Sacramental Existence and Embodied Theology in Buber’s Representation of Hasidism

Sam Berrin Shonkoff

Abstract:
Martin Buber denied consistently that he was a theologian because he repudiated abstract discourse about God. However, he did affirm that intersubjective events in the world express theological truth, even if that truth cannot be possessed or professed thereafter as noetic content. In this paper I introduce a concept of “embodied theology” to elucidate this nuance in Buber’s religious thought, and I show how his Hasidic writings shed unique light on these matters. Through hermeneutical investigations of his Hasidic tales vis-à-vis the original sources, I illuminate Buber’s conviction that genuine sages convey theological meaning through the very spiritual-corporeal dynamics of their lives—or what Buber calls their “sacramental existence.”

Keywords: Martin Buber; embodied theology; Hasidism; sacrament; narrative

I. Buber’s Concept of Theological Expression

Humor theory is no laughing matter. If one must explain why something is funny, it’s a lost cause. People say, “You had to be there” because hilarity is situational, spontaneous, even sensory. Thinking about humor can be fascinating, but it misses the spirit of the joke.

We face a similar absurdity in the field of religious studies. We can discuss and write about religious concepts, rituals, and histories—theologians can throw around words like “transcendence,” “wonder,” and “God”—but at the end of the day: perhaps we just had to be there. Discourse about what’s funny or about what’s divine can illuminate and refine, but it can hardly capture. As philosophical theologians have insisted but not heeded for centuries, God-talk is inevitably estranged from the unspeakable God. There is neither belly-laughing nor revelation in theoretical discourse.
In this spirit, Martin Buber denied until his dying day that he was a theologian. He sought to convey the “experience of faith,” but he refused to call this theology. “The theological element has indeed influenced a large part of my scholarship and reporting,” he wrote, and “it is the foundation of my thinking,” but “I am absolutely not capable nor even disposed to teach this or that about God.”\(^1\) In a public dialogue with Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago Hillel in 1957, one earnest attendee asked Professor Buber if he could clarify what he meant by “the Absolute.” Buber responded in a playful tone with a serious objection: “No. I do not want to!” After the audience’s laughter faded, he continued, “As soon as I try to explain the Absolute, then it is no longer the Absolute.”\(^2\)

The irony, of course, is that Buber wrote insatiably about God. Evidently, he thought it was possible to gain some insight into the Divine, even if that insight remained irreducible to systems or principles.\(^3\) If we, against Buber’s will somewhat, define “theology” as any mode of human expression that conveys somehow something about divine reality—whether in the medium of language, image, sound, or gesture—then we may rightly inquire: What kind of theology does Buber undertake and envision? Frankly, I am less concerned with preserving the term “theology” than I am committed to the foundational question: How, for Buber, can one express religious truth? The term “theology,” for lack of a better word, helps us ask this question about his thought.

\(^1\) Martin Buber, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, eds. P.A. Schilpp and M. Friedman (LaSalle: Open Court, 1967), 690.

\(^2\) “Conversation with Martin Buber, December 3, 1951” (audio recording), Leo Strauss Papers, Box 76, in the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library.

\(^3\) My use of the term “insight” here corresponds to the German *Einsicht*, which Buber uses to denote situational and even sensuous awareness, as opposed to abstract or intellectual knowledge. For example, see “Gegen all mantische Historiosophie, gegen alles Bescheidwissen um die Zukunft, ob dialektischer, ob gnostischer Herkunft, steht hier die Einsicht in das echte Dasein des geschehenden.” Martin Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum,” in *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934, Band II: Ostwestliche Symbolik und Seelenführung*, ed. Olga Fröbe Kapteyn (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1935), 346. Cf. Buber’s reference to a dialogical “sinngewissen Leibeseinsicht” in *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1923), 88.
We should begin with Buber’s distinction between what he calls “philosophy and religion,” which he acknowledges openly can be conceived in terms of philosophy and theology. For Buber, philosophy is discourse about the nature of things. It is scientific, and insofar as philosophers offer objectivity, they must objectify. In order to speak intelligently about reality, one must shift from the particular to the general, and regard individuals and events as data for rational reflection. Thus, Buber writes, “Philosophizing and philosophy…begin ever anew with one’s definitely looking away from his concrete situation, hence with the primary act of abstraction.”

In contrast, “religious expression is bound to the concrete situation.” If philosophy is a “third-person” discourse about what is generally, religion is a “second-person” relation with what is presently. Religion and philosophy, for Buber, are different epistemologies with divergent aims. Whereas philosophy pursues objective knowledge (Erkenntnis), religion seeks intersubjective knowing (Erkennen)—in the biblical sense. “In a great act of philosophizing,” Buber writes, “even the finger-tips think—but they no longer feel.” Religious understanding is

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6 Buber, Eclipse of God, 37.

7 For the difference between abstract Erkenntnis and dialogical or “biblical” Erkennen, see Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” 363; idem., Ereignisse und Begegnungen (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1917), 29; idem., Ich und Du, 107; idem., Nachlese, 128; idem., Die Chassidischen Bücher (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1927), 665.

