexandrov gave Guttman a mythological history of the religious *Übermensch*, illustrated by four biblical figures: Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the Messiah. The first stage required preservation. This was the stage of Noah, who understood the threat posed by the flood and built an ark. He did not try to stop the water and to save the old world; rather, he focused on saving himself and his loved ones, understanding the importance of these last traces of a lost world. Noah was a simple believer. He did not develop new ideas, but stood firm in preserving the old ones. He withdrew from the outside world, drowning in “the materialism of natural sciences” (Alexandrov 1932, pp. 10–11). This period of seclusion was critical in preserving a small corner of belief from overflowing atheism, but did nothing to repair its damages. In the terms put forward by Alexandrov, Noah was not taking an active part in the creation of a new world, but stubbornly maintained his piety in a world that had turned its back on it (Alexandrov 1932, pp. 10–13).

The second stage in this evolution of the religious *Übermensch* was Abraham, as the person who made God known to the masses. Abraham was not confined to an ark and did not fear general knowledge and ideas. He travelled the land and met with “the righteous among the nations”, learned their wisdom, and taught them to acknowledge the one God (Alexandrov 1932, p. 13). In so doing, he took the belief preserved by Noah and brought it back to life. He spoke about faith in a new language and thus brought new light to the world, which was now not only flooded by mundane lusts, but by a systematic materialist philosophy. It was this world that produced Abraham, as a scholar versed in all wisdoms and able to redeem spirituality from the jaws of materialism (Alexandrov 1932, pp. 12–13).

Moses represented the third stage of the religious *Übermensch*, one that had to face not only materialist philosophy, but also distorted religion, which brings us back to the anti-clerical aspect of Alexandrov’s philosophy discussed earlier in this article (Alexandrov 1932, p. 13). Moses was not content with individualistic actions. He established a nation destined to carry the knowledge of God and religious rules to uphold this nation as “a unit that is separate and distinct from all other nations in its rules and beliefs” (Alexandrov 1932, p. 19). Alexandrov presents this separation and legislation as acts of disguise, meant as a temporary remedy for the world’s ills. Moses himself had no need for rules or national particularism: “he was not a chauvinist”, Alexandrov writes, “but a person with deep consideration for all nations” (Alexandrov 1932, p. 19). It was the world’s spiritual condition that forced Moses to hide behind a national identity and to establish a legal system to uphold the knowledge of God in such a debased environment. When the world evolved and this cover would no longer be needed, then the universal nature of Judaism would be revealed (Alexandrov 1932, pp. 19–20). The person who would remove the cover is the fourth and final stage in the evolution of the religious *Übermensch*: the Messiah.

Nowhere in his writings does Alexandrov identify himself as this messianic figure. In several points in his letters to Guttman, it seems that the actions of such a figure are actually the product of a group effort. Alexandrov expected Guttman to help to create a group of rabbis that would help him in the intellectual messianic mission: to remove the cover and present Judaism’s universal spiritual nature, which would have the power to defeat heresy. With this notion, Alexandrov returns to one of his earliest articles: *Eš Dat Veruah Le’umi* (Fiery Law and National Spirit, 1891), where he put forth the idea that the Messiah would reveal what Moses concealed. Moses had “laid a cover” over this messianic and spiritual Judaism, hiding it behind “the black fire” of the halakha. The Messiah would remove this cover and redeem the inner Torah, which is not bound by commandments and national identity.<sup>29</sup> The Communist revolution, Alexandrov claimed, had laid the ground for that messianic period. This is what he wrote to Guttman:

All that is happening in the present is the destruction before the construction that will be carried out by the remnants that will survive the upheaval [ . . . ] they will replace the material raiment with divine garments. And though they are few, those noble ones who will survive the upheaval, they nevertheless exist and each of them is more than an equal measure of the whole world. (Alexandrov 1932, p. 7)

This passage relates to the subject of historical theodicy discussed in the introduction to this paper, meaning the role that Alexandrov thought the Communist revolution had to play in bringing about a messianic age of universal religious faith. Alexandrov did not envision this before the revolution, but rather tried to explain—or justify—the divine plan behind the revolution, and the subsequent oppression of rabbinic Judaism. Not only did this oppression wipe out an old and damaged form of religiosity, but “divine garments” also lay behind its “material raiment.” A slightly more illuminating passage in that regard can be found in one of Alexandrov’s letters to R. Krasilshchikov, where he claims that the unification of mankind under the flag of heresy and materialism would lay the foundation for a unification of mankind around a true religious belief, when the Jewish people would reveal that God resides in that monistic matter (Alexandrov 1932, p. 79).<sup>30</sup>

