A Tale of Two Nothings:
A Comparison of Knowledge in Judaism and Daoism Through the Prisms of Rabbi
Nachman of Bratslav and Zhuangzi

By Gavi Kutliroff

Written under the supervision of Yu Feng, PhD and Yehuda Mirsky, PhD

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Acknowledgments

In many ways, this project began in my teenage years, when I developed an early fascination with Chinese thought more broadly and Daoism in particular. As I developed my parallel and more personal interest in Jewish thought and Hasidism in particular, I began to notice remarkable similarities that surpassed the boundary of wishful thinking. I also became aware of an unexamined attitude among my peers and teachers to dismiss the philosophical, cultural, and religious integrity of virtually the entire Eastern hemisphere, which struck me on an especially personal note because I felt, as I have often remarked to my friends, that Judaism developed both historically and philosophically in between the East and the West. Over the course of my four years at Brandeis University, these beliefs and passions were channeled into serious academic investigations, and they culminated in this thesis. This process would not have been possible without a whole slew of people.

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A Note on Translation

Due to the nature of this project, translation posed an interesting problem in a dual sense, both in the literal manner and in the broader manner of making foreign cultures comprehensible to each other and to the reader. Whenever possible, I have presented Chinese and Hebrew terms beside their transliteration and their spelling in the original alphabet, in an attempt to make comfortable the reader who is familiar with at least one of these languages. Many of these terms, while bearing literal English “counterparts,” are laced with immutable cultural connotations, so rather than use the familiar English term I have often opted to use the authentic term in the original language after the first use. I often found there was a trade-off between maintaining cultural integrity and offering the reader an easier reading experience, which is perhaps indicative of a more general and pressing issue. I have attempted to mediate these cases with as much balance as possible.

All translations from Hebrew are my own. All translations of the Zhuangzi have been taken from Martin Palmer’s translation, unless otherwise specified; however, transliterations from the outdated Wade-Giles system have been changed to pinyin. These quotes include that edition’s pagination. The few translations of the Daodejing are my own and used the edition published by Shambhala, which includes both Chinese and English. All quotes from Likkutei Moharan are taken from the version published by Ayin Ro’eh Productions [הפקות ראה עין].

In terms of spelling, transliterations from Hebrew are generally phonetic and in accordance with standard scholarly use. The field of Jewish mysticism studies and Jewish studies more broadly could benefit from a more standardized system across the board; different studies often used different transliterations to refer to the same terms. Transliterations from Chinese are all based on the more accurate pinyin system rather than the archaic and colonialist Wade-Giles system. The only exception is the I Ching, which in pinyin is spelled as it more accurately pronounced, Yijing (the latter character is the same as that of the Daodejing); this book is simply too famous and the archaic spelling of its title has already taken hold.
“A religion which cannot face the negation of itself is a religion which negates itself.”

—Anna Abrowofsky
Introduction

An Unlikely Comparison

When Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, master of a revolutionary Hasidic dynasty in what is now Ukraine and which still thrives today, was stricken in 1808 with the tuberculosis that took his wife’s life and eventually his own, he travelled to the city of Lviv, where he received medical treatment. Ever the traditional image of Jewish piety, he protested the treatment as heretical even as he underwent it, antithetical to unyielding faith in God as divine healer. In describing his master’s comments regarding the experience, his main disciple Nathan Sternhartz—always at the side of “Rabbeinu” (our Rabbi) through his manifold sufferings—records the following poignant incident:

...The afflictions I endured there [in Lviv], I cannot describe; more than just afflictions, I received also medicines. I drank [the medicine called] “Hina,”—there in the land of Hina [China] they are heretics completely, saying there is neither Judge nor judgment. And so too with other medicines from places in which there are other heresies. And when all of this entered my insides, what was done was done.¹

It is certainly possible to read these comments as dismissive of the validity of Chinese “heresy,” to understand that Rabbi Nachman felt no more than threatened by the symbolic and theological danger it posed. Nathan Sternhartz seems to read it this way, continuing to explain that his master only engaged with the medicine in order to “defeat those heresies,” and admittedly the notion of engaging directly with the heresies of other nations in order to combat them does appear elsewhere in Rabbi Nachman’s thought.²

But this reading does not account for the cryptic closing line—מה שהנהרשה מהון ננהשה—

¹ Nathan Sternhartz, Chayey Moharan, 181.
² See, for example, Likkutei Moharan II:63 on singing the songs of other nations.
literally “what was done from this was done.” The line implies Rabbi Nachman felt that the medicine he assumed to be Chinese had had some kind of lasting impact, apparently on Rabbi Nachman himself; as he put it, the medicine had “entered his insides.” Rabbi Nachman in fact seems to have felt that something of the Chinese “heresy” was inside him, that there was some indelibly Chinese mark on his character and his thought.\(^3\)

Whether or not the story and this reading is true as such—and there are, to be sure, a number of questionable elements, like the exact identity of the medicine in question and the ambiguous meaning of the closing phrase—it draws attention to an area of which scholarship is startlingly devoid: the comparison of Jewish and Chinese thought. There has been a limited amount of research into the comparison of early Rabbinic and Confucian thought (although this has been sparse and broad), but virtually no investigation whatsoever into the two more mystically inclined counterparts of each culture—Hasidism and Daoism.\(^4\) These traditions represent a more “folk” tradition in contrast to the mainstream traditions of Chinese and Jewish societies, taking issue with the dogma, rigidity, and rationalism of the major philosophical-religious movements of their day. Hasidism in many ways represents the popular resurgence of the mystical underbelly of Jewish thought that had in fact been in firm presence close to a thousand years prior to its appearance in the mid-18th century; and Daoism in its initial

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\(^3\) I owe this clever reading to Zvi Mark, who told it to me when I explained to him this project in a meeting. A similar reading is proposed in Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 238-239.

philosophical incarnation in the 4th century BCE represents a mystical interpretation of symbols present in the backdrop of Chinese society for at least five centuries.

Each of these traditions is characterized by a creative and daring mental energy that produced countless minds of heroic proportions, but at their height stand two towering figures unique for their sheer creative genius: Rabbi Nachman, the aforementioned Hasidic master of what came to be known as the Bratslav sect, and Zhuangzi, the wandering, wondering philosopher of 4th century BCE China, considered one of the patriarchs of the Daoist religion.\(^5\)

Despite a distance of two millennia and a sixth of the globe’s circumference, these two thinkers converged on a remarkable number of points. Both speak constantly in praise of childlike simplicity. Both are funny, and aware of the profundity of comedy as a value in the mind and in the world. Both were itinerants, and wrote texts that require the same wandering style of reading that they manifested literally. Both had a cutting skepticism of knowledge and objectivity. And on a deeper and more historical note, both found themselves at a watershed in the development of the human philosophical and religious soul, at a moment where rationalism threatened to rigidify once and for all the dynamic powers of imagination, and both fought valiantly for a life premised on absurdity rather than logic. It might be said that both thinkers saw themselves as the vanguard of what they felt to be a dying way of thinking and living, the last line of

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\(^5\) The term “Daoism,” a translation of the Chinese 道家 dao jia, more precisely translated as “School of Dao” or “School of Way,” does not actually appear as a reference to an organized system of thought until the Han-era historian Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* two centuries later. Neither Zhuangzi nor his eponymous book should be considered as having been part of any “organized religion” in their day, at least in the Western sense. See Kidder Smith, “Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, ‘Legalism,’ et cetera” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (2003), 129-156.
defense protecting the primal human mind against the assault of ideology and, in
different forms but of one essence, modernity.

This constellation of similarities will form the backbone of this paper. In
particular, this paper is an examination of how both thinkers relate to the concept of
knowledge—its purpose, its pitfalls, its very existence, its relation to the human and to
the other, when it is to be eschewed and when exploited. But in the background of the
comparison will stand more dramatic and historical questions, like each thinker’s
perceived place in a changing society—a changing humanity—and their relationship to
the basic existential questions that emerge in times of crisis.

In order to embark on a comparison of the thought of these two monumental
figures, it is of interest to properly outline a defense of why exactly this admittedly
striking and unfamiliar comparison is valuable at all. But before this argument can be
elaborated, it is necessary to paint a portrait of Rabbi Nachman and Zhuangzi and the
rich worlds in which they wandered, exploring the vastly disparate—and in some ways
strangely similar—realms of 4th century BCE, Warring States-era China and its
burgeoning Daoist terminology, and early 19th century Hasidism in Eastern Europe and
its position in a millennium-old tradition of Jewish mysticism, known as Kabbalah. It
can be assumed based on the very gap that this paper seeks to fill that the average reader
will not be firmly familiar with more than one history; this account will therefore
provide a cursory overview of the earth from which each thinker sprouted. Each
description, both historical and phenomenological, will conclude with a brief description
of the thinkers themselves, whose ideas will be more fully fleshed out in the body of the
paper.
Historical Context—Zhuangzi

The Zhou dynasty (1046-221 BCE) was the second and longest of China’s historical dynasties. Promoting a sort of feudal economy, the early decisions of the royal court paved the way for the dynasty’s own collapse; by the latter half of its reign, certain local authorities had become so powerful as to become effectively independent polities. Over several centuries of complicated political drama, including the Eastward move of the capital following a coup and an invasion from the North as well as the partition of some of these polities, the Zhou ruler was reduced to a figurehead.

The ensuing power vacuum ushered in a period known as the Warring States. The statesmen at the head of each polity, suspended in political and economic stasis, scrambled to assemble their own state mechanisms, and, more important to the stage of history, the philosophies behind them. This political disaster ironically produced a revolution in human thought. It was this situation that spurred the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought, the incredible explosion of philosophical productivity whereby itinerant thinkers roamed from state to state at the behest of various nobles, offering theories encompassing both statecraft and broad statements on human nature.6

Confucius (551-479 BCE), the earliest and most famous of these thinkers, based his heavily ritualistic vision on his conception of the early Zhou, casting this period as a golden age to be adapted by the rulers of his own day. His thought, itself the subject of such intense debate as to produce entirely independent schools later in the Warring States era, is marked by a character of rigidity and conservatism; it has been compared, 

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6 For a more detailed account of late Zhou history and its relevance for the Hundred Schools of Thought, see A.C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1989), 1-8.
at least in part, to the Western philosophy of “role ethics,” wherein social good is
determined not by adherence to a transcendent principle (as in virtue ethics) but by
adherence to a social role.\(^7\) Confucius’s school, called *rujia* 儒家, roughly translated as
the School of the Scholar or Gentleman, acted as the barometer against which all future
schools would be measured, variously in terms of how they interpreted it, how much
they agreed with their own interpretation, and how much they prided themselves on their
own deviance from China’s philosophical patriarch.

It is against this backdrop that the figure of Zhuang Zhou, known honorifically as
Zhuangzi (“Master Zhuang”), emerges. Cryptic as an actual historical person, he lived
during the latter half of the 4\(^{th}\) century BCE, although even this point is not a consensus.
The little else we know about him is from the earliest biographical account in Sima
Qian’s writings, drawing mostly from the text of his work *Zhuangzi* itself, which
probably did not reflect historical reality and certainly did not seek to intentionally.
Tedious and quarrelsome debates about his personal life and the historical development
of his eponymous work have produced a literature of their own and are entirely beyond
the scope of and irrelevant to this paper.\(^8\) It is safe to say, however, that Zhuangzi seems
to have drawn from the thought of two prior texts—the *Daodejing* and the *I Ching*.\(^9\) The
first, penned by the mythical Laozi, is a collection of eighty-one short poems
expounding on the Dao. Literally translated as Way, the term *dao* 道 used to refer to an

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\(^8\) For this information, see A.C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*
(Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 283-321; Liu Xiaogan, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters* (Ann Arbor:
University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies Monograph, 1994); Harold Roth, ed., *A Companion to
\(^9\) *Daodejing* 道德经 translates to “The Classic of Dao and De,” terms to be defined shortly; *I Ching* 易经
is “The Classic of Changes,” more commonly known in the West as simply the Book of Changes. That
Zhuangzi drew from these two texts will be further demonstrated herein.
ideal mode of a task’s performance or of living in general predates the text and appears frequently in Confucius’s *Analects*. But for Laozi, the Dao becomes an ontological phenomenon itself, a mode of being to be accessed and made manifest in the life of the individual.¹⁰ Strictly speaking, Laozi’s Dao is *absent*; it is the Great Nothing that precedes and produces all being, or to use the text’s own phrase, the empty hub at the center of the wheel around which the spokes turn.¹¹ *De*, the other titular subject, is the manifested application of the Dao in a person’s actions, the behavior corollary to the phenomenon. Roger Ames has labeled the Dao-De relationship the “focus-field” relationship, wherein De is the focused manifestation of the broader field of Dao as it relates to a given situation.¹²

The *I Ching*, of unknown authorship, was originally a divination guide in use at the onset of the Zhou. Over the ensuing centuries it amassed a tremendous body of commentary and assumed a place at the head of the Chinese classics, sacred to the followers of every school of the period. This commentary, building on images latent in the original text, transformed the text from a technical manual into a discourse on cosmology, occupied especially with the nature of change, which it feels to be the paradoxically dynamic constant of the universe.¹³

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¹⁰ The “individual” in question here was most explicitly a ruler, but the book reads just as well as a manifesto for the curious existentialist, which explains its lasting popularity and its resurgence as a member of the New Age body of literature. This is an excellent opportunity to note the style of most Hundred Schools of Thought texts—intended technically for statesmen, their sweeping and universal manner of expression renders them relevant for any reader, even across millennia. The *Zhuangzi* itself is a major exception, generally disdainful of politicians and targeting instead the average citizen.

¹¹ Daodejing Chapter 11.


Although the strictly linear association of these three texts is made centuries later after Daoism has coalesced into a coherent body, Zhuangzi certainly does represent a continuation of a preexisting stream. He, too, is concerned with, in fact enthralled by, the notion of change as the atom of being and the imperative of humanity to embrace this fact. This anti-imperative imperative is, as it turns out, virtually the only imperative to be expected of humanity at all—there is a clear antinomian trend in the Zhuangzi, a skepticism of law, of the nobles who sculpt it, and of the politicians who enact it. If from the I Ching Zhuangzi inherited his regard for change, what Ames has termed the priority of process over form, from the Daodejing he received his biting criticism of the legalistic Confucian doctrine as representing a departure from the Dao. Society functions only so long as it roots itself to that encompassing and mysterious phenomenon, the absence at the heart of things; but this view of humanity as derivative from a source leads to liberty, not law. Zhuangzi’s view is distinctly naturalistic, in that the place of mankind in his thought is no different than the place of nature. The China of his day, he felt, had compensated for its departure from the Dao not by throwing off the yoke of the normative and returning, but by magnifying the problem through the vehicle of ritual, which he despised and ridiculed.

In all of these views Zhuangzi is and should be seen as a link in the antinomian, naturalistic chain of the I Ching and the Daodejing. But by extending their philosophies beyond the original texts, Zhuangzi entered into uncharted philosophical territory all his own in two particular points. First, his antinomian tendencies were applied not just to law, but also to logic itself, to the unexamined human reflex toward structure and sense.

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14 See above, footnote 5.
15 Ames, Wandering at Ease, 227.
Much of the *Zhuangzi*, especially the first seven chapters, is devoted to pulling the rug out from under the various logical arguments of the thinkers (real and imagined) of his day, and often exposing the ruse of language itself, the very expressive form logic assumes. Second, whereas his textual predecessors were concerned primarily with abstraction and pontification, *Zhuangzi* is interested first and foremost in the *behavior* of the reader. Although the text does feature several soliloquies superficially about cosmology or the nature of truth (or rather non-truth) itself, these essays often only appear so as to provide a model that can be manifested in the actual life of the practitioner. This is an important methodological note about the text: The *Zhuangzi* is at least partially an attempt to apply an ontological scheme of the universe to the lived experience of the person. It is the confluence of both these points that leads to *Zhuangzi*’s supreme disdain for rationalism, ideology, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

**Historical Context—Rabbi Nachman**

Rabbi Nachman was born across the span of the globe and of history from *Zhuangzi*, not in fact in the town of Bratslav for which his dynasty is named, but in the now-Ukrainian town of Medzhybizh. He was born into a dynamic and tempestuous Jewish world populated by a number of interweaving social groups. Quite like how the

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16 The text’s 33 chapters are divided into three sections: the *neipian* 内篇 or Inner Chapters (1-7), the *waipian* 外篇 Outer Chapters (8-22), and the *zapian* 杂篇 or Miscellaneous Chapters (23-33). As mentioned above, there is an almost independent literature on the *Zhuangzi*’s authorship, but for brevity’s sake it is of scholarly consensus that the Inner Chapters are *Zhuangzi*’s own work, and the rest is a syncretic mix of several others schools which all nonetheless bear varying degrees of fealty to the original core ideas. For the purposes of this paper, any quote from the text will be considered as coming from a unitary document unless the content bears clear contradiction to the main theses of the text. In doing so this paper secondarily serves as an argument for the basic philosophical continuity of the *Zhuangzi*.

17 To be sure, the *Daodejing* does offer hints of this method—especially in its second half, which deals with matters of *De*—but its examples are underdeveloped and aimed usually at the head of state.
Hundred Schools of Thought fought for the soul of the China as much as for the proper way to live, these social groups fought, at times viciously, for the spirit of Judaism of the day. The debates wrestled with questions of modernity, the opposing roles of mysticism and rationalism in the life of a practitioner, and social organization. At risk of overgeneralization, we can speak of three groups that defined Rabbi Nachman’s world: the Hasidim, the Misnagdim, and the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment.