8 Buber, Eclipse of God, 44. Buber’s imagery here of bodily perception is significant. Indeed, in his more pointed critiques of particular philosophers, Buber tends to highlight their lack of attunement to corporeal life, suggesting that they are out of touch, so to speak, with the body. Regarding Descartes, for example: “The I in the Cartesian ego cogito is not the living, body-soul (leibseelische) person whose corporality (Leibhaftigkeit) had just been disregarded by Descartes as being a matter of doubt.” Buber, Eclipse of God, 39. As for Heidegger’s Daseinemanalytik: “Contemplation of existence (Daseins) or self-being as such yields only the concept and outline of an almost ghostly spiritual being, that possesses, indeed, bodily contents of its basic sensations, its dread of the universe, its anxiety about existence, its feeling of primal guilt, yet possesses even these in a way that has nothing to do with the body (aber auch sie auf eine ganz unleibliche, allem Leiblichen fremde Weise hat).” Buber, The Knowledge of Man: Selected Essays (New York: Harper
rooted in concrete awareness, so rational rumination upon divinity can actually distract one from God. The “theomaniac” who thinks incessantly about theological mysteries obstructs any genuine encounter.9 “Act as if there were no God,” Buber exhorted at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus in 1922. “By not concerning himself with God, the man who acts touches upon the divine.”10

However, the theological question still remains: What is the optimum expression of religious reality? Buber does, of course, use philosophical language, but he insists that such analysis is “only a gateway, nothing more,”11 and the religious reality to which he points “cannot be grasped philosophically.”12 As Paul Mendes-Flohr has emphasized, Buber holds an entirely “non-noetic conception of faith.”13 Religious insight takes shape, rather, in utterly irreducible events of relation in concrete life, and there is no conceptual content to extract therefrom.

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10 Quoted in Rivka Horwitz, Buber’s Way to ‘I and Thou’: The Development of Martin Buber’s Thought and His ‘Religion as Presence’ Lectures (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 36-37. To my knowledge, the first time Buber formulates this notion of action “as if there were no God” was in his 1916 rendition of a Hasidic teaching attributed to Moshe Leib of Sasov, and Buber’s phrasing diverges somewhat from the original sources. See Martin Buber, “Die gute Gottesleugnung,” in Das Buch von den polnischen Juden, edited by S. J. Agnon and Ahron Eliasberg (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1916), 151-2. Cf. Martin Buber, Chassidismus III: Die Erzählungen der Chassidim, Martin Buber Werkausgabe, Vol. 18, edited by Ran HaCohen (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), §705. Volumes of the Martin Buber Werkausgabe will be cited henceforth as MBW. For the original Hasidic sources, see Aharon ben Yeshayah Natan Walden, Qehal Hasidim (Warsaw, 1870), 53a; Israel Berger, ‘Esar Tzahtzahot (Piotrków, 1909), 52-53.
The meaning (Sinn) itself cannot be transferred or expressed as a universally valid and generally acceptable piece of knowledge. The meaning we receive can be put to the proof in action (bewähren) only by each person in the uniqueness of his being and in the uniqueness of his life. As we have nothing but a You on our lips when we enter the encounter, it is with this on our lips that we are released from it into the world.  

Dialogical encounter is divine revelation, the one true medium of theological expression, intelligible only in the elusive concreteness of presence. “The pure relation can be built up into spatio-temporal continuity only by becoming embodied (verleiblicht) in the whole material of life. It cannot be preserved (bewahrt) but only put to the proof in action (bewährt); it can only be done, poured into life.” This is the heart of the matter. For Buber, the primordial medium of theological expression is no more and no less than the spiritual-corporeal wholeness of existence. Theoretical articulations of religious truth are, at best, secondary materials based upon the primary materiality of dialogical meeting.

Ultimately, a Buberian theology must be an embodied theology.


15 Buber, I and Thou, 163; Ich und Du, 110. I altered Kaufmann’s translation here to render Materie more literally as “material,” instead of “stuff.”

16 Some readers may object here that Buber’s concept of dialogical encounter is not actually “embodied” and so it would be misguided to characterize his notion of religious expression as one of “embodied theology.” For example, Steven Katz claims that Buber’s typology of I-It and I-Thou corresponds to Kant’s phenomenon and noumenon, respectively, and refers therefore to Buber’s “ghostlike I’s and Thou’s” that lack any “embodied existence.” Steven T. Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” in Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume, edited by H. Gordon and J. Bloch (New York: Ktav, 1984), 103, emphasis in original. Similarly, Robert Wood suggests that I-It perception is, for Buber, “clearly Kantian” and “not subject to the dimensions of bodily perceptions.” Robert Wood, Martin Buber’s Ontology: An Analysis of I and Thou (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 35-36, 72. However, this common portrayal of Buberian dialogue is misguided and, in fact, the very inverse is true: For Buber, it is precisely I-Thou relations that are embodied and I-It relations that are abstract. When I analyze, objectify, or stereotype someone as an It, then I see only an egocentric projection of the other; her actual presence here and now remains invisible to me, as it were, eclipsed by the thickness of my own thinking. Only when I open myself intersubjectively to the undetermined Other do I genuinely behold the person as a Thou there over-against me. Thus, the Thou “bodies (leibt) over against me,” and “the It-humanity that some imagine, postulate, and advertise has nothing in common with the bodily (leibhaftigen)
II. Embodied Theology in Buber’s Portrayal of Hasidism