These ambitious aspirations may have given Guttman a sense of purpose in his inner struggles, but after half a year of intensive correspondence, he revealed the depth of his religious crisis. Still holding his rabbinic position, Guttman confessed to Alexandrov that he no longer believed in God. He wished to believe, but his perception of reality no longer allowed him to do so, as the rational truth seemed to lie in Marxism’s atheist philosophy (Alexandrov 1932, p. 49). Unlike in his response to Hilewitz, Alexandrov did not condemn Guttman as a heretic and did not shy away from the challenge. He answered with a surprising suggestion: “Make yourself a God to follow! With your own powers, make yourself a God and worship Him!” (Alexandrov 1932, p. 50). Alexandrov then uses several Kabbalistic sources to strengthen his assertion that the religious *Übermensch* has the power “to be a creator of God, so to speak” (Alexandrov 1932, p. 51). The phrase “so to speak” is, of course, significant. Alexandrov never doubted the existence of a metaphysical God that human beings could never completely know. However, he encouraged Guttman to transcend the image of the traditional God and create a new one, and he continued as follows:

The notion of “creating a God” was formulated and absorbed by Kabbalah sages’ imagination after contemplating the free will given to us by our Creator [ . . . ] in such a way that not only can the righteous annul what God has ordered, but one can also deny God’s existence, and thus we can say, metaphorically speaking, that when one is following the path of the Lord, one creates Him . . . After all, he could have denied Him, and in his free will, he chose to believe that there is God on earth, and thus in that instance, he creates Him . . . And it is in that instance that God finds His partner for creating heaven and earth; that is, the one who freely decides that there is a God. (Alexandrov 1932, p. 51)

For Alexandrov, the meaning of “making a God” is not ontological, but epistemological. It is not the mere existence of God that is debated, but rather the way God is perceived, the image via which he appears in the world. If the Communists can create a Godless world, then the believers can create a Godly one, and if the old image of God and the old religious language with it are no longer tenable, then the religious *Übermensch* can and should create new ones.<sup>31</sup> For Alexandrov, God’s revelation in the world was always a product of human creativity, and thus the new image of God would be just as valid as the one held by the rabbinic tradition. The important thing is for Guttman to continue to believe, one way or another, in order to emerge triumphant in the battle against rational skepticism.

As much as Alexandrov was impressed by the ideas of Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolay Berdayev, and as much as the God-Seekers wished to empower the individual, the

notion of “creating a God” cannot be found in their writings, as it was too unorthodox for them. Alexandrov’s use of this idea reflects a different source of inspiration from a different branch of Russian Nietzscheanism, the Marxist “God-Builders”, and their interpretation of Ludwig Feuerbach’s philosophy of religion. Thinkers such as Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933) and Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) introduced God-building in order to counter the neo-idealists’ God-seeking, and to give the masses a secular myth that could sway them to the Marxist cause. They argued that a new God, created by man, could carry the weight of messianic aspirations and lead humanity to a Marxist revolutionary redemption.<sup>32</sup> Considering this source of inspiration, one has to wonder if, when Alexandrov supplied Guttman with the idea of God-building, he perhaps even implicitly approved of notions similar to those of Lunacharsky and Gorky. If rational reasoning forced Guttman to accept a materialist worldview, limited by natural and economic laws, then he should create a deity compatible with those laws, provided it would leave room for his yearning for the divine. Granted, this would create a limited deity, narrowed down to fit human consciousness, but the same can be said with regard to the traditional image of God.

The correspondence between Guttman and Alexandrov exemplifies both the moral and theological challenges of the Soviet period, and the creative religious philosophy formulated to address these challenges. What started as an acknowledgment of some of the claims made by Soviet propaganda against rabbinic institutions, and continued with Guttman confessing his disbelief, was countered by Alexandrov with a new theology, inspired by a variety of sources including a unique branch of Marxist philosophy.