Hasidism, the movement into which Rabbi Nachman was born and would irrevocably impact, credits as its founder his great-grandfather, the mid-18th century figure Israel ben Eliezer, known more famously as the “Baal Shem Tov” or “Owner of Great Name.” Not much verifiable information in the way of history exists regarding this cryptic personality, and his teachings are almost all recorded by his students and through apocryphal stories. Nonetheless, consistent across all accounts, there seems to be two main novelties he offered: an intellectual revolution in the form of a new understanding of Jewish mysticism, and a social revolution in the form of a unique, distinctly populist social organization. Both of these revolutions were apparently understated in the life of the Baal Shem Tov himself and developed in a more pronounced manner as the movement proliferated.

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18 “-im” is the plural suffix in Hebrew; the singular of each term is respectively Hasid and Misnaged. Formal pronunciation renders the latter term Mitnaged, but in the Yiddish parlance of the world in which the term developed the “t” sound was rendered “s.”

19 The term connotes both good repute of the man himself and also the mastery of the Great Name, i.e. God’s, whereby one has the power to perform supernatural acts. Accounts abound of the Baal Shem Tov performing these (miraculous hagiographies comprise the main text of his disciple’s work Shivchei HaBesht, literally “The Praises of the Baal Shem Tov”), and defiance of nature and order through acts of faith is an important theme in Hasidism in general and for Rabbi Nachman in particular.

In terms of the intellectual revolution of Hasidism, the movement preached the popular study of Kabbalah, the mystical stream of Judaism that had existed at this point for around seven centuries. Hasidism’s particular novelty to this body was the psychologization of its vocabulary—that is, its appropriation of Kabbalistic terms for a symbolic understanding of the individual person. Prior to the Hasidic movement, Kabbalah was generally taken to be a description of the broader spiritual universe and of the Godhead in highly mythical and literal language; humanity’s role in the cosmos may have been, depending on the given Kabbalistic subsystem, pivotal in terms of ensuring its proper functioning, but man himself was never the fulcrum of the entire mystical project.

Hasidism, while retaining by all means a literal understanding of Kabbalistic models and God’s position as the lifeblood of being, moves the person into the center of the conversation. Models that previously only described the supernal worlds are now applied to the inner worlds of the worshipper. In particular, the sefirot, the ten hypostatic entities that comprise the supernal body of God, were now stressed in their aspect of being homologous with the body of man; in addition to describing the process of creation as emerging from “the head of God,” for example, Hasidism could now describe the genesis of human thought as emerging from the same spiritual location in the soul of the worshipper. These notions, while bearing earlier Kabbalistic precedent,
were marginal if present at all in various models; it can therefore be said that Hasidism is, in the sense of religious history, a progressive and individualistic movement.

On the other hand, Hasidism’s other major shift was in the social realm. Although the Rabbi was always of paramount importance in the Jewish communal structure, in this new movement the rebbe—also called the zadik [זָדיק] or righteous man—was marked as the undisputed nucleus of his Hasidic court. A figure characterized by impressive charisma, he was granted exceptional religious capabilities and commanded different degrees of dependence from his Hasidim, the members of his court, depending on the variety of Hasidism in question. Rabbi Nachman himself contributed heavily to the development of the zadik’s role and its theological underpinnings.22 This highly organized but flexible populist structure lent the movement its extraordinary speed of proliferation across Northeastern Europe, and also lent it a distinctly conservative character, since allegiance was pledged to a single figure. Hasidism was therefore colored by a certain paradox, whereby the content of its mystical speculative literature was highly revolutionary, but its social activity and legal orthodoxy was highly traditional.

The leaps made by the Hasidic movement drew the ire of many Jews in the region. These Jews quickly identified themselves as Misnagdim, literally “opponents,” and developed a traditionalist movement of their own. The Misnagdim were uncomfortable with the cultish character of the new movement’s populist structure, and with the popularization of Kabbalah, which was until that point a highly esoteric doctrine preserved only for the scholarly elite, of which the Hasidic layperson was

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neither. The establishment of Misnagdism and its growing staunchness contributed to Hasidism’s public perception as countercultural.

The third social movement of relevance here is the Haskalah. The Haskalah was an intellectual movement that sought to modernize Judaism, reshaping Jewish culture in the Enlightenment language of 18th Century Europe. This manifested in bidirectional translation, the proliferation of Yiddish high culture, and the presentation of Jewish thought as a coherent, Western-style philosophy. Misnagdim and Hasidim alike were appalled by the so-called Maskilim, who typically abandoned the traditional fold and embraced secular values. Hasidism gains an anti-modernist character when examined against the Haskalah, and there is a truth to the claim that a fear of modernity and its concomitant erosion of ritual and faith abides in Hasidic texts, but it has been correctly noted that Hasidism also utilized tools of modernity in its social organization in its very fight against modernity, and its identity as a religious revivalist movement is typical of the modern era.

Into this historical whirlwind enters Rabbi Nachman. Although he is the founder of his own dynasty—whose followers, called “Breslovers,” are today experiencing a renaissance—there is a distinct, almost pathological iconoclastic aura about him; indeed, his is the only dynasty to eschew the hierarchical pattern of inheritance, and Breslover Hasidim to this day acknowledge only him as their present Rabbi. Arthur Green has noted that Rabbi Nachman’s iconoclastic behavior—his failure to select an heir, his wanderings from town to town (sometimes overnight and without warning to

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24 This move has earned the Breslovers the epithet “Dead Hasidim” among other Hasidic groups.
25 Green, Tormented Master, 119.
his disciples), his vicious battle with his Hasidic peers, his occasional rejection of his
own Hasidim—points to a desire, conscious or otherwise, to emulate the Baal Shem Tov
and breathe life back into a movement that even in its own progressiveness was for him
already too stale and ossified. He refers to his own Hasidic compatriots as
“Misnagdim,” unique in Hasidic parlance. Rabbi Nachman also expressed a virulent
opposition to the Maskilim, ostensibly for cheapening the impenetrable depths of the
Torah and the Jewish soul, although he also expresses a profound understanding of and
regard for them.

The common thread in Rabbi Nachman’s attack on the social ills of traditional
Judaism and his venomous critique of the Haskalah is a skepticism of order, also social
but especially philosophical—that is, logic. The Hebrew root of the term Haskalah is
sekhel ע热点), intellect, a term Rabbi Nachman frequently identifies with rational
thought. His two-volume magnum opus Likkutei Moharan, whose explication forms
the backbone of the portion of this paper involved with Rabbi Nachman’s thought,
should be understood primarily as a project intended to prove the absurdity of logic and
promote instead a model of religious worship based on the mystical, the irrational, the
immanent, and absurdity itself. In doing so Rabbi Nachman represents in many ways the

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26 Nathan Sternhartz writes in Chayey Moharan II:279 that Rabbi Nachman was a reincarnation of the
Baal Shem Tov.
27 Likkutei Moharan 8:8, 28:1, 221. These should be read in the context of the persecution on the part of
other Hasidim against Rabbi Nachman. See also Green, Tormented Master, 94-123.
28 Rabbi Nachman’s complex attitude toward the Maskilim is more fully fleshed out in Yehuda Liebes’s
article “The Novelty of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav”, and is partially the subject of the third chapter of
this paper. It is noteworthy that he spent the last two years of his life living in the house of a Maskil and
spending time with his host’s associates. See Green, Tormented Master, 255-259 and Yehuda Liebes,
“The Novelty of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav” in Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah 45,
91-103 (Hebrew).
29 It is noteworthy that Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, better known by his acronym the Maharal of
Prague—with whose writings Rabbi Nachman was intimately familiar—wrote in Netzach Yisrael, עירע
“Order is the very nature of the intellect.” Thus the assault on the Haskalah was conceived in Rabbi Nachman’s symbolic mind as an assault on logic itself—and vice versa.
height of Hasidic prodigy, taking to their ultimate conclusion the postulates set forth at the movement’s birth and setting a precedent for more antinomian and independent thinkers for years to come.30

_The Value of Comparison_

After a brief overview of the social and phenomenological context of each of these two thinkers, certain factors should stand out—both thinkers construct arguments against logic and propose alternative models for “knowing” rather than knowledge itself; both base their models off of more grandiose, previously existing strains of mysticism; and both develop these preexisting ideas further after a perceived social need, that is, the heavily structural, categorical thought of their respective eras. It is in light of this common ground that we can propose several arguments for the value of this admittedly surprising comparison.

First, as mentioned earlier, a comparison of Daoist and Hasidic thought through the prism of two particular examples has never been rigorously performed, and will serve to fill a major gap in the literature. But more than the general trends of both movements, it should now be clear that a comparison of Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman themselves is of special interest, considering the extreme and provocative nature of their thought and the extraordinarily similar worlds in which they blossomed. In exploring the question of their similarity, we will come to discover something not only about history and its interplay with philosophy and religion, but about knowledge itself, revealing a

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30 Like Zhuangzi, Rabbi Nachman also gained posthumous popularity, and increasingly so as time passed; his writings also experienced unprecedented popularity in the secular world during the New Age. See Persico, “Hitbodedut for a New Age.”
transcendental idea fundamental to both thinkers, even as they express it in different and sometimes contradictory terms.

Second, establishing the relationship between these two disparate figures will help dislodge each of them from contexts into which each has been prodded by academic literature. Rabbi Nachman has long been considered a Hasidic renegade, more a Western-style existentialist than a Jewish mystic. Zhuangzi, for his part, has often been construed through the lens of Indian thought, a problem whose untangling is made all the more difficult by the centuries of Daoist-Buddhist syncretism in China. Both of them have been subject to perhaps a slightly more accurate reading through a postmodern lens, but this too represents a superimposition of a foreign identity upon each thinker.

The very idea of reading through a particular “ism” is exactly the notion much of their writings seek to dispel, as will become clear. It might be said that through the comparison of each thinker to his philosophical neighbors, certain commonalities

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31 This is precisely the claim made in Green, *Tormented Master*, 317, and also explains the trend of comparing Rabbi Nachman to Western philosophers like Foucault, Kierkegaard, Kafka, and Wittgenstein. See, respectively, Oriol Poveda, “Resuming the Broken Dialogue: On Madness and the Limits of Reason in Michel Foucault and Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,” (Master’s thesis, Center for Jewish Studies Heidelberg, 2010); S.G. Shoham, “Soren Kierkegaard and Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav: Defiant Rebels” in *Filosofia Oggi* 14, no. 1, 21-36.; Rodger Kamanetz, *Burnt Books: Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka* (New York/Canada, Random House, 2010); Yehuda Liebes, “Nahman of Bratslav and Ludwig Wittgenstein” in *Dimmui* 19 (2001). Zvi Mark has made the goal of much of his analysis the “returning” of Rabbi Nachman to his non-Western, Hasidic roots, and in many ways this paper is a continuation of that effort.


between each neighbor have created not clarity but confusion of terms and ideas, further obscuring the distinctness of either party. The distance in time and space between Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman is therefore not an obstacle, but an advantage. Noticing the similarities between them will include pinpointing characteristics of each that have been overlooked or oversimplified by previous studies; it will characterize each of them differently than they have been shown before, painting a richer and more complete portrait of each thinker.

Third, on a methodological note, comparing the two will serve not only to establish a common ground, but also to illustrate the unique and incompatible worlds from which they stem. Contrasting their respective paradigms will highlight the unique elements comprising each. This paper does not intend to wash over the legitimate differences between the two, but neither does it start from the premise that they are beyond comparison, and any attempt at one infringes upon their inalienable character; instead, it will seek to explore the territory shared by each thinker, while simultaneously determining how their paths toward that space derive from distinct roots.

And fourth, quite simply, it will introduce a fascinating and perennially important thinker to any reader who is familiar with only one of the schools discussed herein. Research on Daoism and Chinese thought in general displays a very poor and immature understanding of Jewish thought; scholars of Jewish thought, for their part, have recently begun to show an understanding in particular for Buddhism, but their grasp on Daoism and its luminaries remains murky, if not altogether absent. In addition

34 Scholars considered part of the “Neo-Hasidic movement” in particular, like Arthur Green and his student Ariel Mayse, have displayed an interest in Buddhist thought. See also the work of Boaz Huss on contemporary religious revivalism and the New Age. In the traditional fold, Rabbis Menachem Froman and Shimon Gershon Rosenberg frequently referenced Buddhism in their works, evidently with scholarly background.
to its academic significance, this paper should serve as a nuanced presentation of at least one exciting thinker to a reader who is familiar with one or neither of these two giants.

Overview of This Paper

As mentioned, this paper is primarily an exploration of the idea of knowledge as it appears in the thought of Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. This exploration will develop over three chapters.

The first chapter, titled “Immanent Knowledge,” will discuss the model each thinker presents for a way of knowing alternative to the intellectual method—rather than apprehending an object of thought through a rational, a priori system, the object is instead apprehended for what it is in itself and how it relates to the observer. This method derives from a fundamental skepticism of the intellect and its dubious processes, and is raised by both thinkers as another kind of knowing altogether than that which we conventionally mean by the term “to know.”

The second chapter, titled “Absurdity of Knowledge,” is a closer look at this skepticism, at exactly why and how each thinker rejects the “conventional” way of knowing. Whereas the first chapter examines their alternative model, the second will examine the problems inherent in rationalism and the absurdity they deem it to be based upon. It will also feature a study of the surprising ramifications these conclusions about the absurdity of knowledge imply.

The third chapter, titled “Ontology and Ideology,” will pan out from the close-reading method employed by the previous two chapters and attempt to trace the roots of their thought back to their respective worlds, effectively “returning” each of them to their philosophical homes. It will also attempt to show how their ideas were an
expression of their basic disdain for ideology as a mechanism of human thought, contextualizing this claim not only within the realm of ontology but within the realm of history, returning them to the global canvas as well.

There is a saying in China that despite the traditional conception of Daoism and Confucianism as fundamentally at odds, in reality a man is a Confucian in his place of work and a Daoist in his home. It seems that this is true for the Jew as well—while the traditional narrative has it that Hasidism, with its mystical character, opposes at its heart the legalistic rationalism of rabbinic Judaism, in fact the Jew is a rationalist in the House of Study and a mystic in prayer. While several analyses, albeit few in total, have been performed of the relationship between the legalist-rationalist elements in Judaism and Chinese thought, this paper represents the first step toward seriously understanding the relationship between the traditional absurdist, mystical strains of Judaism and of China, those two ancient peoples whose thought has persisted until today, occupying the deepest recesses of the human mind and soul.
Chapter One: Immanent Knowledge

Knowledge and Behavior

Before we can embark on an exploration of knowledge in Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, we must pose a more basic question: What is the purpose, for each thinker, of knowledge altogether? A cursory glance at the manifold statements of each regarding knowledge paints a confused and possibly incoherent portrait. In Rabbi Nachman, we find on the one hand abounding statements in the vein of: “The goal of knowledge is that we shall not know,”35 and: “When a person pursues his intellect and wisdom [וחכמתו], he may fall into many errors and stumbling blocks, and come to great evils, God forbid.”36 This latter statement in particular, deriving from a typical passage where Rabbi Nachman characteristically disparages the intellect and exhorts childlike simplicity of his Hasidim, mirrors quite well the opening words of Chapter 3 of Zhuangzi: “Our life has a boundary but there is no boundary to knowledge. To use what has a boundary to pursue what is limitless is dangerous; with this knowledge, if we still go after knowledge, we will run into trouble.” It seems that to Zhuangzi, too, the ultimate “this knowledge” [知者] is to not know at all. And throughout narrative passages in both works, praises are heaped upon the fools, the simpletons, and the commoners.

And yet, throughout the works of both thinkers, we find them continually extolling knowledge. Explicit statements are more easily found in Rabbi Nachman, who

35 Likkutei Moharan 24. The phrase is a common Hasidic application of a phrase originally found in R’ Yosef Albo’s work, ostensibly an adaptation of a statement by Rabbi Yediah Ha-Penini. See Mark’s discussion of this phrase in Rabbi Nachman’s thought in Zvi Mark, Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, trans. Yaacov Dovid Shulman (London/New York: 2009), 218-246.

36 Likkutei Moharan II:12.
in the opening discourse to his magnum opus *Likkutei Moharan* refers to the apprehension of an object’s identity as procuring its “intellect” [שכל],\(^{37}\) and who constantly speaks of “knowledge” [דעת] as being of fundamental importance to divine worship.\(^{38}\) Such statements are admittedly far more sparse in *Zhuangzi*, but the work’s elusive author does portray a mastery of the intellectual craft he so often claims to disparage: He is frequently depicted in debates with contemporaneous scholars in which, while always demolishing his opponents’ arguments and demonstrating the fallacy of logic, he often uses his opponents’ own logical tactics with clear ease and comfort.\(^{39}\) A.C. Graham shrewdly observes that despite his expressed tendencies, Zhuangzi is “in one of his many aspects…himself a true sophist.”\(^{40}\) The vertiginous sensation induced by reading the labyrinthine texts of both authors can largely be understood as the result of an anti-intellectual thesis expressed in hyper-logical language, Zhuangzi in his philosophical expertise, Rabbi Nachman in his brilliant and intricate network of thematic associations,\(^{41}\) both authors in their unparalleled knack for wordplay. How do we square this contradiction?