For Buber, this theological sensibility surges in Hasidic sources. One of the reasons why he was so drawn to Hasidism for nearly seven decades was that he saw it as a radical religious revolution that was not based on doctrine. The movement adopted much of the gnostic language and imagery from medieval Jewish mysticism, but Buber

humanity to which a human being can truly say Thou.” Buber, I and Thou, 58, 65; Ich und Du, 8, 14. The boldly bodily language with which Buber portrays dialogical encounter is not figurative poetry, but phenomenological description. In fact, Buber’s phenomenology of dialogue is in many respects post-Kantian. Whereas Kantian Anschauung is “merely” sensible perception vis-à-vis phenomenal appearances (Erscheinungen), Buber appropriates that term (and its various cognates) to denote a noumenal beholding that is thoroughly sensible. “Schau is faithfulness not to the Erscheinung, but to Being,” and moreover: “The person in I-Thou ‘beholds (schaut)’ nothing else than what he sees with his senses.” Buber, Werke I: 434; idem., Nachlese, 134. Buber’s essay “Der Mensch und sein Gebild” offers the clearest demonstrations of his post-Kantian phenomenology. Regarding a dialogical encounter with a linden tree, for example, noumenality is manifest in the very “visibility (Schaubarkeit)” of phenomenality, and there is a “wholly sensible (anschauliche) correspondence” between the subject and the tree in itself, arising precisely through corporeal sensations: “the rustling and fragrance is not merely in and on it; it itself rustles and smells, and it is it itself that I feel when my hand touches its bark.” Buber, Knowledge of Man, 159; idem., Werke I: 434. In the words of Mendes-Flohr: “[B]y virtue of the I-Thou dialogue between God and man the phenomenal and noumenal realms are ultimately homologous.” Paul Mendes-Flohr, “The Aporiae of Dialogue: Reflections on Martin Buber’s Non-Noetic Conception of Faith,” Intersubjectivité et Théologie Philosophique: Textes Réunis par Marco M. Olivetti, Archivio di Filosofia 69 (2001), 689.

I refer here and henceforth to Buber’s most enduring views on Hasidism, namely, those of his “dialogical” years spanning the four decades from his publication of Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge (Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1922) until the end of his life in 1965. A full comparative study of Buber’s early and ultimate representations of Hasidism is beyond the scope of this paper. For our present purposes, however, let us note that Buber portrayed Hasidism in his earlier “mystical” years according to different ontological conceptions of body-soul and materiality-spirituality relations. For instance, in his book Die Legende des Baal-Schem (Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1908), Buber claimed that Hasidim regarded souls as “locked up (verschlossen)” in bodies and the sparks of souls as “imprisoned” (gefangen) in the “dungeon (Kerker)” of material forms (24-25). Moreover, he celebrated mystical ecstasy (hitlahavut) as “the basic principle of Hasidic life” (29), defining it precisely as “the end of boundedness (Gebundenheit), the shaking off of the last chains, the liberation (Auflösung) which is lifted above everything earthly” (4). As will be clear below, Buber represents the movement quite differently in his later writings, wherein he portrays Hasidic piety as rooted fundamentally in corporeal concreteness. Thus, I disagree respectfully with Israel Koren’s stance that “Buber’s fundamental perception of the Hasidic message did not undergo any substantive change throughout the course of his life.” Israel Koren, The Mystery of the Earth: Mysticism and Hasidism in the Thought of Martin Buber (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 205. On Buber’s early representation of Hasidism, see Martina Urban, The Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber’s Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). On Buber’s changing ontology over time, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Transformation of Social Thought (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); cf. Elliot Wolfson, “The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 27.3 (1989): 423-444.
characterized Hasidism as “Kabbalah become ethos.”\(^{18}\) That is, Hasidism transformed mystical gnosis—or, “knowledge” of divine mysteries—into an “agnostic” ethical-cum-spiritual way of life.\(^{19}\) The essence of religious meaning was no longer in transcendent secrets or abstract knowledge, but in immanent presence and concrete community.

To highlight this foundation of Ḥasidic spirituality, Buber employed the term “sacrament,” and it is significant for our purposes that he defined sacrament precisely as the “binding of meaning to the body (\textit{Bindung des Sinns an den Leib}).”\(^{20}\) This concept


\(^{19}\) On Ḥasidism as “agnostic,” see Buber, “\textit{Sprachtum und sakramentale Existenz},” 363.