## 6. Conclusions

In a dramatic cultural and political struggle such as the one experienced by the Jewish population of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, where two contending identities clashed with such belligerence, we can usually find thinkers and ideas that would try, to some degree, to bridge the gap between the two. That sounds obvious, but to this day very little work has been done on the reception of Communist or Marxist ideas by rabbinic figures in the Soviet Union. Despite known cases of Communist sympathizers among the rabbinic elite, not many studies have been dedicated to understanding their worldview. Instead, they and their publications at the Soviet press were usually labelled part of Soviet propaganda, and though that might be true of some figures, it can be false of others. There is no way to tell before we shed previous conceptions, before we put aside the heroic narrative and its dichotomous depictions and try to listen to the story of these figures as they told it.

This paper, though not dealing directly with publications produced by the Soviet press, aims to deal with the same problem using a different source: that of personal letters. These letters, which are of both a philosophical and a theological nature, provide a small window of direct access to the conflictual world of rabbis and yeshiva students at the time, without the problems that accompany publications from a party-sponsored press. However small the sample discussed in this article is, we can still point out different ways in which thinkers implemented Communist and Marxist ideas in their writings. The first and relatively minimal way is by identifying with certain aspects of Communist anticlericalism. Both Rabbi Guttman and Alexandrov acknowledged that some rabbis used their position for material gain, and though this criticism is not unique to the Communists, and Alexandrov himself had said similar things before the revolution (Alexandrov 1910, pp. 36–38), he nevertheless adopted the Marxist theory in order to put it into perspective as a systematic failure of the rabbinate, and not one that was tied to the misgivings of one person or another.

The second way Alexandrov used Communist ideas is in what I called a historical theodicy. When he comes to explain why God brought about this age of heresy, he not only turns to historical dialectics, but also uses the idea of universal revolution, as he claims that uniting humankind under the flag of materialism was a necessary stage before uniting it around a true belief that knew no division of nations or religious denominations. The third

and most radical idea of incorporating Communist and Marxist concepts into Jewish religious thought comes from Alter Hilewitz, and his notion of Habad dialectics and historical materialism being two sides of the same coin. This is a bold statement, coming from an impassioned yeshiva student, but one that seems to be a result of a long contemplation of the issue. The fragments we find in Alexandrov's letters are probably merely remnants of a few articles that have yet to be found. This might be the only window onto the world of those who truly tried to reconcile Communism and rabbinic Judaism.

This period of Jewish thought did not last long. By the mid-1930s, Guttman and Krasilshchikov had left their rabbinic positions and Hilewitz had immigrated to Palestine. There is scarcely any mention of heretical or Marxist beliefs in any publication relating to them, nor do they fit the heroic narrative of a firm opposition in the face of persecution. Alexandrov's ideas did not go unnoticed, but were often misunderstood due to the emotional weight of the debate. That weight still casts a heavy shadow over the subject in question and may very well dictate how it will be discussed moving forward. With that in mind, I wish to suggest that even a sympathetic portrayal of these thinkers, one that primarily views them as victims of anti-religious persecution, does not do justice to Guttman's, Hilewitz's, and Alexandrov's ideas. Yes, we can look at Guttman with compassion, as a believer who struggled to find peace in times of great crisis. We can also view Hilewitz as a confused young man seeking to find his way against a current of different, conflicting ideas. However, it seems to me that in doing so, we would be guilty of imposing our own narrative upon them, a narrative in which Hasidism and Marxism, and heresy and religious belief, are mutually exclusive. This is not the way they experienced matters. At the time, Hilewitz denied that he lived in two contradictory worlds and saw Hasidism and Marxism as two sides of the same coin. Alexandrov, too, believed that one could be a believer and a heretic at the same time. Ignoring such a possibility and viewing them only with compassion reduces their experiences and ideas to our particular outlook. To me, doing so not only misses the beauty and innovation of their ideas; it also means overlooking the everyday experiences and queries that shaped this unique period in Jewish social and intellectual history.