It seems that while both thinkers hold knowledge in reverence, there is a critical difference between their understanding of knowledge and the traditional Western approach. In the Western philosophical tradition, the pursuit of truth is self-evidently

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38 See, for example, *Likkutei Moharan* I:4:4, 13:1, 33:6, 254, II:1:5, 26, and throughout the work. It is perhaps noteworthy that many of the discourses throughout *Likkutei Moharan* begin with the instruction דע, “know.”
39 Huizi 惠子 is the most famous, but not the only, example of Zhuangzi’s intellectual sparring partners, whose loss Zhuangzi famously mourns as the death of a beloved, if comically incompetent, partner in Chapter 24, 215-216. Perhaps the most obvious episode of Zhuangzi himself engaging in the argumentative style of his opponent to undermine their point (a traditional tactic of Warring States-era sophistry) is in his dialogue with Huizi on the River Hao in Chapter 17, which will be dissected here further on.
40 Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 178.
41 Known as “bechinot” [בחינות], this method of thematic association will be analyzed in the next chapter.
valuable; knowledge is sought *lishma* לְשָׁם, for its own sake. Zhuangzi, a contemporary of Plato and Aristotle but of course a stranger to them, is not bound by this presumption. As A.C. Graham succinctly phrased it, the question in Warring States China “is not the Western philosopher’s ‘What is the truth?’ but ‘Where is the way?’” An Yanming makes a similar statement in observing the tendency of Chinese philosophers even as late as the early 20th century to translate European philosophical concepts while prioritizing “ethics over epistemology”; Western explorations of truth become in translation “sources of ethical standards rather than…keys to reality.” To be sure, these statements were made in regard to Chinese philosophy on the whole, but Zhuangzi doubtless takes this sentiment to its extreme in making statements about the dangers of knowledge altogether, quite unheard of in his climate.

It seems that in more straightforward terms, *knowledge* for Zhuangzi is only important insofar as it leads to *behavior*. This illuminating formulation is certainly the case for Rabbi Nachman as well. In the introduction to his *Sefer HaMiddot*, his student Nathan Sternhartz recounts his master reciting a story in which a *maggid* מָגִיד, an otherworldly spirit, appears to an otherwise blameless new bridegroom and instructs him to sleep with his new wife while she is menstruating, a capital offense in Jewish law. The bride’s father, who is described as “a great and important person,” provides him

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42 The global coincidence of the formative schools of the four great surviving philosophical traditions (China, India, Israel, and Greece) at roughly the same time is the subject of much of Karl Jaspers’s historiographical work. He termed this era the “Axial Age.”
43 Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 3.
45 There are a number of different versions of this story, some of which have quite significant differences (a later version has it that the man’s sin will produce the Messiah as his offspring); this description of the father-in-law is included in the two earlier of the three versions. All three texts are compared in Zvi Mark, *All the Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav—Fables, Secret Tales, Dreams, and Visions: A Collection of*
with “names” [of God or angels], a type of incantation, to recite upon the maggid’s next appearance, which will reveal upon the spirit’s forehead the aleph-bet, the Hebrew alphabet. Whether the twenty-two letters are all in attendance and in the proper order or not will determine whether or not this spirit is a maggid “of truth” or “of falsehood.”

Surely enough, it is discovered to be a spirit of falsehood. Rabbi Nachman concludes this story by instructing his disciples that he is about to teach them “the aleph-bet in order,” and proceeds to teach them the text of Sefer HaMiddot. In context, the implication is obvious: The book is a collection of pithy sayings about character traits—behavioral features—which are presented alphabetically.

The story’s suggestion is that when presented with a problem of faith based on the ambiguous nature of truth, rather than engage with the problem directly and through the intellect—through knowledge—the problem will work itself out through the worshipper properly assimilating the aleph-bet, that is, through proper behavior. Much like Zhuangzi, who ostensibly does not deny the provenance of knowledge itself but merely man’s efforts to ascertain it, Rabbi Nachman is not disparaging truth itself, but encouraging a kind of backwards-leaning approach, whereby simplicity and perfection of character avoid the question of knowledge altogether, defeating the maggid of falsehood. It is possible that after all, there is no maggid of truth who ever demands antinomian action, and therefore the defense of orthodoxy is accomplished not through intellectual speculation but through adherence to behavioral simplicity.46

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46 Zvi Mark suggested as much to me in a private conversation. Mark also points out in the Hebrew edition of Mysticism and Madness that the general orthodox trend in the wake of the upheaval of the false messiah Shabtai Zvi, who preached that sanctity was to be found in all things (including the violation of divine commandment) was to disparage not Zvi’s actual theology but the corruption of his character. See
Since both thinkers prioritize behavior over knowledge, they are disposed toward a radical skepticism of the intellect; after all, if the ultimate goal (whether it be the Dao or God) can be reached through the more direct means of behavior, why should the practitioner enmesh himself in the dangerous web of conventional knowledge? Their anti-intellectual leanings in this regard open them up to noticing the highly problematic nature of a method they recognize not as essential, but as one alternative. They are also led to formulate a coherent idea of what it means to live outside the intellect, to approach either the Dao—the art of living—or God through what will be termed throughout this paper immanent knowledge: the direct, immediate experience of life or God or indeed any object of interaction through methods other than the objectifying, the analytical, the calculating, the distant. To do, and not to know, is itself a different kind of knowing, whose character will be explored in this chapter.

However, there is another implication of the priority of behavior over knowledge. The risks of the intellectual method notwithstanding, an approach through the prism of knowledge may also serve as a means to some form of enlightenment as long as that intellectual knowledge results in some kind of “immanent knowledge,” some sort of experiential telos that translates into behavior; while knowledge for its own sake is castigated by both thinkers, knowledge as a vessel or a medium is viewed at least ambivalently and sometimes positively by them. This approach, in which knowledge is absurd but can nonetheless be used as a vehicle, results in a relativistic, rather than a

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Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness in the Work of R. Nahman of Bratslav* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003) 39-40 (Hebrew). This same attitude in Rabbi Nachman is discussed in Yehuda Liebes, “R. Nahman of Bratslav’s ‘Hatikkun Hakelali’ and His Attitude Towards Sabbateanism” in *Zion* 45, no. 3 (1980) 219-231 (Hebrew). Especially considering its Messianic tone in certain versions (see footnote 47), this story may therefore be a nod to this Hasidic trend, phrased in the larger context of Rabbi Nachman’s broader belief system about the absurdity of the intellect and the religious power of behavior.
skeptical, attitude toward knowledge—any and all systems of knowledge are valid so long as they lead where they are supposed to, even if they are not “true” in the conventional sense. Something like this pragmatist method seems to be the idea conveyed by Rabbi Nachman’s statement that “it is impossible to attain a greater intellect unless it is clothed within a lower intellect;” systems of knowledge, while not necessarily true, are engaged with in the quest toward higher understanding. In the scholarship of Zhuangzi studies, the place of this approach is precisely the debate—whether Zhuangzi is a philosophical skeptic or a relativist. It appears that these two isms, which in any event seem to miss the heart of Zhuangzi’s objection to categorization, are in fact two sides of the same coin, two methods of approach toward the Dao which can be collectively explained by his priority of behavior; when it comes to knowledge, one can either go around, or through. The relativist Zhuangzi, as well the parallel tendency in Rabbi Nachman, will be the subject of the following chapter.

*Immanent Knowledge in the Zhuangzi*

The clearest demonstration of Zhuangzi’s “immanent knowledge” is probably his dialogue with his philosophical rival Huizi on the River Hao. This passage, taken from Chapter 17, “Autumn Floods,” has already been subjected to a thorough analysis by

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47 Likkutei Moharan 1:30:1.
48 A survey of the spectrum of opinions on this subject can be found in the aptly titled book *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, edited by Kjellberg and Ivanhoe. See also the opening paragraph of B.W. Van Norden, “Comparing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*” in *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 2 (1996), 247-268, where he surveys attempts by scholars to variously pin down Zhuangzi as an ethicist, a relativist, a skeptic, a transcendentalist mystic, and an immanentist mystic. Rabbi Nachman has been the subject of similar attempts at philosophical pigeonholing in the arguments between those who cast him as an existentialist (Green and Weiss) or a mystic (Mark and most other recent scholarship). See also the chapter on Rabbi Nachman in *Hasidism: A New History*, 111-117 for an exploration of whether his mysticism is based on a transcendental or an immanent conception of the divine. Doubtless the elusive nature of their thought is a more fruitful area of study than that which can be pinned down in them, and as will be discussed herein this is precisely one of their major theses.
Roger Ames,\(^49\) but we will go a slightly differently route here. This is the dialogue as translated by Ames:

Zhuangzi and Hui Shi were strolling across the bridge over the Hao River. Zhuangzi observed, “The minnows swim out and about as they please—this is the way they enjoy [乐] themselves.”

Huizi replied, “You are not a fish—how do you know what they enjoy?”

Zhuangzi returned, “You are not me—how do you know that I don’t know what is enjoyable for the fish?”

Huizi said, “I am not you, so I certainly don’t know what you know; but it follows that, since you are certainly not the fish, you don’t know what is enjoyment for the fish either.”

Zhuangzi said, “Let’s go back to your basic question. When you asked, ‘How do you know what the fish enjoy?’ you already knew that I know what the fish enjoy, or you wouldn’t have asked me. I know it from here above the Hao river. [italics in original]

This passage is especially revealing because it contrasts Zhuangzi with an epitomized version of the kind of thinking he opposes. Huizi practices a fixed, intellectual variety of thinking. The sophist speaks only twice here, both questions deriving from the same basic argument—logic must have limits, and any claim about any object must be made from within those limits. According to this line of reasoning, Huizi is to Zhuangzi as Zhuangzi is to the fish: Both are self-contained entities whose objects of study are outside of their grasp, and therefore neither Huizi nor Zhuangzi can make any kind of valid claim about their object. Zhuangzi’s retort—“You are not me”—is at first no trouble for Huizi, since it indeed validates his general belief that knowledge is firm, objective, and bound to a locale.

Zhuangzi is bound by none of these premises. In his initial retort, Zhuangzi displays his ability to masterfully employ his opponent’s own logic; he can stoop to the

\(^{49}\) Ames, *Wandering at Ease*, 219-228.

\(^{50}\) Like Zhuangzi’s name, “Hui Shi” is his personal name, the suffix 子—zi added to mean the honorific “Master Hui.”
level of logic that he ultimately disagrees with from the start (“Let’s go back to your basic question”). The effect is a strong logical parry—to which Huizi ably responds—but even more obviously, it is funny. Zhuangzi’s answer is subversive and maybe even disrespectful of Huizi’s style of argumentation; there is a sense that he feels himself to be playing a game in which he can smoothly move in and out of various logical systems.  

Huizi, characteristically, is incapable of employing different logical techniques; the very idea of engaging with more than one kind of logic conflicts with his premise that logic itself is fixed, that one cannot know that which one is not. He is a prisoner of his own argument. This depiction of Huizi as philosophically “standing still” while Zhuangzi plays the part of subversive entertainer is graphically mirrored in the episode of Huizi’s death, after which Zhuangzi laments the loss of his partner in argumentation, comparing himself to a craftsman who “swirls his axe around and sweeps it down,” creating a gust of wind to remove a tiny piece of mud on the nose of “the man of Ying…who stood firm.”

Ultimately, Zhuangzi’s real answer reveals a different kind of argument altogether. Zhuangzi ceases to assume Huizi’s logical garb and undermines the foundation of the dialogue. Zhuangzi, in pointing out that Huizi “already knew” about what he claimed to be interrogating, implicitly accuses Huizi of a very basic flaw: Whereas Huizi argues as if logic is self-sufficient, that it must prove all its own assumptions, and cannot relate to that which it does not at first empirically understand,

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51 This description is reminiscent of Wittgenstein, to whom Zhuangzi has been compared in Michael Dufresne, “The Illusion of Teaching and Learning: Zhuangzi, Wittgenstein, and the Groundlessness of Language” in Educational Philosophy and Theory 49, no. 12 (2017), 1207-1215, and as mentioned in the introduction, to whom Rabbi Nachman has also been compared in Liebes, “Nachman of Bratslav and Ludwig Wittgenstein.”

52 Zhuangzi Chapter 24, 215-216.
in fact he himself began with a context, an “already.” The moment he meaningfully entertains Zhuangzi’s casual observation about the fish, Huizi has entered a context, a point of reference that determines the bounds of logic he naively believes to exist in a vacuum. Zhuangzi, of course, knows this about knowledge already—that it is always in reference to some antecedent, that it can always oppose itself, that it is, like the River Hao, in flux. Just as Huizi knows from the beginning that Zhuangzi knows something about fish—not in Huizi’s own sense of empirical knowledge, but in the sense of assumption and contextual awareness—Zhuangzi knows about fish’s happiness “from here on the River Hao.” It is his location that determines his knowledge; or more precisely, it is Zhuangzi’s presence at a certain location, as part of a certain field of awareness, his position along the river, that determines his knowledge.\(^53\)

Whereas Huizi has to understand fish in isolation before he can make a claim about their happiness, Zhuangzi is immediately aware of the fish’s happiness simply by his presence adjacent to them, and it is only after this intuitive, contextual awareness that he is capable of making statements about them, which he makes with the same lack of reflexive awareness that fish have as they swim.\(^54\) Zhuangzi views himself not as an isolated unit, but as alive in a flowing flux of knowledge by which he may at any time be seized. His knowledge is not unified and separate but relational. It is important to not

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\(^{53}\) Ames spends much of his analysis of this dialogue discussing what he calls “the situational self” (Ames, *Wandering at Ease*, 226) and its basis in the actual grammar of classical Chinese, which has “no copula verb that would entail an assumed separation of agent from action, self from context, essence from attribute.” Zhuangzi is of course himself especially attuned to the nuances of language.

\(^{54}\) This conception of language as acting as a model pointing toward an idea that in truth eludes and negates any kind of conscious “understanding” altogether is stated by Zhuangzi himself in Chapter 26, 242: “A rabbit snare is the means to get hold of rabbits. [Only] by getting the rabbit, [can] you forget the snare. Words are the means to get hold of intentions. [Only] by getting what is intended (that is, by being content and thus having no intentions anymore), [can] you forget the words” Translation and parenthetical remark from H.G. Möller, “Zhuangzi’s Fishnet Allegory: A Text-Critical Analysis” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2000), 498.
to gloss over the superficial subject of the dialogue—Zhuangzi himself is the fish, truly happy in his “strolling” or wandering [游] in the river of life, while Huizi stares at the river and does not know what he is looking at, instead viewing a crystallized representation, what might be termed a pseudo-Platonic idea of fish that is divorced from immediate experience. Zhuangzi’s immanent knowledge, and not Huizi’s representational or intellectual knowledge, is what allows him and not Huizi to know the fish, and to ultimately find tranquility in mobility.

A further characterization of this immanent knowledge is in order. It is not merely the case that Zhuangzi employs a more direct method than his opponent to understand something Huizi cannot; at base, the very question of understanding is not part of Zhuangzi’s equation at all. Zhuangzi’s immanent experience of the fish’s happiness from his place inside the flow of knowledge does not derive from any level of conscious awareness—it is based on a procuring of the very emptiness of language, of any logic whatsoever. It is experience, not understanding or self-reflection. Just as the fish do not know of their own happiness—and this is precisely why they are happy—Zhuangzi does not know why he knows the fish are happy, he merely does from his position beside them. This space beyond words and logic, of emptiness and intuition, of the embrace of the mysterious and elusive, is the Dao. Zhuangzi’s priority of this concept also explains his continual exhortations for silence and simplicity—to talk about something is a sure indication of a lack of knowledge of that thing and of a position outside the formless intuition from which more profound, unconscious

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55 A poignant instance of this tendency of the Zhuangzi is the introductory anecdote to Chapter 22, 187, where three characters are asked questions about the Dao, and the only one said to really know anything is the one who “did not answer. Not only did he not answer, he had no idea what to answer.”
knowledge might immanently flow. Certain characters in the *Zhuangzi* who are incapable of expressing anything at all are precisely those who, like fish, dwell permanently in the Dao.\(^{56}\) As H.G. Moeller writes,\(^ {57}\) “The Daoist... gets rid of every particular intention, meaning, or thought. He has no intentions and therefore he is depicted as a complete fool.” Möller than aptly quotes from Chapter 24 of *Zhuangzi*:

“He frees himself even from the wisdom of an ant. Like a fish he is happy with himself.”

The question of precedent is illuminating in terms of Zhuangzi’s methodology. As mentioned in the introduction, something akin to the idea of a flow of knowledge existed already in a more ancient source with which Zhuangzi, as any Warring States-era thinker, was intimately familiar—the *I Ching*, or Book of Changes. In that Zhou-era Chinese classic, as suggested by the title, the structure of life is conceived of as a cycle of change, constantly demanding adaptation on the part of its reader, who was evidently royalty. As Geoffrey Redmond points out in his translation, despite the fact that at the explicit level, the text “offers no abstract formulation of stasis alternating with change...[nonetheless] this recurring cycle is implicit throughout the entire work.”\(^ {58}\) The text’s divinations and their shifting geometric vocabulary\(^ {59}\) imply an unadulterated force of change at work behind the comings and goings of daily life, which is not good or evil but merely the elemental aspect of nature, “realistic and neutral.” As Redmond notes,

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56 This concept is taken to an almost comedic extreme in the statement by Guo Xiang, the classical commentator on the *Zhuangzi*, that in fact Confucius knew more of the Dao than Zhuangzi, because the former never spoke of it and the latter devoted an entire work to the subject. Zhuangzi here is himself cast as the Yellow Emperor, the third character in the anecdote mentioned in the previous footnote, who is the only one to provide a coherent answer, and who is also “not close to it.” See Brook Ziporyn’s article “The Self-So and Its Traces in the Thought of Guo Xiang” in *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 3 (1993), 511–539.