\(^{20}\) Buber, \textit{Origin and Meaning of Hasidism}, 165; idem., “\textit{Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz},” 351. Cf. Buber’s definition of the biblical “symbol” in the same essay as “the appearing and becoming apparent of meaning in the form of corporeality (\textit{Leiblichkeit}),” and “the embodiment of the [divine] message (\textit{Leiblichkeit der Botschaft}).” Buber, \textit{Origin and Meaning of Hasidism}, 165, 161; idem., “\textit{Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz},” 351, 347. It is noteworthy that this essay is based upon Buber’s 1934 lectures at Eranos, the annual conference in Ascona, Switzerland that revolved to a large degree around Carl Gustav Jung and his psychological theories of myth and archetypes. Buber was very critical of Jung, as evidenced most publically in his 1951 essay “Religion and Modern Thinking” (published in \textit{Eclipse of God}, 65-92). Above all, Buber disapproved of what he considered to be Jung’s psychologization of reality and his stance that religion and God should be understood in psychic terms. Buber regarded Jung as a modern “Gnostic” who mediated on abstract images of the collective unconscious, beyond the concreteness of bodily life. In Jung’s lecture at the 1934 Eranos conference, Buber may have sympathized with his contention that the “chronic iconoclasm (\textit{Bilderstrum})” of Protestantism has estranged modern Christians from the concreteness of religious reality and forced them to rely excessively on logocentric “reason” as a theological medium. But for Buber, the core of religious awareness lies not in psychological imagery but in corporeal existence. Indeed, only a year after the Eranos conference, Buber wrote in a letter to Jung’s student Hans Trüb that Jung “does not deal at all with the dimension of existence, it is as if instead of a body (\textit{Leib}) its projection onto a screen becomes a thing (\textit{Gegenstand}). Concerning myself, as you know, for a long time already I do not concern myself much with psychological projection, only with existential corporeality (\textit{existentielle Körperlichkeit}).” Martin Buber, \textit{Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy}, edited by Judith Buber Agassi (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 166-7, emphasis in original; idem., \textit{Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten}, vol. 2, edited by Grete Schaeder (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1973), 573. Buber’s comments here highlight the extent to which his Eranos lectures on “sacramental existence” were directed critically toward Jung. For Jung’s 1934 Eranos lecture, see Fröbe-Kapteyn (ed.), \textit{Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934}, 179-229. On the Buber-Jung debate, see Risto Nurmela, \textit{Auf Unendliches bezogen C.G. Jungs Anschaungen über Christentum und Judentum} (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 2012), 85-103; Maurice Friedman, \textit{Martin Buber’s Life and Work: The Later Years, 1945-1965} (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 169-183.
dissolves dichotomies of religious truth and corporeal activity. Moreover, Buber sensed that Hasidic sacraments are not limited to the particular rituals of Halakhah. “To the question what (in the sacramental sense) is important, the answer was given: ‘What one is engaged in at the moment.’”21 Hence, Buber’s description of Hasidic piety as one of “pan-sacramentalism” and “sacramental existence.”22 Every action is potentially sacramental; every moment and place can harbor the binding of divine meaning to bodily life.

Now, one could say that Buber’s concept of Hasidic sacrament pertains to the relation between person and God, but has nothing to do with theological expression. Insofar as there is no conceptual content to take away from sacramental moments, this objection is valid. However, Buber does highlight Hasidic sources that celebrate the power of unsayable teachings embodied in the concrete actions of what he calls sacramental existence. He emphasizes this especially in his 1922 book The Great Maggid and His Succession. In the section of the introduction entitled aptly “Body,” Buber emphasizes, “Again and again, it says in the hasidic writings that one should learn ‘from

every limb of the tzaddik,’”23 and he refers as well to the Hasidic teaching that “a person shall act that all his conduct should be a Torah and himself a Torah.”24 Later in the same book, Buber presents the following teaching from Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah: “I did not go to the Maggid in order to hear Torah from him, but to see how he unlaces his felt shoes and laces them up again” — and Buber called this teaching “Thora sagen und Thora sein (Saying Torah and Being Torah).”25 For Buber, sacramental existence is an embodied saying of unsayable religious truth, and it is noteworthy that in these cases he translates these particular teachings almost verbatim from the original sources. We will have more to say below about how he alters other Hasidic texts, but suffice it to say for now that Buber does regard sacramental existence as instructive and expressive, even if there is no abstract content to preserve after the dust settles, and he can indeed locate these theological sensibilities in Hasidic sources.26

23 Buber, Der große Maggid, LI; idem., Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, 147. Cf. “Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov used to say that he had learned Torah from every limb of his teacher, Rabbi Elimelek.” Idem., Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, 229. In his unpublished notebook, Buber cites this teaching correctly as Ajeret Menahem (Bilgoraj, 1910), 72:186, and he entitles it “Von allen Gliedern des Zaddiks lernen.” Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. Menahem Mendel of Rymanow, #18. For some reason, however, while he refers to this teaching in essays, Buber never anthologized the legend itself.

