

### Comments on Brill Paper

In his erudite paper, Prof. Brill sketches for us the theological background of RMM: his intellectual predecessors-- especially his illustrious forbears, the six "princes" (*Nesiim*) of the Habad movement and-- most importantly, his immediate predecessor and father-in-law known in Habad circles as "the previous Rebbe." It is clearly a service to those interested in the Lubavitch phenomenon to have this information available to them.

One wonders, however, if his statement that RMM's "philosophy was built upon the thought of his predecessors... *almost everything he said* (my emphasis) was built on the preceding thinkers, even as he took their ideas further," is wholly accurate. Each of RMM's ideas, he avers, "has antecedents in the writings of his predecessors," then goes on to discuss RMM's "unique development to the modernization of these ideas." Considering some of these important contributions, Brill appears to be overstating the case. No better proof of this is RMM's remark, that "Judaism changes." Taken by itself, that statement would produce disbelief and consternation in Lithuanian Orthodox circles and grist for the mills of all Habad's conservative critics, albeit that observant Jews exposed to history and philosophy would agree that *certain kinds* of changes are inevitable and unexceptional.

What is more surprising to the reader unaccustomed to the boldness of early Hasidism is the first example offered by Prof. Brill: "continuous progressive revelation," which term is often invoked by leaders of the "progressive" trends in modernist Jewish thinking to explain (away) deviations from halakhic belief and practice. Nor is RMM's allusion to a "new Torah" bound to win converts to Habad from their rightist critics. Of course, RMM is not by any means offering support for such heterodoxy; his intention is to increase observance by abandoning an "all or nothing" approach in introducing Judaism to Jews estranged from the tradition.

But overstated or not, Brill is right to point out the most significant aberration of RMM from the teachings of the founder of Habad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, who taught that there is an unbridgeable chasm between Jew and Gentile, a spiritual difference that is objective and biologically grounded: Jews have "divine souls," whereas non-Jews have only "animal souls." RMM taught the contrary: women, children, and Gentiles are all endowed with souls, a thesis that has solid sources in classical Jewish thought. This is certainly a tribute to RMM's independence of thought.

Brill describes RMM's emphasis on miracles as the main ingredient in the spiritual diet he recommends for curious Jews, underweight in their knowledge of Basic Judaism. After centuries of discussing the role of miracles—both extraordinary or supernatural and ordinary or "natural"—by rationalists such as Maimonides and a host of others, the Lubavitcher Rebbe's bold insistence on emphasizing miracles took

courage. Even Ramban, who considered the laws of nature as a species of miracle, did not recommend miracles as a didactically preferred way of attracting otherwise skeptical Jews to Torah. Both philosophers and Hasidic masters incline to the view that “miracles – even the supernatural ones – were “natural” in that these events were scripted by God at the Creation. This is the opposite of the Ramban who considered the natural as supernatural. (See my *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, p. 190 n. 53.)

What this reviewer finds surprising is Prof. Brill’s approval of this novel approach to “outreach” by hailing it as “actually something very modern.” Modern? Brill writes, “The twentieth century Catholic world was also appealing to direct miracles for common people, such as those occurring at Lourdes, as a way of maintaining faith in the modern world despite the fixed order of science.” DDE! The Catholic emphasis on miracles much preceded the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Lourdes was an attraction to Catholics for ages. Moreover, I am ignorant of such *new* emphasis by the Church. And most important: so what? Since when is a simple or primitive reliance on miracles needed to prove the truth of the Catholic faith worthy of emulation by committed Jews, at a time when we find it necessary to *explain* miracles rationally to Jews, so many of them skeptics, rather than “pushing” it as a way of winning souls?

Prof. Brill is enlightening when explaining the rationale of some of the innovations of RMM, such as the “Mitzvah Tanks,” “Tefillin Stations,” candle lighting, the famous one dollar distribution by the Rebbe for the recipient to give to charity, and other such. Similarly, his interpretation of the Sabbath laws, while by no means revolutionary or even new, is cogent and relevant. I would not be surprised if many cynics would gain more respect for their religious traditions if they knew the eminently cogent reasons the Lubavitcher Rebbe offers for these practices.

Brill implies (but does not say so explicitly) that Habad, especially the sixth Rebbe, was fond of the expression, *ad she'yafutzu ma'ayonotekha ha-hutzah*. The original source is Proverbs 5:27-- פִּצְצוּ מַעֲיִנְתֶּיךָ חוּצָה – “may your wellsprings be dispersed abroad.” Its special importance for Hasidism lies in the pneumatic experience of the Baal Shem Tov [Besht] as he related it in a letter to his brother-in-law. In this vision, the Besht approaches the Messiah in exasperation, and asks, “When are you coming?” The answer: “When your wellsprings will be dispersed abroad,” i.e., when the Besht’s teachings – the foundations of Hasidism – will be widely accepted in the Jewish world. (See my comments on Prof. Halamish’s paper for more on this.) Even without the parsing by Prof. Brill, it is understandable that we have here a reliable and vital source for Lubavitch style outreach.

Brill also tells of the devotion of RMM to his father-in-law, his immediate predecessor, and his insistence on minimizing the difference between the living and the dead. His prescription for one’s conduct in praying at the grave of the sixth Rebbe is little short of bizarre, and one wishes that the author would have conjectured that we have here a preview of the current excesses of contemporary Lubavitch Hasidim in their devotion to RMM himself. Brill’s caution against trying to fit Habad thinking



– such as the liaison between the living and the dead-- into the contemporary American ethos, is commendable, but there comes a time when one must call a spade a spade.

The contrast Prof. Brill sees between RMM and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is somewhat forced. While the latter devoted most of his career to plumbing the depths of Halakha and explaining its significance for man philosophically, and RMM spoke mostly of faith, commitment, and renewal, that highlights certain differences in emphasis. The latter was a halakhic scholar who certainly did not disdain halakhic learning, and the former was a man of deep faith who spoke and wrote of its importance in a most sophisticated and cogent manner. The differences were less significant than the devotion of both to the fullness of the Jewish tradition in its various forms, and its viability for modern man. In this, both Rav and Rebbe found common ground.