57 Möller, “Zhuangzi’s Fishnet Allegory,” 493.


59 At the head of each of the work’s 64 chapters is a so-called hexagram, an arrangement of six lines, each either broken or unbroken, that were used for divination purposes. The hexagrams originally had no discernible symbolic meaning, nor did they have clear relationship to the content below them. Ibid, 44-47.
this underlying thesis of the *I Ching* is not couched in cosmic or existential language; it is merely the assumption of the work that blessing will come and go, and this is a fact to which man must adapt, not try to overcome. But by Zhuangzi’s era, by which time the highly abstract and philosophical *Ten Wings* commentary had crystallized, the *I Ching* had attained a distinctly cosmic and mystical character. Some of the hexagrams at the head of each chapter, previously used exclusively for divination purposes and bearing no apparent symbolic meaning, had become associated with *yin* and *yang*, the twin forces whose exchange creates the cyclical pattern of the universe now conceived of as a literal force.\(^\text{60}\) Zhuangzi’s novelty is to apply this conception of nature’s structure symbolically—since life is a kind of river\(^\text{61}\) where to be stationary means to fail to adapt to its flow, knowledge is also a flux of ideas to which man exists in relation to and to which he must adapt. In his formulation, adapting to the river’s flow grants pleasure [乐] and an immanent, immediate experience of life.

As for the inexpressibility of the Dao—that which is not really present outside the realm of intuition can of course not be expressed at all—it is the subject of the famous opening lines of the *Daodejing*: “The Way [道] that can be walked [道] is not the eternal Dao [道]; the Name [名] that can be named [名] is not the eternal Name

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\(^{60}\) Ibid, 320, 340, 376.

\(^{61}\) This genealogy of ideas is more than speculative—the river is the subject of chapters 63 and 64 of the *I Ching*, a set of complementary chapters (unique for the text, whose chapters are usually unrelated and not clearly organized) whose mirror-image hexagrams are the primary source for the later notion of *yin* and *yang* as embedded in the text. Zhuangzi is thus applying as a symbol for knowledge an image that was before him taken to be a mystical/cosmic depiction of nature, and before that an assumed state of affairs to be addressed by the politician.
Zhuangzi may therefore be seen as synthesizing earlier Chinese sources, and building a symbolic structure of knowledge based on his elaboration of these sources. This model—the application of already extant notions of the universe’s literal structure to symbolic territory, in particular to the realm of knowledge—mirrors the Hasidic exegetical technique more broadly, and Rabbi Nachman’s especially, whereby Kabbalistic descriptions of the world are understood symbolically and appropriated for the lived human experience. An exploration of this method as practiced by Rabbi Nachman follows.

*Immanent Knowledge in Likkutei Moharan*

Just as Zhuangzi’s statements of skepticism regarding knowledge, as well as praises of those figures who eschew organized, instructional methodologies for more immediate and incommunicable practice of a skill, fit into a single coherent framework regarding knowledge and its structure, so too are Rabbi Nachman’s exhortations for simplicity and behavioral action features of a broader mystical worldview. This is most clearly illustrated in Rabbi Nachman’s discussion of the *Tikkun HaKlali* [תיקון הכללי]. Roughly translated as “General Rectification” or “Comprehensive Remedy,” the term technically refers to a ritual instituted by Rabbi Nachman around 1805 in which the intentional recitation of ten particular Psalms, along with dunking in a mikve or ritual bath, is taken to “rectify” a man’s sin of spilt seed. Some context is in order to explain the backdrop of this ritual—if to understand Zhuangzi we must be aware of the

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62 *Daodejing* Chapter 1.
63 Famous examples include Cook Ding in Zhuangzi Chapter 3, 22-23, who could butcher an animal in one fell swoop by utilizing spaces in between the mean (a reference to his having attained Dao, the ultimate space), and the wheelwright, who insults a noble’s attempt to learn a skill by book, since language cannot convey experience.
64 Liebes, “Hatikkun Hekelali,” 231. Liebes there points out that the exact selections of Psalms were not actually pointed out until 1809, a year before Rabbi Nachman’s death.
discourses of the *Daodejing* as well as the *I Ching* and its historical incarnations, we must do the same for Rabbi Nachman vis-à-vis Lurianic Kabbalah, the Kabbalistic system described by the 16th century visionary Isaac Luria. This exposition will be brief and only for our purposes here; fuller expositions of the origins of the *Tikkun HaKlali* have already been performed by both Yehuda Liebes and Zvi Mark.65

Arguably since its medieval inception and certainly since the 13th century, Kabbalah had been based on a model in which some kind of undifferentiated infinity, variously understood by different mystics, emanated outward in stages increasingly complex and distant from the singular infinity at the beginning of the cosmic process. In Lurianic Kabbalah, this process became saliently associated with a pronounced pain; more than ever before, the undifferentiated singularity of the before-time was yearned for, and man’s fall into history and the plurality of the physical world was conceived of as at worst a grave error, at best an tortuous departure from cosmic perfection. The vessels that initially contained the divine in its contracted form have shattered in a process called *shvirat ha-keilim*, the breaking of the vessels. In Luria’s terminology, acts of *tikkun*—“rectification” or “repairing”, at the symbolic level a reference to the repairing of the vessels—serve to overcome the dilemma of history and physicality, both associated with evil, and restore the universe to that initial point. Significantly, these are ritual acts to be performed by people; in the Lurianic system—and especially, as has

been discussed in particular by Liebes and Mark, for Rabbi Nachman—man is imbued with religious powers of literally Messianic proportions.  

Generally speaking, with the advent of Hasidism in the 18th century, *tikkun* fell by the wayside, at least relative to its earlier prominence, but the *Tikkun HaKlali* ritual is of central importance in Rabbi Nachman’s theology. The “general” or “comprehensive” nature of this special *tikkun* ritual is elucidated primarily in *Likkutei Moharan* 29 and 205. In the former discourse, he establishes a sort of hierarchy based on the general and particular—each biblical prohibition incumbent upon a Jew contains within it more detailed prohibitions, and is itself a member of a larger set of prohibitions. The sin of sexuality is regarded as the broadest or most general of prohibitions, including the rest of them as a subset. The human body is fashioned similarly, in that the *brit* [ברית], or “covenant”—that is, the place of circumcision—is considered to be the most “general” of all parts of the body, meaning the site of concentration of the human form, the outermost member of the bodily hierarchy, which includes all others. The sin of sexual impropriety is a microcosm of all sins, and the place of circumcision is the microcosm of the body. The lynchpin in this symbolic network is a much older tradition that the number of bodily sinews—365—is equal to the number of prohibitions in the

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67 The reason for this decrease in prominence is a subject of scholarly debate, but it is clear that the significance of the ritual for Rabbi Nachman is exceptional among the Hasidim, as is his general fixation on sexuality, which was more a feature of early medieval Kabbalah, especially the foundational 13th century work *Zohar*. It is worth noting that contrary to some portrayals, Rabbi Nachman does occasionally depict an appropriate sexual ethic in a positive light, such as in *Likkutei Moharan* 31:4, where he uses the term *Shmirat HaBrit*, literally “guarding the covenant” (the place of circumcision, whereby God made a covenant with Abraham), usually associated with refraining from masturbation and appropriate sexual ethic in the prohibitory sense, to mean sleeping with one’s wife before a journey in addition to its prohibitory aspect on the journey itself.
Torah, and each body part is assigned a sin from which it must refrain. Rabbi Nachman, through characteristic thematic association, arrives at the conclusion that to rectify (in both the literal and the Lurianic sense) the most general of body parts is to rectify the most general of sins, thereby rectifying the entire body and all sins, the rectification of a man’s place of circumcision is the rectification of all of his sins in one fell swoop. This is an act of profound significance because, as mentioned earlier, man’s tikkun is not a mere act of religious self-purging, but the restoration of cosmic unity. To perform the Tikkun HaKlali is therefore to know God.

This point is critical—an entirely unintellectual act focused on the perfection of human behavior, which Rabbi Nachman expected of every follower regardless of intellectual capacity, results in a direct, immanent knowledge of God. To bolster this point, it is worth noting that it is in similar language that Rabbi Nachman extolls the religious power of music. In Likkutei Moharan 64, probably the work’s most famous discourse, he discusses the ability of a melody to circumvent the intellect when

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69 As Liebes notes in “Hatikkun Hakelali” 232, the much earlier association of brit with the ninth sefira of yesod (lit. “foundation”), the penultimate place in the Godhead that the divine flow reaches before it penetrates into the material worlds below, contains a kind of foreshadowing to Rabbi Nachman’s system: To cleanse sexual impropriety is to bypass the tenth and lowest sefira of malkhut (lit. “Kingship”), where the destructive power of the divine is more potent, and reach directly the phallic source of life, a more advanced and immediate revelation of God.
70 A similar claim that behavioral uprightness is demanded of the common folk devoid of intellect appears in Likkutei Moharan 54:3: “The majority of people, who do not have the intellect to delve into all this….all of it happens for them automatically, through sleep, [the wearing of the ritual garments] tzitzit and tefillin, [learning] Torah, prayer, and business.”
71 Liebes, “Hatikkun Hakelali,” 219, footnote 59 points out that the inclusion of the recitation of Psalms as part of the ritual points to Rabbi Nachman’s thematic association of the power of music with the Tikkun HaKlali.
72 This discourse has been subjected to penetrating analyses by virtually every serious scholar of Rabbi Nachman. See Joseph Weiss, Studies in Braslav Hassidism (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1974), 121-141 (Hebrew); Mark, Mysticism and Madness, 155-171; Green, Tormented Master, 311-317; Liebes, “Nahman of Bratslav and Ludwig Wittgenstein.”
seemingly insoluble logical problems of faith present themselves to the believer. This discourse is presented in noticeably spatial language, drawing from Lurianic Kabbalah—whereas problems of logic present themselves in the “empty space” that arose in the wake of the infinite God’s recoil from creation, music engages with the place of God “surrounding” that space, and is therefore untouched by logic. Here, more explicitly than in his discourses on Tikkun HaKlali, Rabbi Nachman associates this method of circumventing the intellect and knowing God directly—immanently, without logic—with emuna [אמונה], faith.

Faith, in Rabbi Nachman’s usage of the term, means not the denial of logic and the belief that in spite of proof divinity is present, but the circumventing of that logic and the immediate, immanent experience of that divinity. Much like Zhuangzi’s knowing, albeit in very different expression and with a very different telos, Rabbi Nachman’s faith is its own self-contained language, its own way of knowing, that grants its practitioner access to its object independent of the mind. It is important to note, however, that this faith is not apparently an attempt to understand the divine; this is the domain of logic, and is precisely one of its problems. Instead, faith promotes an experience of the divine, embracing its elusiveness rather than attempting, as Huizi with the fish as well as with his opponent, to contain it.

The exact problems of the mind and its logic are played out in another characteristic association Rabbi Nachman makes: that of knowledge and ni’uf [ניאוף], or sexual impropriety. Liebes shrewdly notes that Moses, based on Rabbi Nachman’s

73 In Sichot HaRan 32, Nathan Sternhartz records his master as saying that speaking to a simple believer about logical problems of faith is like speaking to a castrate about sexual desires. Faith for Rabbi Nachman is not a rejection of logic, but an incapability of understanding it as a language.
personal notes to his discourse on the Land of Israel and behavioral simplicity in
*Likkutei Moharan* II:78, is in his symbolic network the symbol for knowledge;

furthermore, Moses’s failure in the biblical narrative to enter the Land of Israel, the land
of simple faith (that is, immanent knowledge), is due to the intricate relationship
between knowledge and sexuality. This is based at least in part on an assumption of
medieval science that the source of a man’s seed is in his brain, but also on a
penetrating understanding of the mechanisms of the intellect—rather than offer, as it
claims to, a purely objective report of the world around it, the intellectual gesture is in
fact based at its core on an *appetite*, a desire to possess and relate to an object.

There is a paradox here. Logic is in theory the construction of a calculated model,
distant from its object of study; but it derives from a deeply human desire for
understanding and fulfillment. It is this irreconcilable contradiction that renders the
rational appetite insatiable; this is the pitfall of Moses that Rabbi Nachman overcomes
through the *Tikkun HaKlali*, which provides an intimate encounter with the divine that
the intellect cannot. It is noteworthy that for both Rabbi Nachman and Zhuangzi, the
respective incarnations of intellectual knowledge—Moses and Huizi—are figures whom
the authors deeply respect (and in the former’s case, revere). Neither thinker is ever
reluctant to cast their philosophical enemies in much more comical or demonic roles; it
seems that their choice of symbol here connotes a profound understanding of the powers
of logic in ascertaining the world, if also a sensitivity to the risks it entails.

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75 In Zhuangzi, depictions of Confucius in particular as hopelessly naïve and hapless as a result abound,
especially in the “Old Fisherman” chapter (*Zhuangzi* Chapter 31, 280-286), where he is bested by a
peasant who knows far more of the Dao than he does; in *Likkutei Moharan* 28, Rabbi Nachman writes that
the Misnagdim (which may be a reference to those Hasidim who derided his teachings) “receive their
Torah from those sages who are Jewish demons,” a reference to a Zoharic statement that some
otherworldly demons are Jewish and, in his interpretation, possess knowledge of the Torah.
To summarize: Rabbi Nachman is intimately aware of the dangers of the intellect, which presents an object as apparently true but does not necessarily reflect its more elusive nature, even while understanding its relative power in apprehending the divine. In its place, he proposes a rich symbolic network of sexual propriety, music, and faith—all heavily associated with behavior rather than knowledge, and all bearing the mark of simplicity and sometimes even the appearance of foolishness in their rejection of logic—through which a practitioner can bypass the intellect and attain immanent, irrational knowledge of God. Significantly, this experience is heavily tied up with joy, in that joy is a necessary precursor to the experience and evidently a result. All in all, Rabbi Nachman’s approach to immanent knowledge is at this stage quite similar to Zhuangzi’s—both respect the intellect, but deride it as incapable of truly representing an object, which in fact can only be apprehended by embracing its elusive nature; both consciously reject rationalism in favor of a more immediate method of knowing, which we have here termed “immanent knowledge”; both represent this alternative kind of knowledge in highly spatial or geographical terms as in some way superior to the logical mode of knowing; both associate this kind of knowing with a character of freedom, joy, foolishness, and sincerity.

**Differences and Cultural Traditions**

There are, however, several critical differences that emerge from these analyses. One noticeable discrepancy is that while both thinkers display a clear preference at this stage for progress of behavior rather than intellectual knowledge, this progress for Rabbi
Nachman is a moral step—chastity is a virtue, and the *Tikkun HaKlali* cannot be divorced from its obvious moralistic associations. The conclusion of the story at *Sefer HaMiddot*’s introduction is apparently that behavioral simplicity precludes sin. On the other hand, morality seems to have no bearing on Zhuangzi’s philosophy. On the contrary, Chapter 29 is devoted to an episode in which Confucius initially berates Robber Zhi for his immoral behavior, and is promptly lectured for the remainder of the extended narrative on how each being has its nature—Robber Zhi’s own is, unsurprisingly, to rob—and Confucius is in fact the greatest robber of all for attempting to lock all beings into a system that demands of each member commitment to a predetermined role. Indeed, it is precisely the moral conventions of Confucius that are considered to be a great wrongdoing, because the Dao is amorphous (or rather shapeless altogether) and morality affixes to a particular spot. While immanent knowledge of God necessarily translates into moral behavior, immanent knowledge of the Dao merely leads each being to its own dao in the original sense of term as it was used by many Warring States thinkers—its authentic mode of being. This is an example of how similar lines of thinking can manifest in different conclusions when they play out among different cultural traditions.

Another difference, and far more pressing, is the goal of this process of immanent knowledge. For Zhuangzi, immanent knowledge of the Dao is its own telos; the attempt to grasp anything else is a falling short (and the attempt to grasp the Dao is in essence not really an attempt to grasp anything at all, but as has been demonstrated, in

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79 Although the works of Mordechai Yosef Leiner and Zadok HaKohen of Lublin took famous exception in attempting to find divine roots of sin, virtually all orthodox Hasidim operated under this premise. It is important here to recall that Hasidism grew out of a deeply legalistic culture and was at its core intensely devoted to that culture; it was of necessity that their theological speculation lead to legal orthodoxy. Zhuangzi was bound by no such assumption and is more traditionally antinomian.
fact a relinquishing of a grasp). To fall short of the Dao, as virtually every philosopher in the *Zhuangzi* besides its titular character does, is not a commission of moral wrongdoing—since morality itself is only a construct that emerges outside of the Dao—as much as it is an aberration from nature, a departure from the zero-point of the world. But for Rabbi Nachman, the telos of knowledge of any kind is an experience of the divine.⁸⁰ Ostensibly, God is not “empty” or “space,” terms frequently used to describe or allude to the Dao in the *Zhuangzi*; God can, at least in theory and in the final account, be known to some limited extent and in some manner resembling our concept of conventional, intellectual knowledge.⁸¹ The next chapter will focus on a deeper analysis of Rabbi Nachman’s relationship to the intellect and circumstances in which it is an appropriate tool for the divine seeker, but for now it will suffice to point out that immanent knowledge is often depicted in *Likkutei Moharan* as a pathway to attain intellectual knowledge, even as the former is depicted as a superior methodology. Immanent knowledge, is for example, often depicted as a necessary precursor for *chiddush ha-mochin* [חידוש המוחין], or the renewal of the mind. Originally a reference to

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⁸⁰ See the note in Mark, *Mysticism and Madness* 135, where he argues that Rabbi Nachman’s theology is a “mysticism of faith”; that is, the telos of his religious mechanisms of music, faith, and other behavioral propriety is union with God. This is in contrast to the existentialist depictions drawn especially in Weiss, *Studies*, 87-95 and Green, *Tormented Master*, 317, in which these mechanisms are primarily an attempt on the part of the believer to deal with being alive and believing.