24 Buber, Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, 128; German: Der große Maggid, xxix. For the original sources, see Menahem Mendel Bodek, Seder ha-dorot mi-Talmidei ha-Besht (Lemberg, 1880?), 46; Pinhas of Dinowitz, Siftei Tzaddikim (Warsaw/Józefów, 1893), 67; Yo’etz Kim Kaddish Rokatz, Siftei Qodesh (Lodz, 1929), 26:16. After citing this teaching, Buber adds: “And another time it says: The wise man shall aspire that he himself be a perfected teaching and all his deeds bodies (Körper) of instruction; or, where this is not granted him, that he be a transmission and exposition of the teaching and that the teaching should spread through each of his limbs.” Buber, Der große Maggid, LI; idem., Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, 128-129. However, I have been unable to locate the original source for this addition. Unfortunately, in his “Quellenverzeichnis zu ‘Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge” (Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1921[?]), Buber cites sources from his “Geleitwort” only from p. xxxviii.

25 Buber, Der große Maggid, 13; idem., “Lehre sagen und Lehre sein,” in MBW, vol. 18, §146. Buber draws this source from Bodek, Seder ha-dorot mi-Talmidei ha-Besht, 41; Dinowitz, Siftei Tzaddikim, 91; and Rokatz, Siftei Qodesh (Lodz, 1929), 26:16.

26 In discussing embodied theology in the context of Hasidism, it is necessary to say a word about the semantically similar concept of incarnational theology, especially now in the wake of Shaul Magid’s study of “incarnational thinking” in Hasidism. Interestingly, when Buber shared a copy of his Eranos lectures—or, more specifically, his final manuscript based on the lectures—with Abraham Joshua Heschel, Heschel accused him of bordering on notions of divine incarnation. See Buber, Briefwechsel, vol. 2, 568-569. To be sure, Heschel was responding legitimately to elements that were present in Buber’s essay, and one can find other examples in Buber’s writings that seem to exhibit incarnational elements. Consider, for example, his
One can see why Buber always preferred the legendary literature to the theoretical literature of Hasidism. For Buber, these terse, rarely reflective descriptions of moments in the lives of tzaddikim (Hasidic sages) articulate the movement’s religious sensibilities without stepping back to say so. Indeed, Buber translates the Hebrew term tzaddikim as “die Bewährten,” the ones in whom truth is put to proof in action. If theological truths are best expressed through the fleeting, bodily dynamics of sacramental existence, then what better genre of theological writing could Buber desire than that of raw narrative?

The Hasidic tale, the ma’aseh, functions for him as a sort of narrative theology, rendering

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1953 letter to Will Herberg, wherein he suggests that the Christian doctrine of incarnation is actually a diluted version of the original Biblical view(!): “The Biblical concept of קדוש עז [holy nation], in which the word עז (cf. עם, living human body, dead body) designs the people in its corporeal existence, in the generative connexion of its generations, has no romantic character at all; Rosenzweig was even inclined to translate it by heiliger Leib [holy body]. The pretension of the Church to be the realisation of that concept, a pretension based on the supposition of Israel being rejected by God, meant and means giving up the Biblical fullness of the concept, the unity of body and spirit, replacing the body-element by the mystical corpus Christi.” Buber, Briefwechsel, vol. 3, 326; a copy of the original English letter can be found in the Maurice Friedman Archives at Brandeis University. See also Buber’s eighth “Religion as Presence” lecture in 1922: “In the way of history, ever new regions of the world and of the spirit are lifted up into form, summoned to divine form, to the incarnation, as it were, of God (gleichsam Verleiblichung Gottes).”

Quoted in Horwitz, Buber’s Way to ‘I and Thou,’ 126. However, it would be misleading to conclude simply that Buber’s religious thought is incarnational in the strict sense. It is not the substance of corporeality that somehow contains or exhibits divinity, for Buber, but rather the dynamic wholeness of the dialogical event in corporeal life. Indeed, in his Eranos lectures Buber differentiates between Hasidic pansacramentalism, which is thoroughly relational, and what he calls “primitive” or “naïve” pansacramentalism,” according to which holiness dwells objectively in materiality so that one can find, possess, and manipulate it. See Buber, Origin and Meaning, 166-171. If there are incarnational elements in traditional Hasidism, as Magid claims, then Buber downplays them through his reformulations of tzaddikism and magic in the movement. For Buber’s differentiation between Jewish and Christian notions of theological imagery, see his Two Types of Faith, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 129-132; cf. Wolfson, Giving Beyond the Gift, 27-29. On the question of incarnational elements in Ḥasidism, see Shaul Magid, Ḥasidism Incarnate: Ḥ asidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); cf. Moshe Idel, Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism (London: Continuum, 2007), chapter six. For claims that Hasidic sources influenced Buber’s dialogical philosophy, see Koren, The Mystery of the Earth, Part II; cf. Ron Margolin, Mikdash adam: ha-Hafnamah ha-Datit ve-’Itsuv Haye ha-Dat ha-Penimiyim be-Reshit ha-Ḥ asidut (Jerusalem: Hotsa’at Sefarim ‘a. sh. Y.L. Magnes, 2004), 6-21.

the embodied instruction of sacramental existence into transmissible language. Indeed, Buber includes the founder of Hasidism, the Ba’al Shem Tov, among those extraordinary religious figures who “did not proceed from a teaching, but moved to a teaching, in such a way that their life worked as a teaching, as a teaching not yet grasped in words.”