More to the point, the compassionate perspective downplays these thinkers' contribution to our understanding of Jewish modernities by limiting their relevance to a unique period of Jewish history. Indeed, the ideas of Guttman, Hilewitz, and Alexandrov were a product of their time and place, but so too were the ideas of their more well-known counterparts, whose philosophies are celebrated exactly because they aim at mitigating—or even emphasizing—the inherited tensions of Jewish modernity. In that regard, we can see the early Soviet Jewish experience as an extreme manifestation of what it meant to be both modern and Jewish, both contemporary and another link in the chain of tradition. While some of their contemporaries reacted to the revolution by reinforcing traditionalism, these authors took on the challenge of their time and used Kabbalistic themes and language to address the dialectics embedded in their social and intellectual situations. This puts them in line with thinkers such as Eliah Benamozegh, Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Yehuda Leib Ashlag, and Martin Buber as bearers of a Kabbalah-inflected understanding of modernity. As such, they are not outliers to modern Jewish thought, but rather a manifestation of the tensions that continue to define it even today.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rabbis and religious functionaries, together with their families, were deprived of any political rights and had very limited access to social benefits, including housing, food, and medical care (Pinkus 1986, pp. 206–20; Rothenberg 1971, pp. 170–80; Altshuler 1980, pp. 292–303; Gershuni 1961, pp. 66–73). During the 1920s, these limitations were not imposed on private people who followed halakhic rules. However, party members were expected to turn their back on religion altogether, in which case inquiries with regard to certain religious customs, such as circumcision, were quite common: see (Gitelman 1972, p. 304; Bemporad 2013, pp. 133–44).
- <sup>2</sup> For a discussion of cases of rabbis who openly sided with the Communists, see (Gershuni 1961, pp. 109–11; Gitelman 1972, p. 306). On the gradual resignation of rabbinic posts, see (Gershuni 1961, pp. 66–73). The world of one yeshiva student, Alter Hilewitz, and his Hasido-Marxist ideas are discussed below. On the “danger” of Yiddish libraries and “books where one finds death”, see (Bar-Eli 2002, p. 33).
- <sup>3</sup> See (Bemporad 2013, pp. 81–111; Gitelman 1972, pp. 88–114; Shneer 2004; Shternshis 2006). One of the Soviet-Yiddish activists in the academic field was Hillel Alexandrov (1890–1972), son of Shmuel, one of the main figures discussed in this paper: see (Alexandrov 1928, 2016; Bemporad 2013, pp. 107–8; Schulman 1977).
- <sup>4</sup> For a great example of bringing these two worlds together in one locality, see (Bemporad 2013). For a categorical rejection of any notion of interlacing Communism and rabbinic Judaism, see (Gershuni 1961, pp. 126–33).
- <sup>5</sup> There are several known cases of rabbis who defended Marxism at the time, a few of whom even turned their back on religion as a whole and publicly condemned it. However, their publications in Soviet newspapers do not convey much of a philosophical or theological discussion and are mainly read as propaganda: see (Gitelman 1972, p. 306; Gershuni 1961, pp. 109–10).
- <sup>6</sup> On Alexandrov’s life and philosophy see (Agursky 1984; Bat-Yehuda 1987; Luz 1981; Slater 2016b; Slater Forthcoming; Schwartz 2002, pp. 12–14, 63, 114–16; Schweid 2019, pp. 319–26).
- <sup>7</sup> See (Shauli 1957, 1958, pp. 52–63; Gershuni 1961, pp. 109–10; Gitelman 1972, pp. 306–7). In many regards, this misleading interpretation is a product of Avraham Shauli’s search for a religious-Marxist identity, and it even trickled down to Gershuni, who objected to this notion and harshly attacked Alexandrov.
- <sup>8</sup> Avraham Shauli’s interpretation contains some creative and sometimes misleading translations from Alexandrov’s letters. For example, the remarks quoted here from a letter to R. Krasilschikov appear in Shauli’s article as follows: “God has wrapped himself in a cloak of materialism and in so doing has brought life to the world [ . . . ] behold there are days which are coming in which the eyes of man will be opened to see the Divine kernel which lies hidden in *dialectical materialism*” (Shauli 1957; emphasis mine). Compare this to the Hebrew original in (Alexandrov 1932, p. 73).
- <sup>9</sup> In fact, the Marxist thinker Aaron Shmuel Liberman (1845–1880) was the first person to link Marxism and Kabbalah; see (Stern 2018, pp. 118–130).
- <sup>10</sup> On Guttman, see (Greenbaum 1994, p. 10; Shauli 1958, pp. 61–63). On Krasilschikov and his commentary on the Palestinian Talmud, see (Greenbaum 1994, p. 42; Shauli 1982, pp. 87–95; Zelcer 2004, pp. 109–11). On Palay, see (Greenbaum 1994, p. 42). See also (Guttman 1913; Krasilschikov 1926).
- <sup>11</sup> Alexandrov then continues to attack the rabbinate’s alignment with rich merchants and the middle classes, echoing a common reality in Jewish communities at the time where religious leaders sided with the middle classes and attacked the secular tendencies of the proletariat: see (Alexandrov 1932, p. 64; Gitelman 1972, pp. 293–94).
- <sup>12</sup> Some customs also showed more resilience in the face of persecution, as is evident from the Evseksiia’s struggle against circumcision in their ranks: see (Bemporad 2013, pp. 133–44; Gitelman 1972, p. 304).
- <sup>13</sup> Alexandrov is probably alluding to a rabbinic discussion on how to define both Jewish Communists and the silent majority of Soviet Jews in halakhic terms. Through definitions such as “Marranos” and “Apostates”, rabbis attempted both to solve practical halakhic problems and to map the Jewish identities of Soviet Jews: see (Karlip 2020).
- <sup>14</sup> Alexandrov’s letters never mention Hilewitz’s full name, only A. Hilewitz (א. הילעוויץ). Nevertheless, they are obviously addressed to a young man versed in Habad theology who met Alexandrov in person and showed him “heretical” articles that he had written: see (Alexandrov 1931, p. 24). In one of his memoirs, Alter Hilewitz mentions that he had met and corresponded with Alexandrov see (Isaacs 1989, pp. 28–29). In another memoir, he also mentions that one of the articles he had written had provoked the ire of his father, who warned him not to grapple with heretics: see (Hilewitz 1981, p. 9).
- <sup>15</sup> On Kharik, see (Shneer 2002; 2004, pp. 179–214; Shternshis 2006, pp. 66–69).
- <sup>16</sup> On Nikolski’s research method and legacy, see (Shakhnovich 1993, pp. 67–68). On his connection with Hilewitz, see (Isaacs 1989, p. 29). On the Marxist-Leninist method in the field of religious studies, see (Thrower 1983, especially pp. 215–88).