⁸¹ The reader familiar with Rabbi Nachman’s theology will recognize here the significance of the Messianic era in his thought, in which humanity will evidently be granted some kind of supernal equivalent of this-worldly knowledge—as he writes in *Likkutei Moharan* 21 regarding knowledge in the Messianic era (the discourse is devoted to this subject), “Everyone will know [ידעו] God.” The this-worldly antecedent of the supernal knowledge in question is not immanent knowledge, but intellectual knowledge, da’at [דעת]. A more complete analysis of knowledge in Rabbi Nachman’s Messianic era can be found in Zvi Mark, *The Scroll of Secrets: The Hidden Messianic Vision of R. Nachman of Breslav*, trans. Naftali Moses (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies, 2010), as well as in Alexandra Mandelbaum, *Torat Ha-Makifim: Ha-Model Ha-Ma’agali B’Likkutei Moharan l’Rebbe Nachman Mi-Breslev* (Master’s thesis, Hebrew University, 2017), 72-79. (Hebrew).
the complex Lurianic concept of theogony, or the self-creation of the Godhead, for Rabbi Nachman the term seems to mean, at least in part and in addition to its literal Kabbalistic connotations, the construction of a new intellectual model of reality. This model often requires a return to simplicity, an erasure of the previous model. For example, in *Likkutei Moharan* 35, he writes that in order to attain a *chiddush* of the mind—an obvious pun with the same word for a novelty gained in Torah learning—a person must first engage in the simple reading of the plain text. A person must be, so to speak, wiped clean before he can be reformed. Immanent knowledge is here a precursor to intellectual knowledge. Therefore, whereas for Zhuangzi immanent knowledge is a superior method of knowing to the exclusion of all others, for Rabbi Nachman it is sometimes a stepping-stone.

This difference stems from a more fundamental departure between the two in their respective conceptions of God and the Dao, which derive in turn from their respective traditions. The Dao, as discussed above, cannot be expressed because it does not exist altogether in the realm of logic and language; it is the very act of speech that creates such a hypostatic entity of “Dao,” which in reality does not really exist at all but is rather the intuited, formless flow of being, empty of any signification. As demonstrated, this concept predates Zhuangzi and characterizes the tradition in which he

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84 See the H.G. Moeller’s *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory* (Chicago/La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2004), 137-148, and particularly David Chai, “Meontological Generativity: A Daoist Reading of the Thing” in *Philosophy East and West* 64 no. 2 (2014), 303-318. A fuller exposition of the nature of Dao and its relation to language and the world of phenomena follows in third chapter of this paper.
emerges. Although Rabbi Nachman agrees to the essential suprarationalism of God and displays an equally strong aversion to the notion that any linguistic interpretation of divinity infinity actually represents it, he also speaks highly of the capacity (and the necessity) of human speech, *dibbur* [דיבור], in the conveyance of that supposedly inexpressible idea.

This is not unique to him—the paradoxical reverence of speech in Jewish mysticism more broadly was noted already by Scholem, the first of the rigorous scholars of Kabbalah.85 Wolfson has characterized this reverence for speech as a subversion of the Platonic hierarchy of substance and form—the inexpressible idea that is God is religiously insignificant until it is made manifest in the clothing of human language and phenomena.86 Since for Rabbi Nachman (as for Zhuangzi), language is tied to and is itself a symbol of logic, the esteem in which his cultural tradition held verbal expression means that he understood the necessity of the intellect in translating the divine into human terms, thereby manifesting it in the mortal realm.87 Nonetheless, he could not escape from the suprarationalism of God, the uncompromising presence of the divine outside the realm of logic and language. His brilliance was to integrate the two sides of the contradiction by utilizing immanent knowledge as a direct pathway to *unio mystica*, and then occasionally calling for a return to the human realm of intellectual knowledge in order to manifest the former. Other times he is interested exclusively in the moment

86 See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Undoing Time and the Syntax of the Dream Interlude: A Phenomenological Reading of Zohar 1:199a-200a” in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 22, no. 1 (2010), 57. “Clothing,” or *levush* [לבוש], has been a central Kabbalistic doctrine since the medieval period, and features prominently in the *Zohar*.
87 This is the meaning of Rabbi Nachman’s exegesis of the earlier Kabbalistic dictum “The end in deed is the beginning in thought” [תחילה במחשבה מעשה סוף] in *Likkutei Moharan* 18.
of divine union. It is here he appears most similar to Zhuangzi, despite the difference in
the target of their methodology. ⁸⁸

Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman were both shown in this chapter to disparage the
intellect, instead advocating a more immanent experience of their desired object based
on behavior and intuition. Although differences in their respective characterizations of
this object do account for differences in their methodology and its goals, on the whole
the manner in which they discuss this kind of immanent knowledge is surprisingly
similar. In the next chapter, we will get a closer look at how the two thinkers deconstruct
the intellectual method of knowledge, and also examine the unexpected ramifications of
this deconstruction.

⁸⁸ This whole narrative will be complicated in the next chapter, and especially in Chapter Three, with the
introduction of keter, the highest revelation of the Godhead, which is characterized in Rabbi Nachman in
terms highly similar to the Dao.
Chapter Two: Absurdity of Knowledge

In the last chapter, we primarily focused on the concept of immanent knowledge in Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman. Along the way we also alluded to the issues they associate with logic that push them to their formulation of this alternative. We made clear that for both thinkers, logic and language are bound up with each other, in that to utilize one entails the other, and that the two derive from the same mechanic. It is therefore appropriate to begin this chapter, which focuses in greater detail on the problematic of logic and knowledge, with an analysis of language. Rather than speech—that is, when a person should or should not talk, and whether silence is an altogether preferable mode of being—this analysis takes as its subject the word itself and the perennial problem of representation.

Dichotomy and Unity in the Zhuangzi

Names in the Zhuangzi are famously arbitrary. Characters frequently appear throughout the work proffering opposing perspectives, poking fun at the human tendency to associate a name with a consistent philosophical outlook. A prominent example is the Yellow Emperor, who appears in Chapter 14 as a figure clearly having apprehended the Dao\(^89\) and in Chapter 11 as having been, in fact, the first to “disturb the hearts of the people” in the absence of the Dao, resorting instead to “benevolence and righteousness” \([仁义]\), terms inextricably linked to Confucian thought.\(^90\) Although the

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\(^89\) He is here (Zhuangzi Chapter 14, 118-119) depicted answering the question of “Cheng of the North Gate” (the name cheng [成] is also a term for changing or becoming) about the Yellow Emperor’s arrangement of an orchestra that left him “bewildered,” “upset,” and “incapable of coherent speech.” In a manner quite consistent with Zhuangzi’s broader philosophy, the Yellow Emperor replies by extolling virtues of “awe,” “confusion,” and “stupidity,” in Palmer’s translation, suggesting that it was precisely these qualities of the music that allow Cheng to understand the Dao.

\(^90\) The term “hearts of the people” can also translate to “man’s heart,” as in the fundamental condition of humanity, which here was disturbed by the abandonment of the Dao. The anti-Confucian polemical idea
precise categorizations were unknown to Zhuangzi, in our retrospective parlance we may say that the Yellow Emperor is sometimes a Daoist and sometimes a Confucian, sometimes an ancient sage who lived in the immanence of the Dao and sometimes precisely the figure that initiated humanity’s departure from it. Still other accounts complicate this portrayal, placing him somewhere between enlightenment and ignorance.\textsuperscript{91} Whether or not these conflicting personalities are the result of different authors is irrelevant, since the text’s compilers felt the un-reconciled nature of the conflicts to be entirely consistent with Zhuangzi’s original ethic. The suggestion here is that there is the difficulty in pinpointing down one consistent identity is not due to a failure to observe details and resolve contradictions, but the very fabric of relating to identities as consistent; the convention of naming is itself arbitrary.

That such an evasiveness of identity and pervasiveness of change is essential to the nature of things, and not merely a social convention regarding historical figures, is stated explicitly in the text in several places: “So how can I know that what I term Heaven is not human? Or that what I call human is not Heaven?”\textsuperscript{92} As Graham notes, this pair of questions does not merely question the social efficacy of language, but much more profoundly interrogates the status of people’s decisions—it is not a simple task to determine whether or not they are in line with their own designs or with those of Heaven, as any attempt to actually apply the vague philosophy of living in accordance with

\textsuperscript{91} See, for example, the introductory anecdote to Chapter 22, discussed in footnote 56 of the previous chapter of this paper.

\textsuperscript{92} Zhuangzi Chapter 6, 47.
Heaven’s ways will reveal.\textsuperscript{93} All decisions can variously be conceived as deriving from either location. The relativistic nature of people’s actions applies to much more basic descriptors of reality as well: “Under Heaven there is nothing greater than the tip of the hair, but Mount Tai is smaller; there is no one older than a dead child, yet Peng Zu [the legendary ancient saint who lived 800 years] died young.”\textsuperscript{94} To describe something with a size or an age necessarily entails contrast and context; to zoom in on an object is therefore paradoxically to pan out at the same time. Building on the thesis of the importance of contextualization established in this paper’s previous chapter, Zhuangzi is deeply attuned to the staggering inconsistency of reality, the manner in which language and logic itself employs impossible contradictions.

So what, then, is the unifying factor uniting these shifting phenomena that all go by the same name, other than the name itself? If the name is nothing more than an arbitrary social convention, we should dispense with it entirely, instead referring to three different Yellow Emperors altogether, perhaps renaming each of them to avoid confusion. Yet we do not find this suggestion anywhere in the text—on the contrary, Zhuangzi seems to delight in highlighting the baffling and inexpressible similarity of all those different things that carry the same name precisely by emphasizing their identity, even as everything about them seems to point toward their difference. A clear and significant example is the opening anecdote to the entire work, in which a massive fish called Kun (“I don’t know how many thousand miles long”) transforms back and forth into a giant bird called Peng. The former travels to the north, the latter to the south; the former conquers the sea, the latter the sky. Initially depicted with majesty and power,

\textsuperscript{93} Graham, \textit{Disputers of the Tao}, 196-197.
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Zhuangzi} Chapter 2, 15.
they are later laughed at by a cicada who does not understand the advantage of their tremendous size. Are Kun and Peng really the same creature, or two different ones that become each other? Is the cicada right, or does he merely misunderstand? What, really, is the factor by which the changing things may be regarded as being one in such a way that their difference is accounted for?

This unifying factor, for Zhuangzi, is the Dao. The Dao, in this connection, is not heaven or man, but rather the place beyond either domain; it is neither Kun nor Peng—nor the cicada—but the eagle’s eye view beyond any of these changes and shifts in perspective. The Dao in the logical sense is the space from which contradictions can be seen not as in argument, but as in complement. In the text’s graphic and spatial terminology, the place from which it is appropriate to speak about something as large and simultaneously imply that there can be a small is the “axis” or “pivot” of the Dao, the place about which all substantial perspectives move but that itself posits no concrete assertion whatsoever.

Of course, the idea that arguments may serve to address different and complementary aspects of truth rather than merely, as Huizi believes, postulate exclusive portrayals of reality is not in itself a surprising novelty; Zhuangzi’s brilliance here is portraying the capability of the co-dependence of conflicting truths as itself an actual phenomenon. The Dao seems to exist literally, and Zhuangzi frequently describes

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95 Zhuangzi Chapter 1, 1-3.
96 This idea has precedent in the Daodejing’s formulation that the Dao precedes both Heaven and Earth (Chapter 25), but there the statement is apparently cosmological or mystical and does not clearly refer to language or logic; this is another example of Zhuangzi taking earlier cosmological models as symbols for the human relationship to knowledge.
97 Occasionally translated as “axis” in implicit reference to the thought of Mircea Eliade, Palmer and Legge both render “pivot,” which captures the sense of motion entailed as language and logic move into, out of, and around this space.
it as if referring to a real entity—the Dao can be known, it can act upon the world, it can be obtained.⁹⁸ To be sure, the Dao’s empty and elusive suggests it may not in fact “be there” altogether; its nature spurs paradoxes whereby any mention of a thing tend to entail its opposite—as Confucius is informed in Chapter 14, to know the Dao is to accept its unknowability, and in reality it has no “center” or “direction” and cannot be “drawn upon.”⁹⁹ Nonetheless, the Dao seems to some extent to have some sort of phenomenal existence, and it was apparently this fact that initially led Confucius to his misunderstanding of the Dao as containing a substance or essence, rather than comprehending its negative quality. Instead, the Dao in Zhuangzi is the space from which a person may observe opposites in their complementarity rather than in their exclusivist opposition.

From the standpoint of the Dao, then, the opposing complexities of a system may be seen as partial traits of a grander unit, a unified machine of sorts. The Dao is the eagle-eye locus at which an observer can understand the singularity of this unit, although it itself is not part of the system and precedes any kind of enumeration altogether.¹⁰⁰ Zhuangzi enlists an enchanting depiction of logic viewed from the standpoint of the Dao:

A boat can be hidden in a gorge, and a fishing net in a pool, and you may think they are therefore safe. However, in the middle of the night a strong man comes and carries them off. Small-minded people just cannot see that hiding smaller things in larger things does not mean that they will not be stolen. If you take everything under Heaven and try to store it under Heaven

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⁹⁸ The existence of the Dao as a literal entity will be put into question in the next chapter, however; suffice it to say for now that even if the Dao is a mere linguistic tool, at the level of language it can be said to exist with as much certainty as anything else can be posited in language to exist absolutely.
⁹⁹ Zhuangzi Chapter 14 122-123.
¹⁰⁰ It is precisely this pre-enumeration place of the Dao that makes it so elusive; to “number” or refer to the Dao is to assume a sequence into which the Dao may be placed, thereby undermining its isolated self-sufficiency. As Zhuangzi states in Chapter Two, which is mostly devoted to this pre-lingual state of the Dao: “As all life is one, what need is there for words? Yet I have just said all life is one, so I have already spoken, haven’t I?” (Chapter Two, 15). To refer to a unit is paradoxically to assume plurality; once you say there is one, there must have a one before your statement. The Dao precedes these dichotomies.
Most people, when attempting to refine their logical standpoints, take themselves to be couching their expressed argument in a grand notion of truth. As their argument becomes more refined, it becomes closer and closer in nature—so they think—to the way things really are. As it matures, their argument encompasses more and more of those other perspectives that in more immature conceptions were taken to be opposing and contradictory. But, as Zhuangzi graphically demonstrates, any argument that does not encompass everything [天下, “all under Heaven,” “the world”] can always be dislodged by its implied opposite. Only that largest of units which contains everything and is contained in nothing can never be dislodged, because there is nothing else from which to dislodge it. While selecting any term to describe reality necessarily negates itself by implying the existence of a contrast, perceiving reality all in one fell swoop, in its totality, reveals no contrast at all. Zhuangzi illustrates, through the metaphor of hiding the world in the world, what the enlightened Daoist’s world looks like—all opposites are viewed as not in fact opposing at all, but members of a grander organism. The point at which that Daoist himself stands to see this unity is the Dao, and it precedes the dichotomous realm of all of these moving parts; it is the “pivot of the Dao,” a perfect stillness from which he can still all the constituent parts of logic and their proper place at their proper time.

The metaphor of hiding the world in the world also clarifies in more precise terms what exactly Zhuangzi’s problem is with the other philosophers of his day and

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101 Ibid Chapter 6, 50. Legge’s translation renders the Chinese phrase here as “but if you could hide the world in the world.”
with conventional logic. Viewed from the standpoint of the Dao, a person who hides his small object in a larger one, rather than hiding the world in itself, is a fool. If in reality all arguments are complementary—even in contradiction—then to argue anything as an objective, exclusive truth renders invalid whatever partial truth that argument may actually possess. As long as dichotomies are not taken to add together to make one organism, they implode; to tell a partial truth is to lie. Zhuangzi’s criticism is that each philosopher of his day is telling part of the truth, but in failing to see the validity of each other contemporary perspective they all in fact say nothing.

As for Zhuangzi, he can “stroll across the bridge over the [River] Hao,” laughing at all of the “small-minded people” below who take part of a whole and claim it to be separate and self-sufficient. His own belief system, standing at the emptiness of the Dao, is nothing at all; or rather it is Nothing, an empty space through which he may move and assume any of the partial perspectives that rotate about the Dao as he finds them useful. He does not join the fray of his contemporaries and offer an opposing perspective, but undermines the very foundation on which they debate and unifies them all, simultaneously validating each of them and subverting any one of them. The versatility of this approach is what allows him, in the dialogue over the River Hao, to assume Huizi’s philosophical “clothing” and then immediately subvert his argument. Huizi’s philosophical school is a kind of “name” that upon closer inspection fails to cohere into a consistent identity, and Zhuangzi, from his position beyond names, can assume Huizi’s at his own convenience; in fact, all names are really only minor names for the Dao (what the opening lines in the Daodejing call “The Great Nameless”\(^\text{102}\)), and in this way all

\(^{102}\) Daodejing Chapter 1; 名可名非常名, literally “The name that can be named is not the eternal name.”
philosophical arguments are at once the same and their difference is accounted for.