Buber celebrates Hasidic narrative as “at once reality and teaching,” as the “verbal expression adequate to an overpowering objective reality,” capturing “events in which…even the mute happening spoke.” One recalls Buber’s similar characterization of the Hebrew Bible: “biblical theology is narrated theology (erzählte Theologie)...a doctrine that is nothing but history, and...a history that is nothing but doctrine.” Buber goes so far as to suggest that the original orality of Hasidic narrative played a crucial theological role. Since “oral transmission...is always assisted by tone and gesture,” the tales remained bound to “the situations out of which they sprang as the sparks from steel” and they were protected from “the danger of ‘objective’ conceptualization.” To return to the parallel from the beginning of this essay: the ma‘aseh is the theological analog of the joke. In fact, Buber himself describes Hasidism as “faithful and humorous,” and he does

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29 Buber, Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, 25.
so precisely to illustrate the movement’s prioritization of “vital, biblical ‘knowing (Erkennen)’” over “objective, formulable, schematizable knowledge (Erkenntnis)”!

The very notion of embodied theological expression raises crucial methodological questions for studies in the history of religions, and I shall touch briefly upon these matters with reference to the much-discussed Buber-Scholem debate. Buber, drawing mostly from Ḥasidism’s legendary-anecdotal literature, claimed that the movement hallowed bodily life in the everyday, but Scholem pointed exasperatedly to the theoretical-homiletical literature that celebrated mystical practices of “stripping away corporeality (hitpashṭut ha-gashmiyut),” “annihilating being (biṭul ha-yesh),” “contemplation (hitbonenut)” of divine nothingness beyond materiality, and so on. It is significant for our purposes that Scholem, in his case against Buber, differentiates sharply between genuine Ḥasidic “theology” and “theory,” on the one hand, and “popular and vulgar mood” and “praxis,” on the other. He suggests that a religious movement’s “legends should by no means seduce us into thinking that they represent the real

36 Scholem, Messianic Idea, 244.
doctrines,” nor can a selection of such legends facilitate a “real and scholarly understanding” of a movement.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, Scholem advises that if the legendary anecdotes seem to beckon an interpretation of Ḥasidism that contradicts the very explicit theoretical teachings, then “this interpretation must be false.”\textsuperscript{38} Only with such a methodology, Scholem argues, can we access the “real phenomenon of Ḥasidism.”\textsuperscript{39} In his rebuttal against Scholem, however, Buber emphasizes his efforts to “convey the reality of the way of life that was once informed by [Ḥasidic] teachings, the life of faith that was lived by exemplary individuals and by the communities they founded and led.”\textsuperscript{40} One who wishes to grasp the essence of Ḥasidism must attend to the very interpersonal headwaters of the teachings and the temporal currents that carried them. In direct contrast to Scholem’s methodology, Buber warns, “It is not always good to begin with a central religious content; it may be more fruitful to proceed from life itself, from the relation to concrete reality, and only finally to ask concerning the central content.”\textsuperscript{41} For Buber, the boundaries between theory and practice, theology and life are blurred in genuine religiosity.\textsuperscript{42}

In part, these historiographical differences between Buber and Scholem stem from their divergent philosophies of language. After all, both of them investigated Ḥasidism through the medium of texts, and their conceptions of language surely influenced how

\textsuperscript{37} Scholem, \textit{Messianic Idea}, 236.
\textsuperscript{38} ibid., 249.
\textsuperscript{39} ibid., 248.
\textsuperscript{40} Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” \textit{Commentary}, 218.
\textsuperscript{41} Buber, \textit{Origin and Meaning of Hasidism}, 224; German: \textit{Werke}, Vol. III (Munich: Kösel Verlag and Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1963), 883.
\textsuperscript{42} To be sure, Scholem faults Buber for entertaining a false dichotomy between “teaching” and “life” and for dismissing the content of teachings as superficial while glorifying the forms of life as fundamental. Scholem protests that Hasidism is truly “a historical phenomenon whose teaching is inextricably bound up with the life which it demands.” Scholem, \textit{Messianic Idea}, 234. However, in his refutation of Buber’s method, Scholem reinforces that very dichotomy in ways that actually violate Buber’s own sensibilities.
they read those sources. As David Biale has shown, Scholem seems to have embraced the kabbalistic notion that language itself is transcendent and divine, and all utterances are permutations of God’s ineffable name. Thus, for Scholem, revelation is fundamentally linguistic. Although the primordial, unmediated revelation of God is ultimately unknowable, it gains intelligibility through the language of religious commentary, even in its contradictory expressions throughout historical periods and places. Moreover, since language itself springs from transcendent sources, Scholem does not draw a formal distinction between written and spoken words. In the ceaseless process of verbalizing revelation, “Every act of speaking…is at once an act of writing and every writing is a potential speech.” For Buber, on the other hand, it is not language that is divine but dialogue, that is, concrete encounters in the world that do not even necessarily involve words. Divine revelation is homologous with dialogical meetings. The “word of God,” so to speak, is beyond language, but not necessarily beyond certain modes of listening, living, and beholding. Above all, Buber holds that the gravity and meaning of language (Sprache) cannot be divorced from concrete instances of spokenness.