- 17 Much to his father's dismay, Hillel Alexandrov received a secular education, and after the revolution he became a leading figure in Belarusian Jewish studies as a historian of Jewish society and anthropology. His guide "פארשט אייר שטעטל!" or "Research Your Shtetl!" set out a program for anthropological research on Jewish communities: see (Alexandrov 1928, 2016; Schulman 1977; Bemporad 2013, pp. 99–100).
- 18 On *Atzilut*, *Assiah* and the other divine worlds according to Lurianic Kabbalah, see (Scholem 1977, pp. 116–22).
- 19 See (Stern 2018, pp. 118–30; Boulouque 2020, pp. 133–47; Garb 2009; Mirsky 2014; Huss 2006; Rothman 2021, pp. 127–51). The intersection of Hasidism and Marxism brings to mind Raphael Mahler's famous studies of the sociopolitical foundations of Hasidism (Mahler 2001, pp. 4–29), but although Hilewitz was trained by Marxist historians, his materialism had nothing to do with laypeople's beliefs. It was rather built upon a concealed perspective, available only to a chosen few, much like Ahshlag's Communism. For another journey from Jewish mysticism to materialism, see (Krutikov 2010).
- 20 On *tsimtsum* and the breaking of the vessels in Lurianic Kabbalah, see (Scholem 1977, pp. 128–44; 1967, pp. 260–61; Schulte 2014, pp. 47–48). On the extensive discussions of these themes in Habad literature, see (Elior 1993, pp. 79–91; Funkenstein 1974; Wolfson 2013, pp. 76–92), among many others.
- 21 On Shmuel Schneersohn's notion of *tsimtsum*, see (Roth 2013, pp. 245–49; Rubin 2021, pp. 374–81). On Shalom Dovber Schneersohn's development of his father's ideas, see (Wolfson 2013).
- 22 On the divine tree of *Sefirot*, see (Scholem 1980, pp. 173–86). As for "the holy sparks", Hilewitz seems to indicate that dealing with social activism in the mundane world ("matters of the contracted ones") enables him to gather the fallen sparks and to ascend to a higher understanding precisely because it undermines the old dualism of spiritualism and materiality. On the shattering of the vessels, see (Scholem 1977, pp. 135–40).
- 23 In that regard, we can see Marxist and Kabbalist dialectics as a form of elective affinity, a relationship between two social or cultural phenomena that according to Michael Löwy starts "from a certain structural analogy" and "consists of a convergence, a mutual attraction, an active confluence, a combination that can go as far as fusion" (Löwy 1992, p. 10). However, unlike Löwy, I do not believe that cultural phenomena have their own lives. However compelling the structural analogy may be, human beings are the ones to elect their affinities, which is evident in the difference between Alexandrov's and Hilewitz's treatment of Marxism. On Habad theology and the different ways to understand it, see (Schwartz 2010, pp. 25–30; 2013; Elior 1993, pp. 49–100). On a possible Habad source of inspiration for Hilewitz's notion of connecting his soul to divine infinity, see (Elior 1993, pp. 103–24; Schwartz 2012). Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880–1950), who is the subject of Schwartz's article, was the rebbe of Habad at the time in question and stood at the forefront of the struggles against the Soviet anti-religious campaign: see (Gitelman 1972, pp. 307–8; Fishman 1995, pp. 253–60). As mentioned above, Hilewitz followed Schneersohn's directives and met with him in Leningrad: see (Hilewitz 1981, pp. 9–12). On Habad and materiality, see (Rothschild 2016, pp. 148–49).