Viewed in this light, Zhuangzi’s statement that Confucius “changed his views sixty times…So who knows now whether what he once called right he hasn’t fifty-nine times called wrong?”\(^\text{103}\) is not a criticism, but a praise—holding obstinately to a single ideology is a rejection of the Dao and the ever-changing cycle of logic. This interpretation accords with Zhuangzi’s general esteem for change as an insurmountable force.

*Dichotomy and Unity in Likkutei Moharan*

Rabbi Nachman, too, grapples frequently with the elusive objectivity of truth and its subjective manifestations. In two places in particular in *Likkutei Moharan* his effort to pin down the relationship between these phenomena is especially creative and clear: discourses 31:9 and 36:6. An analysis of these two pieces will reveal striking similarities and differences between his and Zhuangzi’s conception of logic and the human role in reality.

In a characteristically cryptic statement in discourse 31:7, Rabbi Nachman states that “letters without *nequdot* [vowel-dots] are like a body without a soul, which cannot produce any movement or action without the soul.”\(^\text{104}\) He goes on to make a series of linguistic associations that hinge upon the two-word phrase from Song of Songs 1:11, “*nequdot ha-kasef*” [נקודות חפס], literally “points of silver.” Rereading the root *kasef* as deriving from not the word for silver, but the word for desire—*kisufin* [ كسוף]—he

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\(^\text{103}\) *Zhuangzi* Chapter 27, 245.

\(^\text{104}\) Unlike Romance languages, in which both consonants and vowels are represented by letters, in Hebrew letters represent only consonants, and vowels are represented by arrangements of dots known as *nequdot* plotted diacritically throughout a word, meaning that various letters are supplemented with different dot-patterns to indicate vowelization. Traditionally written Torah scrolls are written without *nequdot*, and vowelization, determined by traditional readings, is implied.
states that desires comprise the stuff of the soul, which he derives in a further link from a verse in Psalms 84:3, “I have desired and my soul is consumed.” This complex associative chain—which, it should be noted, is remarkably technical in nature, based purely on linguistic links and clever re-readings and not at all in thematic or philosophical conjecture—allows him to state that a person’s desires compel him to vowelize a word in a certain manner. This is because a person’s desires are his soul, and the nequdot are the soul of a word’s letters.

In a protracted addendum to this discourse in 31:9, Nathan Sternhartz offers an explanation that boils down to the following. Since Hebrew words cannot be pronounced without nequdot, but nonetheless words in traditional writing are written in precisely that manner, words-without-nequdot can therefore be taken to be the raw material, or golem ְֵָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָָּּ
To make clear that this linguistic analysis is itself a symbol for the real experience of the worshipper more broadly, Nathan Sternhartz writes rather provocatively that a true zadik, or righteous leader,\textsuperscript{106} can speak in such a manner that the righteous listener will hear lessons of righteousness and the evil listener will hear lessons of heresy; since he speaks from a place of raw material, of letters without vowels, his speech is entirely neutral of quality and in fact contains in its very emptiness the potential for both worship and heresy. Speech that derives from this divine root simply is; any modifier that can be added to that phrase, any quality adduced to an item’s neutral simplicity, derives from the prism through which an observer perceives it.

As a result of this model, divine speech is open quite literally to an infinity of interpretations. The apprehension of the zadik’s lessons as evil is therefore at once both a corruption and a legitimate representation of his lesson; it is corrupt since the interpretation belongs to the listener, and it is legitimate because all interpretations were paradoxically present in the “unpronounced” speech. Perception of divine speech as evil is therefore not a contradiction of the divinity of that speech, but indeed a proof—speech that claims objectivity, even in its righteousness, cannot possibly derive from the divine, which is pure and simple in its untapped form but full of contradiction and paradox in its manifest form.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{106} For a history and analysis of this central term in Hasidism, which refers to a sort of charismatic, populist rabbinic leader around whom Hasidic courts or dynasties form, see Green, “The Żaddiq as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism” in Journal of the American Academy of Religion 45, no. 3 (1977). Rabbi Nachman is, of course, the zadik of Bratslav Hasidism, and although the statement here certainly applies at its broad literal interpretation it also refers to Rabbi Nachman’s own technique. This is an example of Rabbi Nachman developing the term in quite a revolutionary manner—he accords here the human zadik a position above human apprehension.

\textsuperscript{107} Rabbi Nachman’s Kabbalistic model from which he derives this discourse is that of the sefira of chochma [חכמה], wisdom, the “head” or beginning of the divine body, which is regarded already in Medieval sources as a single point in which all of being is “engraved” but unmanifest. 16th Century Safedian Kabbalist Moshe Cordovero, in his 16th century commentary to the foundational proto-
Through Sternhartz’s example of the zadik’s speech, it becomes clear that individual facts are not the subject of the discourse—people’s individualized perceptions affect not necessarily their understanding of a physical object, but their formulation of systems of knowledge, their conception of good and evil. This also becomes apparent through the quotation of a famous Talmudic episode\(^\text{108}\) in which Elisha ben Avuya, formerly a renowned sage, becomes an apostate after he ascends to heaven and witnesses some vision of what he had thought to be impossible and heretical. Sternhartz notes that this figure is described as already having “doubt in his heart” [בהבו יש טעמה], and as having displayed prior interest in Greek philosophy; these innate desires had already structured his view of reality, and this view led him to “vowelize” what he saw in heaven as enough to drive him to apostasy. A person’s character determines things like their political orientation or philosophical outlook or, especially, theology; generally speaking, their logical orientation. In this discourse, ways of perceiving reality are taken to be not presentations of truth, but *approximations*; they are the subjective reports, varying by the observer, of the ever-elusive way things really are.

In discourse 36:6, Rabbi Nachman argues a similar point, albeit with subtle but critical differences. Here he works with the Kabbalistic model of the *or pashut* [אור прост], “simple light,” an early term to refer to the early stages of the *einsof*, the

\(^{108}\) Babylonian Talmud, *Hagiga* 14b.
unqualified, infinite selfhood of God that is devoid of any attribute or quality.\(^{109}\) This light emanates in progressively more manifest, complicated stages throughout the sefirot—the Godhead—until by the end it appears to humanity as the physical world. This Neo-Platonic process of an unqualified, infinite essence into a complex, manifest form proves quite useful in Rabbi Nachman’s articulation of his idea:

And it is a principle of great import that “from the mouth of the Lofty One does not come” [anything but] simple light.\(^{110}\) However, it is according to the character of the vessel that receives the light that the light will be depicted [וציר] inside it—if the vessel is whole, then it will receive [the light] in the aspect of “meorot” [lights, מאורות] written out fully; but if, God forbid, the vessel is not whole, then it will receive the light in the aspect of “meorot” [מאורות] written lacking its letter vav\(^{111}\) ...For the simple light that comes from on high is the aspect of “retracting” [קמיץ] and hidden,” but the aspect of the receiving vessels is the aspect of tzeri [צירי], since the light is depicted [וציר] according to it.

The pun here is obvious to the reader familiar with Hebrew orthography. Kamatz and tzeri are both names for different nequdot, vowel-signs; two adjectives that seem to share roots with these vowel-signs are, respectively, kamitz and nitztayer, “retracting” and “depicted,” traits associated with the infinite, unattainable nature of the divine and its subjective representation by man. In this dizzying analysis, Rabbi Nachman recalls the aforementioned discourse by suggesting that the vowel-sign tzeri itself stands for the representative process of vowelizing a word, of interpreting the divine in a subjective fashion. Again, he protects the integrity of the divine and its transcendent neutrality by

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\(^{110}\) The verse is from Lamentation 3:38; Rabbi Nachman supplements his own ending to the partial quote, understanding “the Lofty One” to be the einsof and interpreting the verse to mean that no attribute or identifiable trait derives from the divine in its most unmanifest, only “simple light.”

\(^{111}\) In traditional Hebrew orthography, words may sometimes be written with or without the letter vav, which in certain contexts serves as a vowel rather than a consonant and may therefore be selectively omitted in the same sense nequdot are implied. The word meorot is one such case and can be written with or without its vav; here, Rabbi Nachman employs a classic exegetical move in which the lacking of the letter is taken to correspond to a thematic “lacking” in the wholeness of the vessel.
assigning any quality to man’s ascription, not to the nature of the thing itself, which is nonexistent or at least unknowable.

**Differences and Similarities**

There is a major difference between these two discourses in *Likkutei Moharan*, or at least an expression in one that was not clearly present in the other—rather than viewing all subjective interpretations with equal absurdity (and therefore equal validity), as seems to be the case in 31:9, in the discussion in 36:6 there is a hierarchy of interpretation, whereby one person’s vessel can be “whole” and another’s can be broken. It becomes clear here that Elisha ben Avuya does not merely perceive God through a lens as false as any other; in fact, he is *more* wrong than his Talmudic counterpart Rabbi Akiva, who in the same episode “exits [heaven] in peace” after witnessing the same sight, maintaining his faith. Presumably, neither party actually comprehended the divine, which is by nature incomprehensible and unpronounceable; nonetheless, Rabbi Akiva’s “vessel” contains the divine light more completely than his heretical colleague. How can Rabbi Nachman account for this state of affairs, whereby interpretations all fail completely to grasp the ultimate and most indefinable truth, and yet one subjective ascertainment of that truth can be more right than another?

In answering this question we will reveal a crucial difference between Rabbi Nachman and Zhuangzi, which derives from their different cultural and philosophical backdrops. As has already been alluded, Rabbi Nachman’s Kabbalistic model is based heavily on the Neo-Platonic model of *emanations*: A singular, unqualified, and—crucially—transcendent entity undergoes phases of increasing complexity and
manifestation.  

Rabbi Nachman’s solution to his problem is in line with this model: although no system of knowledge can ever apprehend the infinite, which is by definition infinitely distant from any given system, those systems of knowledge can be progressively refined and updated to more accurately represent the divine. In a mode rather similar to the notion of limits in calculus, a person can attempt to reach the divine through an infinite series of successive approximations—not of numbers, but of models of truth. From the standpoint of the infinite, all of these models are equally false; but vis-à-vis one another, these models can be arranged in a clear hierarchy of accuracy. This is precisely the tone of discourse II:7, in which Rabbi Nachman presents his notion of the *makifin*, or concentric circles, which essentially stand for a person’s models of the infinite. As he matures in his intellectual sophistication, he breaks through one layer and arrives at the next concentric one; his new model is at once more accurate and at the same time equally a failure in representing God, the true unknowable.

Truth, for Rabbi Nachman, is not significant in its own right, since for humanity it is only a model and is essentially false and absurd; it is instead conceived of as a *tool*, a means to arrive at mystical experience of God, which transcends that modeling process. For Zhuangzi, too, truth is a false representation of reality, and is judged not on its own merit but on its pragmatic component. This is neatly illustrated by a clever little parable in Chapter Two:

> To tax our spirits and our intellect in this way without realizing that everything is the same is called ‘Three in the Morning.’ And what is ‘Three in the Morning’? A monkey trainer was giving out acorns and he said, ‘In the morning I will give you each three acorns and in the

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112 For an analysis of the Neo-Platonic roots of Kabbalah in the Middle Ages, see Lenn E. Goodman, ed., *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY, 1992).

113 Alexandra Mandelbaum, in a paper dedicated to an extensive treatment of the philosophical and historical context of the *makifin* in Rabbi Nachman, labels this process as תּוֹרְא הָה אֱמֶת, “an eternal ascent.” Mandelbaum, *Torat Ha-Makifin*, 60.
evening you will get four.’ The monkeys were very upset at this and so he said, ‘All right, in the morning you will get four and in the evening, three.’ This pleased the monkeys no end. His two statements were essentially the same, but got different reactions from the monkeys. He gained what he wanted by his skill. So it is with the sage, who manages to harmonize right and wrong and is content to abide by the Natural Equality of Heaven. This is called walking two roads.\footnote{Zhuangzi Chapter 2, 13-14.} No order of the acorns is more “correct” than the other; the difference is in its usefulness. Models of reality are not true, but they are useful. For both thinkers, these models may—and must—be changed or dispensed with when they are no longer useful. But whereas for Rabbi Nachman these models are thought of as \textit{approximations}, conveying the sense of hierarchy and approach, in Zhuangzi these models are \textit{manipulations}, apprehensions of reality that are all equally valid and invalid. It might be said that Rabbi Nachman operates on a vertical plane of truth, on which a worshipper must move upward toward the divine peak of mystical absorption, while Zhuangzi operates on a horizontal plane of truth, a kind of sliding scale in which a practitioner adjusts his orientation toward reality based on the changing circumstances.\footnote{Rabbi Nachman, too, depicts reality and its truth as constantly changing in a manner that could well have been said by Zhuangzi in \textit{Sichot HaRan} 40: “This is the aspect of the \textit{dreidel} [the spinning top played with during the \textit{Hanukkah} holiday], the aspect of the spinning wheel that switches from one aspect to another and back and forth.” However, as Mandelbaum notes in \textit{Torat Ha-Makifim}, 41, footnote 145, this statement should be contextualized by the more elaborate theoretical presentation of \textit{Likkutei Moharan}, in which the change of truth clearly occurs only in the vertical direction. Still, the remarkable similarity should not be understated.}  

This difference is poignant in two thinkers’ respective discourses on dreams. In \textit{Likkutei Moharan} II:61, Rabbi Nachman discusses the fluidity of time experienced in dreams, noting that when comparing the waking and sleeping self, whichever self has the “larger” intellect—that is, the version of the self that is awake and has more access to the active mind—experiences time as “smaller,” that is, quicker. Performing a calculation that amounts to taking a mathematical limit, he arrives at the conclusion that
a being with an infinitely “large” mind, meaning unlimited intellectual capacity—that is, God—would experience time as functionally zero—that is, a single identical moment. To explain the problem of reconciling a transcendent God with the human conception of time, Rabbi Nachman employs a model of emanations in which dreamers are inside dreams, and the ultimate waking figure experiences the truest reality. This model is a typical Kabbalistic mode of thought.116

The Zhuangzi, by contrast, features its own statement on dreams in what may be the book’s most famous comment, a story in which Zhuangzi himself dreams he is a butterfly, blissfully unaware of his humanity, and upon waking is unsure if he is a butterfly dreaming he is a man.117 In Moeller’s penetrating analysis of this controversial story, he understands that Zhuangzi the man and Zhuangzi the butterfly are both unaware of each other; each truth assumes its own self-sufficient, isolated character independent of other truths, and since these models never intersect they can be assumed as shifting circumstances demand, even if they conflict when juxtaposed.118 Unlike Rabbi Nachman’s analysis of dreams, which he constructs hierarchically, Zhuangzi understands dreams to function parallel to each other. Nothing, in this model, is transcendent; the Dao exists not on a higher plane of reality, like Rabbi Nachman’s God,

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116 In another instance, 17th-century Italian Kabbalist Moshe Chaim Luzatto engages in a similar exercise to address a similar problem in his Adir Ba-Marom. See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Retroactive Not Yet: Linear Circularity and Kabbalistic Temporality,” in Brian Ogren ed., Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism: That Which Is Before and That Which Is After (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 47, where he suggests that the dream metaphor reached Luzatto through a convoluted path beginning from none other than the Zhuangzi episode addressed here; he fails to note the critical thematic gap addressed in this analysis. If the genealogical route he traces is correct, it is telling that Zhuangzi’s original metaphor, which clearly developed in a philosophical environment free from Platonic assumptions, assumes a Neo-Platonic character in its Kabbalistic appearance. Zhuangzi Chapter 2, 20.

117 Zhuangzi Chapter 2, 20.

118 Moeller, Daoism Explained, 44-55. Moeller specifically points out there that this story has been subject to frequent misinterpretation by Westerners who presume a Platonic mode of thought; Wolfson’s implication referenced in the previous footnote may be an example of this.
but on this very plane, the secret, inexpressible force that allows every model of logic to function. Alternatively, the Dao is the “axis” or “pivot” around which the world moves; it is not above but in the middle. It therefore aligns with Zhuangzi’s general model that no particular system of truth is granted priority except the no-truth of the Dao itself. This is, as we have already seen, a typical approach for a Chinese thinker of his era, where the change-based, morally neutral metaphysics of the *I Ching* had come to dominate the philosophical landscape.