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44 See David Biale, Kabbalah and Counter-History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 112-146. In these pages, Biale compares Scholem’s philosophy of language with that of Buber.

(Gesprochenheit), which he identifies precisely with “the whole speaking human body.”

For Buber, one can access the inner meaning of an Other’s utterance only when one faces her as a whole, spiritual-corporeal You.

These contrasting philosophies of language shed light on why Scholem and Buber read Ḥasidic texts in such vastly different ways. To paint the matter in broad strokes: Whereas Scholem reads the literature as meaningful statements of Ḥasidic sensibilities and thus draws conclusions therefrom about the nature of the movement, Buber regards these writings as surface reflections upon an ocean of Hasidic life-thought. Scholem thought that the primary message of Ḥasidism lay in written compositions; Buber thought that the primary message was enmeshed in flesh-and-blood lives. Thus, Scholem turned primarily to the theoretical literature for the most extensive and explicit meditations on doctrine and dogma, but Buber turned primarily to the legendary literature, wherein teachings are bound inextricably to events.

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49 It is significant, however, that Buber sometimes presents teachings from the homiletical-theoretical literature as “tales,” Toke Elshof’s application of Greimasian semiotics to religious narrative is instructive here: “Whilst standard objectal semiotic research limits itself to the analysis of the text as a final product, the subjunctial branch regards the text as a result of a process of expression; of a process of enunciation in which a certain intentionality is expressed. It looks at traces in the text which refer to the original expression, primarily where shape is given to content… Besides the form of the content, the form of the expression also reveals traces of the original expression: silences, whispering, laughing or crying, the stamping of feet or the wringing of hands are all part and parcel of the meaning receiving its shape, whilst leaving traces in the text.” Toke Elshof, “Religious Narrative and the Body,” in Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaike de Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath (eds.), *Religious Stories We Live by: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 158. Buber turns to Hasidic narratives because he senses that the content of the movement’s teachings are inextricably intertwined with their moments of expression.
Of course, while Buber did defend his interpretation of Ḥasidism at times on historical grounds, he also differentiated himself from the historical scholar. Whereas the historian “takes the former tradition as an object of knowledge” and assumes “the objectivity and detachment that make the scholar what he is,” Buber sought primarily “to convey to our own time the force of a former life of faith and to help our age renew its ruptured bond with the Absolute.” In his attempt to imagine and portray this “life of faith” vis-à-vis the Absolute, Buber refracts the Ḥasidic sources through the prism of his own religious intuition—and from a hermeneutical-theological standpoint, this is where matters get most interesting.

III. Hermeneutical Traces of Embodied Theology in Buber’s Ḥasidic Tales

Ultimately, to grasp the theological core of Buber’s Ḥasidic writings, we need to soften our clutches on abstractions and engage directly with the narratives themselves. More specifically, we must turn to the hermeneutical confluence between original Ḥasidic sources and Buber’s renditions of them in German and Modern Hebrew. This textual intersection reveals far more about Buber’s theology than one could articulate with general reflections. I am sympathetic to Michael Fishbane’s assertion that Jewish theology is fundamentally “exegetical theology,” revealed through the re-vision, re-telling, and re-interpretation of traditional sources, constituting a mode of religious expression that is “not propositional but concrete through and through.” Buber was

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50 For example, see Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 220-1.
51 “Interpreting Hasidism,” 218.
engaged with Hasidic literature for most of his adult life, and when we observe carefully what he conveys in his renditions of Hasidic tales, we perceive his religious sensibilities without reducing them to static ideas.\(^{53}\)

First, let us consider the well-known tale of how Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, came to be a disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov (the Besht, for short). The original narrative, which Buber drew primarily from \textit{Qehal Hasidim},\(^{54}\) is as follows:

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for the Bremen literary prize, gives poetic voice to the hermeneutical tensions within Buber’s Hasidic tales. With the Shoah still in recent memory, Celan refers to his decimated birthplace of Czernowitz, capital of the Bukovina region, as “the landscape in which a not inconsiderable portion of those Hasidic tales were at home which Martin Buber has retold to all of us in German (die Landschaft, in der ein nicht unbeträchtlicher Teil jener chassidischen Geschichten zu Hause war, die Martin Buber uns allen auf deutsch wieder erzählt hat).” Upon close examination, this enigmatic phrasing captures the sheer complexity of Buber’s project. Buber preserved the voices of an old world, but he also retold them for a new audience, and yet that new audience includes the likes of Celan himself, who must hear the tales anew for an unprecedented time. I am grateful that Na’ama Rokem brought this speech to my attention. See Esther Cameron, “Paul Celan: Language and the Inhuman,” \textit{Dappim: Research in Literature}, supplement 1 (1985): 171-193.