- 24 Though Alexandrov himself was fascinated by Baruch Spinoza's philosophy at a younger age (Slater 2019, pp. 59–61, 69–73), his reaction to Hilewitz reflects a generations-long tradition of what Mary-Jane Rubenstein calls "horror pantheism", a horrified perplexity in the face of the limitless differencelessness of monism and pantheism; see (Rubenstein 2018, esp. 1–59).
- 25 On the campaign against communal rabbis and other religious functionaries, see (Gitelman 1972, pp. 298–304; Rothenberg 1971, pp. 209–16; Shternshis 2006, pp. 1–14, 21–43; Gershuni 1961, pp. 66–73).
- 26 On Solovyov's treatment of Judaism and his use of Kabbalistic themes, see (Solovyov 2016; Burmistrov 2007; Kornblatt 1991, 1997; Carlson 1996). Explicit references to the works of Beredeyev and Solovyov can be found in numerous places in Alexandrov's writing, especially prior to the revolution. See (Alexandrov 1907, pp. 27–28, 30; 1910, pp. 8–11; 1931, pp. 55–56).
- 27 On this school of thought and its version of Nietzschean philosophy, see (Grillaert 2008; Rosenthal 2002, pp. 27–115; 2007; Walicki 2015, pp. 721–48). For more on Alexandrov's engagement with these thinkers' ideas, see (Bar-Yosef 2000, pp. 382–84; Burmistrov 2006; Slater 2016b).
- 28 This claim opened a discussion between Alexandrov and Avraham Itzhak Hacohen Kook regarding non-Jewish theology and philosophy: see (Alexandrov 1907, pp. 27–28; Kook 1985, vol. 1, pp. 43–48; Slater 2016b, pp. 60–61).
- 29 See (Alexandrov 1891, p. 246; Slater Forthcoming; Rothman 2021, pp. 113–16). On the Jewish sources of this idea, see (Rothman 2021, pp. 21–23).
- 30 This short explanation, which Alexandrov himself admits to be insufficient, is also the key to understanding the passage quoted in the introduction to this paper. When Alexandrov wrote "God has wrapped himself in a cloak of materialism [ . . . ] behold, there are days which are coming in which the eyes of man will be opened to see the divine kernel which lies hidden in this process" (Alexandrov 1932, p. 73), he did not wish to reconcile Communism and rabbinic Judaism or to expose the divine nature of dialectical materialism (as Avraham Shauli's translation may lead us to believe), but rather to justify historical events ("this process") and to explain how the triumph of heresy would lead to its demise. Compare to (Shauli 1957; Gershuni 1961, pp. 126–28; Gitelman 1972, pp. 306–7).
- 31 The need to remold religious language according to the changing times is stressed in another letter: "The process of the breaking of the vessels [*shevirat ha-kelim*] that transpired, according to the Kabbalists, in the earliest times [ . . . ] is an unceasing process; in every era, the vessels that were formed in accordance with the spiritual state of the previous era shatter in the subsequent era, for in the subsequent era, it becomes apparent that the vessels are discordant with the era's denizens, who are further developed

from those of the previous era due to the law of evolution that rules the universe. But the divine light which knows no change creates, with the help of the divine man, new vessels to hold the divine light" (Alexandrov 1931, p. 26).

- <sup>32</sup> See (Rosenthal 2002, pp. 68–86; Rowley 1987, pp. 136–72; Walicki 2015, pp. 749–65). The first to point out this source of influence on Alexandrov's writing was Avraham Shauli, though he does not seem to differentiate between the "God-Builders" and the "God-Seekers": see (Shauli 1958, p. 54).

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