Another important difference between the two thinkers is the *value* of modeling reality. We have already noted that speech in both thinkers is tied inherently to logic. In the vocabulary developed in this chapter, we could say that speech connotes the assumption of a particular model; it is the articulation of the unvowelized word, the departure from the space of the ineffable and the entrance into the human world of knowledge in the conventional sense. In the *Zhuangzi*, we do not find praise of one who speaks; as mentioned earlier, the Yellow Emperor is in fact considered to have relatively little knowledge of the Dao because he is capable of speaking about it, meaning that his reflexive gesture of analysis of the Dao—the attempt to cage it in the trappings of logical comprehension—indicates his failure to truly grasp it. To model the world is certainly considered useful, but the characters who Zhuangzi really holds in esteem are those who have eschewed the need for any model of reality altogether. The text gives the impression in his debates with figures like Huizi and Confucius that Zhuangzi is stooping down to their level in assuming their logical garb; his true dwelling place is outside the realm of logic altogether. The act of logic modeling conveys a mastery of the Dao, but is not itself of any inherent value.
By contrast, Rabbi Nachman frequently extols the value of speech. Scholem has already noted the paradox typical of Kabbalistic thinkers, whereby an inexpressible God demands the logical expression of human speech in order to become manifest in the world—a model whose Neo-Platonic roots are obvious, but also one that clearly subverts that structure, since the “higher” phenomenon actually requires its “lower” counterpart to present itself in the world. Rabbi Nachman is a major proponent of this trend and writes, for example, of blessing descending to the world as a result of appropriate speech. But more than associating the act of speech and its concomitant employment of logic with blessing, he considers it a creative act—by employing logic and modeling reality, humanity expands the project of creation and fulfills the divine telos. This much is clear in his statement in Likkutei Moharan II:82: “The nation cannot know the king’s will unless he reveals his thought and will in the form of speech; therefore, the primary manifestation of kingship is in speech.”

This is also the tone of Likkutei Moharan 49, a discourse whose central topic is the manifestation of the divine infinite in the finite world by means of the actions of man, more specifically man’s thoughts, which are located in his heart. The heart’s thoughts, variously good and bad, correspondingly invite or banish the divine presence. The heart is therefore capable of literally structuring reality; it is through this explanation that Rabbi Nachman understands the Psalmist’s phrase “the rock [תָּצִּיר] of my heart” (Psalms 73:26)—the term for rock, tzur, can be re-vowelized as coming from the root tzayar [צָרֵיר], to form, structure, or create. This root is, of course, none other than the same root

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119 Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 17.
120 Wolfson, “Undoing Time,” 57. See also footnotes 86-87 in the previous chapter.
121 Likkutei Moharan 34:3. Significantly, dibbur [דִּבְּרָה] or speech is one of the names for the lowest sefira, malkhut, which is the conduit through which divine blessing originating from the upper Godhead penetrates the world.
around which Rabbi Nachman focused his discourse about subjectivity and the human capacity to determine reality in 36:6. Rabbi Nachman thus demonstrates, through employing his own method, how reality can be structured through a person’s subjective interpretation: Interpretation, logical modeling, is therefore a divine act.\footnote{Shaul Magid argued in his article “Associative Midrash” that Rabbi Nachman’s interpretive project was part of his attempt to usher in the Messianic era, i.e. to complete the process of creation and bring history to its conclusion. See Shaul Magid, “Associative Midrash: Reflections on a Hermeneutic Theory in ‘Likkutei Moharan’” in Shaul Magid ed., God’s Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 15-66.} Again, we find that these two thinkers’ cultural and philosophical backdrops accounts for fundamental differences in their application of their modes of living, even as those modes themselves appear identical. Whereas Rabbi Nachman’s entire enterprise is aimed at the human role in the divine project, Zhuangzi knows nothing of any telos, historical or theological, and seeks rather to establish an ideal way of life for the individual in his relation to his political state and to nature.

On the other hand, a remarkable similarity between the two thinkers in this connection is their argument that that which lies beyond these truth-models is an “emptiness,” an elusive, indefinable Nothing that itself provides the life-force of the models of truth that derive from it. Whereas Hebrew letters can appear without vowels, vowels cannot appear without letters; the unpronounceable divine is a necessary antecedent for man’s comprehension of it. Similarly, the “pivot of the Dao” is the space around which all false truths rotate; in the language of the Daodejing, “Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub, but it is on empty space [at the center of the hub] that the wheel depends.”\footnote{Daodejing Chapter 11.} The paradoxical symbiotic relationship between a true Nothing and a
false something that lies at the heart of both thinkers’ philosophical systems is the subject of the following chapter.

A Note on Hermeneutics in Likkutei Moharan

Although not much scholarly attention has been paid to it, certain researchers have noted Rabbi Nachman’s unique exegetical method—his use of the term bechina [בחינה] (pl. bechinot), variously translated as aspect, character, trait, or dimension. This method appears prominently in Hasidic literature in general and has its origins in the work of 16th century Safedian Kabbalist Moshe Cordovero, but nowhere is it used as extensively and creatively as in Rabbi Nachman’s works and especially in Likkutei Moharan. Essentially, as it is used in the latter work, it refers to the linking between any two words or concepts, typically linguistically. As Arthur Green notes, virtually any discourse can be selected that displays this hermeneutical technique in action. Some examples: “Prayer is the aspect of nose,” “…by the aspect of Joseph, which is maintaining the covenant,” “[the biblical character] Balaam is the aspect of knowledge,” “every member of Israel has his aspect of kingship,” “this is the aspect of in order and out of order…which is the aspect of Adam and Eve.” As is apparent from this grab bag of examples, most of the time there is, ostensibly, no clear thematic link driving the associations. On the contrary, the bulk of many of the discourses in Likkutei Moharan is devoted to explication of certain bechinot established matter-of-

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126 Green, Tormented Master, 286.
127 Likkutei Moharan 2:1.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid, 43.
130 Ibid, 56.
131 Ibid, II:82.
factual in a given discourse’s introduction. Instead of bearing obvious thematic commonalities, the associations are typically derived from linguistically creative readings of biblical verses; for example, the source for the aforementioned association of prayer with “the aspect of nose” is the prophet’s phrase “my praise I shall restrain” (Isaiah 48:9)—the word for “I shall restrain” (echetam אֶחְטָם) is a poetic riff on the word “nose” (chotem חַטֶּמ), and the word “praise” has since early rabbinic literature connoted prayer. Thus, in Rabbi Nachman’s rereading, the prophet is made to declare that “prayer is [the aspect of] nose.” The meaning of this mystifying association forms the backbone of the extensive discourse that follows.

In summary, Rabbi Nachman’s two-stage hermeneutical method is based on a highly technical, formalistic reading of biblical phraseology, whereby words are reread (and typically re-vowelized in the process) to provide some kind of mechanical link. This link bears no inherent meaning; the thrusting of meaning upon the link is, apparently, the work of Rabbi Nachman himself. The first stage of this process is based in form and the second in content, the first embedded in the text and the second in the effort of the interpreter. This construction of meaning, which typifies Rabbi Nachman’s whole interpretive project of Likkutei Moharan, is itself a meta-example of the method of re-vowelization he discusses in the discourses analyzed above. Rabbi Nachman is able to create “logical models” of meaning—the discourses themselves and the teachings they deliver—precisely because the text alone means nothing at all, and is therefore pregnant with infinite meaning; if a word contains no vowels and therefore both literally and figuratively does not contain any one meaning, it can be taken to refer to any concept at all within a range of possibilities. Any root based on a combination of
letters can be exchanged for a root with the same or similar letters. The fundamental absurdity of the biblical text is exactly what permits its interpreter to manipulate it as he sees fit, in a manner very near to how Zhuangzi praises the monkey-trainer—since truth is indefinable in the abstract and varies in our own hands, it can be played with and summoned to whatever end is pragmatic. To this end, discourses need not be consistent with one another as long as any individual discourse is self-consistent, just as Zhuangzi might assume the philosophical garb of any of his opponents in an argument with one of them, as Kun and Peng become each other, and as Confucius changes his mind sixty times. This relativistic presentation of truth might account for the labyrinthine and often self-contradictory nature of both texts, as well as each author’s embrace of the absurd. And as we discussed in the previous section, since Rabbi Nachman regards the interpretive act to be a positive step in the creative process, it also explains his encouragement of his disciples to engage in the formation of new bechinot.\footnote{Likkutei Moharan II:105. Rabbi Nachman’s opposition to rereading verses in such a way that would deviate from normative Jewish law suggests that he thinks the interpretive process of modeling the infinite in human terms has a theological limit; this marks another difference between his thought and Zhuangzi’s, which is obviously accounted for by clear differences in tradition (Rabbi Nachman is of course a staunch practitioner of normative Jewish law), and which deserves study in its own right.}

It should be noted that the grammatical structure of the Hebrew language seems to be a primary impetus for Rabbi Nachman’s understanding of the human subjectivization of divine truth—more specifically, the fact that consonant letters and vowel-signs are two parallel but complementary systems, and the fact that at the most basic level of writing letters can exist without vowel-signs but not vice versa. This is quite a novelty to the Western reader, for whom the signifying capabilities of letters and words are basically uniform. Chinese, although of course bearing absolutely no historical relationship to Semitic languages, does bear a marked similarity in its
employment of tones—as in Hebrew, a Chinese character possesses two separable traits, its syllabic pronunciation and its accompanying tone. A.C. Graham has already pointed out Zhuangzi’s awareness of puns in which tones are confused, and Roger Ames has also discussed the capacity of Chinese characters as ideograms to bear a certain distance to their represented concepts unfamiliar to speakers of Western languages.

An exhaustive analysis of the representative capacities of Chinese or Hebrew alone is beyond the scope of this paper, as certainly is a comparison between the two; but it seems like at the very least a speculative possibility that the separateness of parallel grammatical systems within these languages, as well as their unique representative styles, may have informed the views of these two thinkers on the interpretive capacities of people and the indefinable nature of truth. This might be another, and particularly intriguing, factor in the philosophical affinity of Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman. The potential impact of a philosopher’s language on his or her interpretive thought more broadly and how differences in the constructs of languages from around the world account for differences in the thought germane to those regions is certainly a fruitful area for research.

133 Graham, Disputers of the Tao, 177.
134 Ames, Wandering at Ease, 223-227. A Chinese character generally refers to a whole concept, rather than acting as an atomic building block that necessarily must link with other letters to construct a single idea. This feature is foreign to normative Hebrew, but the examination of single letters as possessing personalities in their own right and referring to a variety of concepts alone is a prominent area of Kabbalah and appears occasionally in Likkutei Moharan; see 6:5, 97, II:82. Kabbalistic discussions of the meaning of the shapes of letters is a particularly interesting opportunity for comparison to ancient Chinese.
Chapter Three: Ontology and Ideology

In this paper’s first chapter, we examined the idea of “immanent knowledge” in the thought of Rabbi Nachman and Zhuangzi, which was characterized by its suprarational status—that is, its place above, outside, or beneath the kind of knowledge we traditionally associate with the intellect and its logical modeling of reality. In the previous chapter, we examined their discourses regarding this intellectual tendency, and the fact that both thinkers feel that logical modeling is appropriate in the life of the practitioner as long as, paradoxically, it leads to its own self-negation as it is overcome; rather than fall prey to the intellect’s own trappings, a person must move through the intellect on a line of logic, whether that line be vertical or horizontal. In terms of integrating the two different systems discussed in the previous two chapters, it can now be proposed that the kind of immanent knowledge that these two thinkers advocate, while differing in content according to each, itself bears a distinct relationship with their notion of logical modeling. As will become clear in this chapter, for Rabbi Nachman an immanent knowledge of God is the result of the movement through, and transcendence of, the intellect, while for Zhuangzi an immanent knowledge through the vehicle of the Dao is a cause for the sage’s capacity to manipulate his world and employ logic to its best use; but for both thinkers, there is a linear relationship between immanent and intellectual knowledge.

Specifically, we are interested here in the nothingness that characterizes the philosophical immanence each thinker strives for, in Rabbi Nachman’s God (or at least in humanity’s perception of the divine) and in Zhuangzi’s Dao, and in the paradoxical and mysterious relationship between that great-nothingness and the small-somethingness
that comprises our own logical apprehension of our surroundings. As such, while also employing more of the close-reading method that has characterized this paper so far, this chapter will feature a broader overview of each thinker’s basic ontology, and how their conception of the universe’s arrangement informs their views on logic and knowledge. This argument will ultimately help to frame each thinker against his respective historical backdrop, coloring in richer detail precisely what they stood for and why.

Rabbi Nachman and the Reshimu

In Likkutei Moharan 4:9, Rabbi Nachman engages in a particularly sophisticated discourse concerning divine revelation, drawing heavily on a Kabbalistic vocabulary that is both explicit and implicit. Essentially, he writes that Moses’s characteristic aspect is that of ayin [אין], nothingness; when he encounters the divine, he is swallowed up in its all-consuming infinity, which is an experience of nothingness and death. This infinity is characterized here as stripped of all physicality,\(^\text{135}\) as being unknowable “even by Moses” since it eradicates the intellect and even Moses’s independent identity, and as “having no shape.” During this encounter, Moses—as well as any modern worshipper who comes to visit his local sage, the correlate ayin of his era—is incapable of reporting and describing the experience, which is by definition ineffable. In fact, the only authentic way to describe Moses’s experience at the moment of revelation is nothing at all—he registers no notion of selfhood, and witnesses that which has no image. This is a God devoid of any and all attribute, beyond any logical model or conception. In Kabbalistic terminology, it is the experience of keter, crown, the highest of the sefirot.

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\(^\text{135}\) The phrase “stripping of the physical”, hitpashtut ha-gashmiyut [ה plaisתת הغضביות], is a keyword in Hasidic literature and is sometimes associated, as it is here, with contact with the einsof, the raw infinity of God that sits atop the divine system of emanations that is the Godhead, the sefirot.
and the first grade of emanation between God in his raw infinity and the Godhead below.\textsuperscript{136} Keter is also referred to as ayin, nothingness, clarifying the reference here—the highest revelation a person can attain of the divine is therefore emptiness.\textsuperscript{137} As a crown, keter also by its nature encircles the mind, constantly out of the intellect’s reach—this is the aspect of the divine that transcends logical modeling, and can only be addressed vis-à-vis logic after its revelation has ended.\textsuperscript{138}

Zvi Mark has discussed this discourse and its roots in the philosophical category of negative theology.\textsuperscript{139} This principle, which has its roots in medieval philosophy, most famously in Maimonides,\textsuperscript{140} asserts that God can only be described in terms of what he is not, since the divine is utterly transcendent and human descriptions are utterly finite. We see here a clear precedent for Rabbi Nachman’s approach to the absurdity of knowledge. Mark also notes that one of Rabbi Nachman’s novelties is to ascribe to this nothingness not only philosophical import, but the possibility of actual experiential encounter—he is not merely positing a truth about the nature of the divine, but expecting a person to actually meet with nothingness.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{136} In fact, there is a longstanding debate in Kabbalah whether keter is identical to the einsof—God in his unqualified infinity—or whether it is the first of the sefirot and a separate entity from the former. See Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishby, \textit{Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts}, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 242-246.


\textsuperscript{138} The relationship between keter and the makifin, literally “encircling things,” or Rabbi Nachman’s system of logical models, is discussed in Alexandra Mandelbaum, \textit{Torat Ha-makifim: Ha-model Ha-ma’agali b’ Likkutei Moharan l’ Rebbe Nachman mi-Breslev} (Master’s thesis, Hebrew University, 2017) (Hebrew).

\textsuperscript{139} Mark, \textit{Mysticism and Madness}, 28-25 for the discussion of this discourse; 231-261 discusses the philosophy and genealogy of negative theology.


\textsuperscript{141} Mark, \textit{Mysticism and Madness}, 258-260.
What Mark does not note in regards to this portion of the discourse is its second half, in which Rabbi Nachman addresses Moses’s status post-revelation—upon his return to the world of logic and the living, man must “show [the revelation] to his knowledge,” that is, report in terms of logic his experience of the hyper-logical. Whereas during the experience his logical faculty was obliterated, in his return to life he now finds himself in need of a translation of his transcendent encounter. He needs, in other words, a logical model of the infinite. Rabbi Nachman refers to this logical approximation, of the ability to describe the divine truth with language, as a reshimu [רשימו], a trace, of the infinite.142 Wolfson notes that the term also connotes “impression” or “imprint,” as a shoe in the dirt.143 Something that was really there can now be observed by way of what it left behind, which is in fact negative space, a hole assuming its shape but without its substance.

Significantly, the reshimu is Rabbi Nachman’s term for a verbal account of revelation, the very thing that seems to exist in language and have a real substance. The paradoxical nature of human knowledge is therefore neatly conveyed in the images of keter and the reshimu—whereas experience of the highest truth, the “most real,” the Platonic form, is from the human standpoint an experience of nothingness and emptiness, the articulation of that truth, which is the lower truth, the “less real,” the Platonic substance, is material, the language to which human beings can refer. The

142 This term was propagated by the Lurianic Kabbalah, which was addressed in this paper’s first chapter (see above, footnote 66). In that Kabbalistic system, God created a vacuum from which he was absent in order to facilitate space for the physical world; into that vacuum he emitted a reshimu, a trace of his transcendent infinity—his real nature—which is beyond that void. Rabbi Nachman here psychologizes that Kabbalistic model, regarding all logical comprehension of transcendent truth as a trace of its infinite nature.

divine absence is reflected in a human presence; all logic is a shadow of something that itself has no form whatsoever. This explains why, for Rabbi Nachman, immanent knowledge supersedes logical apprehension of truth.

**Zhuangzi and the Suoyi Ji**

By now it is already clear that *keter*, the highest member of the Godhead and the empty reflection of the divine infinity, is quite similar in its negative quality to the *Dao* in Zhuangzi. Of particular interest is Zhuangzi’s notion of *ji* [迹], trace, which perfectly parallels Rabbi Nachman’s *reshimu*.144 Here are three excerpts from the *Zhuangzi* that demonstrate the point with startling similarity, two of which explicitly use the term:

There was once a man who was frightened by his own shadow and scared of his own footprints [迹], so he tried to escape them by running away. But every time he lifted his foot and brought it down, he made more footprints [迹], and no matter how fast he ran, his shadow never left him. Thinking he was running too slowly, he ran faster, never ceasing until finally he exhausted himself and collapsed and died. He had no idea that simply by sitting in the shade he would have lost his shadow, nor that by resting quietly he would cease making footprints [迹].

He really was a great fool!145

How fortunate that you have not yet encountered a ruler who can govern the world! As for the six Classics, they are but the stale traces [迹] of the kings of old, much less those who leave the trace [所以迹]! Your words today are no different from such traces [迹]. As for the trace [迹], it is like the imprint made by a shoe, it is not the shoe itself!146

We can point to the wood that has been burned, but when the fire has passed on, we cannot know where it has gone.147

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144 The trace is an even more critical element in the thought of Guo Xiang, founder of his own philosophical school in the 3rd century CE and author of the foremost commentary on the _Zhuangzi_; however, his political motivations in using the text to justify the Confucian ethics that had by the his day become sacrosanct, while worth studying of their own accord and continuing the spirit of elements in the _Zhuangzi_ itself, differ too much from the kind of purist ethic this paper attempts to be useful here. Zhuangzi’s trace and its relevance for Guo Xiang’s project is the subject of Brook Ziporyn’s article “The Self-So and Its Traces in the Thought of Guo Xiang” in *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 3 (1993), 511–539.

145 _Zhuangzi_ Chapter 31, 283.


147 Ibid, Chapter 3, 24. This line is offered as an explanation of why a student of Laozi mourned his teacher less than was ritually warranted, and what happened to Laozi after his death. The implication is
Especially intriguing are the translations “footprint” and “imprint,” entirely in line with the Chinese term, which as Wolfson pointed out are also possible translations or at least connotations of the Hebrew term *reshimu*. The point here is that the Dao, which is absent, is paradoxically expressed in the substantial acts of people; as in the parable about hiding the world in the world, any logical construction viewed independently cannot stand on its own and is a mere shadow of the Dao, which is itself absent altogether. That which leaves the trace—the *suoyi ji* [所以迹]—is not the same as the trace itself.  

In particular, each of these excerpts refers especially to *schools of thought*, different manners of thinking as espoused by various philosophers. These manners of thinking as they appear in texts or in the articulated phrases and actions of thinkers fail to convey the organic, mysterious nature of the thinkers themselves; in the first excerpt, it is clear that even the act of formulating these modes of thought is suspect. From the standpoint of the Dao, the sage may assume these logical constructions as he deems them useful, but himself seems to be somewhere else, or rather nowhere, altogether. This is also the explanation of Zhuangzi’s description of himself as a “gust of wind” that scatters mud from Huizi’s nose addressed in Chapter One of this paper—being present at the Dao, his own argument says nothing at all, and yet it can be seen in what it leaves behind, in its exertion of a physical force.  

For Zhuangzi, too, it is clear that the master’s teaching—his school of thought—can be observed as an indication of his presence, but the master himself is absent.

148 In fact, the relationship between the *ji* and the *suoyi ji*, the trace and that which leaves it, is the subject of a debate between Brook Ziporyn (see footnote 146 above) and David Chai. The former maintains that Guo Xiang felt that these two were identical, merely two ways of stating the same fact from complementary perspectives, while the latter argues for their difference. See Chai, “Nothingness, Being, and Dao,” 66.

how ontological understanding of the universe translate into priority of immanent knowledge of the Dao over busying oneself with its intellectualized traces.

*The Dao vs. Keter*

How, exactly, do Zhuangzi’s Dao and Rabbi Nachman’s keter compare to each other more holistically? We have already determined that both are negative in quality, both paradoxically produce stuff of substance, and both are borrowed from earlier traditions and taken to apply to human logical constructs and their limits. Additionally, both serve as philosophical bases for undermining the power of the intellect. Several critical differences between the two will sharpen the distinction between these two thinkers and more clearly characterize their respective systems.

For one, upon closer inspection, it is quite unclear whether, for Zhuangzi, the Dao exists at all. Graham points out that the Daoists “conceive the ground to which they return in meditation, not as ultimate Reality, but as the Way for which they are searching.”150 The Dao is a verb; it is not a hypostatic entity. As such, it can never be “reached” or “attained,” in the strict sense of those terms, through study, discourse, or observation—it must be rather be acted out. The Dao is realized through the intuitive actions of those who live according to it even as they are unaware they are manifesting it, “as the swimmer cannot describe what he does to keep afloat.”151 There is no otherworldly, transcendent, or unified force that the swimmer summons to do his swimming, and yet, in the actual act of his swimming we can clearly discern some kind of present capability in him that an amateur lacks. This capability vanishes the moment the swimmer employs his intellect to pinpoint it.

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151 Ibid, 3-4, in reference to the anecdote in *Zhuangzi* Chapter 19, 162.
Likewise, the Dao that Zhuangzi constantly discusses—ostensibly as an actual place or thing—is that which emerges at the level of reflexive discourse, not the actual Dao as it is experienced. It assumes its character as a noun only upon the linguistic and intellectual attempt to pin it down. In this sense the Dao might be compared to a musician’s sense of rhythm—whereas the musician only plays notes, he perceives a groove that laces those notes together and determines his muscular movements. Even though there is of course no such metaphysical force thrusting the music forward, it is not strictly correct to say that there is no such thing as the groove; rather, it is there, but it is absent, negative in quality, a verb that disappears when the musician ceases activity and attempts to locate it.\footnote{One is reminded of the famous quote by Claude Debussy, “Music is the space between the notes.”}

Rabbi Nachman’s keter, on the other hand, is certainly a hypostatic entity. While a detailed exposition of the nature of the sefirot, the ten elements of the Godhead that are homologous with the human body, is beyond the scope of this paper, it will suffice to say here that each sefira contains an independent and identifiable essence, a character in its own right that can offer a human worshipper a unique and particular experience of God. Keter, the first of the sefirot, is no exception. Although its quality is negative, it does apparently exist as a noun in a sense that the Dao, in its most unadulterated presentation, does not. To prove this point and its relevance for Rabbi Nachman, Mark analyzes the development of the phrase “the ultimate purpose of knowing is that we do not know,” originally a dictum of the philosophers concerning theology, in Rabbi Nachman’s mystical worldview.\footnote{The original appearance of this phrase, תכלית הידעמה שלל נושא, (also translated as “the destination of knowledge is the lack of knowledge”), is in the writings of Yediah Ha-Penini, and became famous among...} For the philosophers, the phrase was an implication...
of negative theology—the ultimate truth is the realization of the inadequacy of any human truth. But for Rabbi Nachman, both “knowing” and “we do not know” (also translated as “lack of knowledge”) become themselves hypostatic entities, references to the sefirot. “Knowing” is taken to be a reference to the second sefira of tochma, discussed earlier as the divine faculty endowing human beings with the capacity of the intellect; “lack of knowledge” is a reference to keter. In Rabbi Nachman’s exegesis, the phrase comes to mean that the movement toward the actual place of nothingness (keter) travels paradoxically through the intellect (chocma), a process already detailed in the previous chapter. Thus, keter is conceived as the final frontier of the intellectual pursuit, the self-negation of logic, and in some plane of reality a veritable place that can really be accessed by the worshipper. Another articulation of this distinction is that whereas keter is a transcendent entity, the Dao is immanent, present and indeed hidden inside the very actions of those who have attained it.\(^{154}\)

Another critical distinction that follows from the previous one is the telos, the goal, of the process of attaining nothingness. For Zhuangzi, the acting out of the Dao is a precursor to proper living, to engaging with and exchanging different models of truth; in other words, a person must get the Dao before being able to properly utilize the intellect. For Rabbi Nachman, keter is the end of the worshipper’s journey, which begins with the intellect. On the other hand, as we have seen, the act of converting the transcendent experience of keter into language is a positive, creative act, even when that linguistic

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\(^{154}\) However, God is depicted throughout Kabbalah and throughout Likkutei Moharan in particular as immanent as well; secrecy and hiddenness in the sense of nearness is a common motif in Jewish mysticism. A comparison between the immanence of the Hasidic God and the Dao is a promising area for further research.
presentation is in a literal sense false. Zhuangzi accords no inherent value to the act of employing logic—he only holds in esteem the figure who is able to do so because it indicates that they have procured the Dao, and in the final tally he continually prefers silence to speech.

**Nothingness as a Response to Ideology**

The bulk of this paper is devoted to demonstrating how the nothingness that both thinkers strive for is in each of their philosophical systems located *beyond* the place where the intellect resides, or perhaps hiding underneath that place or inside of it—in any event, “nothingness” is superior to “somethingness.” Panning out now and viewing each thinker in his historical context, it becomes clear that it is precisely into the inferior realm of this “somethingness” that they place the other philosophical voices of their respective eras. These opponents are cast as *ideologues*, people who subscribe to an a priori system with a rigid, deterministic vocabulary, whose outlook offers an exclusionary view of the world and is resistant to change.

These ideologies were formed in response to a real, historical crisis—the previous way of life had become, due to massive shifts in the political, historical, and cultural spheres, lost or untenable, and the best minds of the era scrambled to stand their civilization upright. As for Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman—each thinker recognized the efforts of his companions, but felt that all proposed solutions to the crisis bore a common flaw: their ideological nature. The ossification of the newly developing human spirit did not serve its purpose of unifying the people; instead, it further fractured the nation, dividing it into competing schools. It also threatened to cage and neutralize the imaginative nature of the mind, which at its heart is premised not on logic but on
absurdity. In other words, for Zhuangzi and Rabbi Nachman, the attempts of contemporaries to offer a solution to the crisis of their day only exacerbated that crisis, and it may be proposed that they set out to correct once and for all the errant trajectory of ideology.

For Zhuangzi, the competing ideologies in question were the thinkers of the Warring States period, nicknamed the Hundred Schools of Thought. Figures like Confucius, Mencius, and Mozi and the various views they constructed peopled Zhuangzi’s world, and as we have already seen in the explication of the hiding-the-world-inside-the-world metaphor, rather than enter the fray, Zhuangzi sought to pull the rug out from under all his peers and expose, quite literally, the void upon which their constructions were precariously built. Since the Dao is held to provide, through its negative generativity, the stuff that comprises the intellect, Zhuangzi can claim that his anti-ideology ideology derives from the root of all other ideologies. In an interesting example, whereas Confucius marked his “golden age,” which the people of his era should seek to revive, at the early Zhou dynasty, Zhuangzi marked his “golden age” as a kind of before-time, a fairy-tale era that precedes history.  

Seen through this lens, Zhuangzi’s project in fact becomes a concerted effort to get to the root of philosophy itself, the metaphorical “before-time” of ideology. In his scathing attack on the thought of his age, he arrives at the conclusion that the cure to the sickness of ideology is absurdity, imagination, creativity, and liberation from the

155 The opening anecdote to Zhuangzi Chapter 7, 60, makes reference to the rule of the mythical figure Tai as an idyllic era that predates history. Thank you to Yu Feng for pointing out this contrast. An interesting parallel might be found in Likkutei Moharan 60:6, where Rabbi Nachman refers to the stories he would commonly use as a didactic tool as “stories of the ancient years,” קדמוניות של שנים קדומות. In modern terms, both thinkers seem to be referring to an earlier, pre-logical region of the human psyche in metaphorical terms as a chronological period that precedes history.
trappings of logic, all of which characterize the territory of nothingness, the realm of the Dao.

Rabbi Nachman too found himself at the precipice of modernity, and he too found it swarmed with countless ideologies formulated to guide humanity forward in the dark. In his situation, the most threatening ideologies were offered by the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, but his fellow Hasidim also represented to him the formulation of staunch worldviews. That he on some level was positively disposed toward the followers of the Haskalah is attested to in the records of his disciple Nathan Sternhartz. Liebes theorizes that the positive disposition toward the Haskalah evident in his writings—which in Likkutei Moharan appears only by suggestion—dates primarily from his earlier interactions with the modernist movement, when he thought that it was, like him, trying to throw off the yoke of ideology and move into a dynamic and limitless new philosophical world (what we might call a world of keter). His negative comments regarding the Haskalah—part of which we could consider his statements criticizing the use of sechel [שכל], intellect, a pun with the word Haskalah [השכלה]—are taken to be written after his extensive exposure to the group, when he became aware that they were in fact just another ideology claiming that their truth transcended the others.

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156 See, for example, criticisms of other “mefursamim,” literally “celebrities” (a term referring Hasidic leaders), as engaging in petty arguments in Likkutei Moharan II:1:3, II:67. See especially Likkutei Moharan 33, where the resolution of all argument between peers is considered a Messianic trait. Rabbi Nachman’s entrenchment in argument with other major Hasidic figures is well-documented; see Zvi Mark, “Why Did R. Moses Zvi of Savran Persecute R. Nathan of Nemirov and Bratslav Hasidim?” in Zion 69, no. 4 (2004), 487-500 (Hebrew).

157 See Green, Tormented Master, 255-259.

Detecting the eclipsing in his day of the supra-rational faculties, those primal human tendencies that can more truly access God unhindered by the intellect, Rabbi Nachman set out to defend an absurdist approach to religion, practicing it in the form of his hermeneutical approach and in his unparalleled storytelling as well as the content of his writing. This fixation on absurdity also explains the form of the *Zhuangzi*, which even in the authentic Inner Chapters free from controversy of authorship is highly nonlinear, associative, self-referential, and labyrinthine. That both texts combine a form of staggering complexity with an air of simplicity and folk thought is characteristic of their attempts to undermine the systematic, ideological nature of the rival tenets they sought to depose.

Furthermore, although it was these historical circumstances that prompted these thinkers to put forth their anti-ideological arguments, the content of those arguments transcended the borders of history. Not only do they persist in relevance today, but in their own day as well the points each thinker made were intended to tackle perennial issues as much as contemporary ones. Mark has pointed out, for example, that the annihilation of the intellect is partially a polemic against Aristotelian models, which are premised on logical apprehension of the divine will; these arguments are certainly not limited to the modern era. Zhuangzi, for his part, speaks as often to the ageless layperson as he does to contemporary philosophers. Spurred by a crisis of the present, their resultant projects span the course of history in both directions.

It is important to elucidate one more point. The anti-ideological systems proposed by both thinkers are centered on the idea of a nothingness that eludes the grasp

\[159\] Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 42-44. Thank you to Yehuda Mirsky for pointing out the complexity of the historical formulation of Rabbi Nachman’s views and its sources.
of logic. In the traditions that precede each of them, this nothingness already exists—the Dao is already in the *Daodejing* an elusive entity meant to be sought by the ideal sage, and *keter* is already in late medieval Kabbalistic texts that highest, negative revelation of the divine infinite that annihilates the substance of the world. But whereas in these earlier traditions, the nothingness in question is taken to deconstruct *existence* or *consciousness*, for both Rabbi Nachman and Zhuangzi it is taken to deconstruct *logic*. Without losing its more literal connotations in the realms of mysticism and phenomenology, the idea of nothingness gains a marked psychological and philosophical character. In its new guise, it is a means to expose the vapid nature of ideology and provide a more immediate experience of some object, whether that object is God or life itself.

With historical context in mind, we can now argue that this symbolic shift in each thinker’s understanding of their tradition’s nothingness was prompted by the circumstances of their own historical moments. The confrontation with modernity (albeit in different forms) posed a new challenge in the form of logic and ideology, and Rabbi Nachman and Zhuangzi both summoned their arsenal of cultural tools to combat it and defend the mystery and imagination natural to the religious mind. To accomplish this task, it was necessary that they move the interpretive chain of their traditions forward, developing earlier symbols to apply them with special relevance for their particular landscape. While their ontological bases preceded them, their own novelty was to adapt these bases as a weapon against stultifying intellectualism. The projects of *Likkutei*

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160 The mystical capacity of the Dao to dissemble consciousness is the subject of Harold D. Roth, “Some Issues in the Study of Chinese Mysticism: A Review Essay” in *China Review International* 2, no. 1 (1995). Reference is made there to the parallel Hasidic practice of *devekut*, cleaving to God, on page 163, but this process is ostensibly not the same as the attainment of *keter*.
Moharan and the Zhuangzi can therefore be seen as an ideal meeting ground of a
culture’s rich legacy of ontological categories and particular historical moments.

**Concluding Thoughts**

We began this paper by noting the comparison between Daoist and Jewish
thought as a gaping lacuna in the literature of either discipline. This project has
attempted to demonstrate the value of this comparison by picking two particular thinkers
from two particular points in history, and in doing so has constructed a more specific
analysis of the ideas of nothingness, logic, and the relationship between ontology and
history. But it is also hoped that this analysis will encourage further research to reflect
on the grander implications lying behind it— the relationship between the Dao and the
God of Kabbalah and Hasidism; the effects of the varying structures of non-Western
languages on philosophy; broader, cross-cultural definitions of mysticism. We have
sought as well to paint sophisticated philosophical portraits of Rabbi Nachman and
Zhuangzi that are not subjugated to each other, and which are rooted in unique cultural
legacies, even as they bear a remarkable resemblance. While these portraits persist today
and transcend the scale of history, they can also be placed firmly in precise historical
contexts that bring them to life.

More than anything else, it is hoped that the philosophies of these two luminaries
have encouraged the reader to reflect with a healthy humor and skepticism on their own
intellect, to challenge the ideological nature of their environment however it may
manifest, and to seek in their own inner life a more primal, pre-logical attitude with
which to enrich their world and perceive it on its own terms.
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