\(^{53}\) Although many scholars have written on Buber’s interpretations of Hasidism in general, they have drawn overwhelmingly upon his discursive reflections in essays, despite the fact that the legends comprise the bulk of Buber’s Hasidic writings. Among those who have engaged with Buber’s tales, only a few have studied them in relation to the original sources. For the few examples, see Akibah Ernst Simon, \textit{Ye’adim, Tsematim, Netivim: Haguto shel Mordekhai M. Buber} (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po’alim, 1985), 113-118; Steven T. Katz, “Buber’s Misuse of Hasidic Sources,” in idem., \textit{Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought} (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 52-93; Nicham Ross, \textit{Masoret Ahuval u-Senu aha: Zehut Yehudit Modernit u-Ketivah Ne’o-Hasidit be-Fetah ha-Me’ah ha-Esrim} (Be’er-Sheva’: Hotsa’at ha-Seferim shel Universitat Ben Gurion ba-Negev, 2010), 77-83; Martina Urban, “Mysticism and Sprachkritik: Martin Buber’s Rendering of the Mystical Metaphor ‘Ahizat ’Enayim,” \textit{Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia} 62.2/4 (2006): 535–52; Ran HaCohen, “Bubers schöpferischer Dialog mit einer chassidischen Legende,” in Paul Mendes-Flohr (ed.), \textit{Dialogue as a Trans-Disciplinary Concept: Martin Buber’s Philosophy of Dialogue and Its Contemporary Reception} (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 89-100.

\(^{54}\) For another version of this tale that Buber consulted, see Israel ben Elieser (Besht), \textit{Keter Shem Tov} (Korenz, 1797), 35b. However, I conclude that Buber worked primarily with the version in \textit{Qehal Hasidim} for three reasons: (1) His rendition corresponds more to this version than to the version in \textit{Keter Shem Tov}; (2) the ink qualities in Buber’s unpublished notes on this source suggest that he added the reference to \textit{Keter Shem Tov} only later; and (3) Buber does not list \textit{Keter Shem Tov} as a source for this legend in his source index to \textit{Or ha-Ganuz}. See Buber’s notes in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. “Der große Maggid,” #3; cf. Martin Buber, \textit{Or ha-Ganuz}, 472. Both Buber (in the source index of \textit{Or ha-Ganuz}) and HaCohen (in \textit{MBW}, vol. 18, 891) list Shivhei ha-Besht as a source for this legend, as well. However, the text therein is actually an alternate account of the first meeting between the Maggid and the Besht, which Buber does not ultimately include in his anthologies. Indeed, in his unpublished notebook, Buber differentiates between the two accounts and he lists Shivhei ha-Besht only for the alternate account (see §§3-4 in his notes). In his unpublished notebook, Buber also lists the introduction to \textit{Maggid Devarav le-Ya’aqov} as a source for the legend translated below. However, as the source therein notes explicitly, it is “copied” directly from \textit{Keter Shem Tov}. See Dov Baer of Mezritch, \textit{Maggid Devarav le-Ya’aqov} (Lemberg, 1863), s.v. “hu’etaq mi-sefer keter shem tov.”
I heard from one hasid [about] when...Dov Baer...[first] heard of the great name of...the Besht. All the people were journeying to him, and he enacted great and wondrous actions in his prayers. Now...Dov Baer was sharp, great, and erudite in all the Talmud and all the legal commentators (ha-poseqim), and he was very knowledgeable (ve-hayah lo ‘eser yadot) in the wisdom of Kabbalah. Thus, he was intrigued by what he heard about the high level of the Besht.

At one point, his mind was set to journey to him [the Besht] in order to test him. But since he was so persistent in his studies (matmid gadol ba-limud), when he was on the road one day and two [days], and was unable to persist in his studies as [he could] at home, he started to regret the journey.

Later on, when he arrived to the Besht, he thought that he would hear some Torah from him. But the Besht told him a story (ma’aseh) about how [once] he had journeyed on the road for a few days and did not have any more bread to give to his gentile (nokhri) wagon driver, and then a poor gentile happened to arrive with bread, and the Besht bought bread from him in order to compensate his wagon driver—and other stories like this.

Then on the second day, [Dov Baer] came again to the Besht, and [the Besht] told him how when he was on the road he did not have any more hay to give to the horses, and then [a poor gentile] happened to arrive, as before. Now all of the stories that the Besht...told contained very wondrous wisdom, but...Dov Baer did not understand this. Thus, he went to the guesthouse and said to his servant, “I wanted to journey back to our place today, but it is very dark out, so let us stay here until the moon rises and sheds light—then we will set off on our way.”

And it happened that, at midnight, when [Dov Baer] prepared himself for the journey, the Besht sent his servant to summon him. And [Dov Baer] went with him.

The Besht asked him, “Do you have knowledge (yedi’ah) in the wisdom of Kabbalah?” “Yes,” he said to him. And the Besht said to the servant, “Bring me the book ‘Etz Hayyim.” The Besht showed a passage in ‘Etz Hayyim to Rabbi Dov Baer. Rabbi Dov Baer said to him, “I will read and contemplate this.” Then he told the Besht the peshat [plain meaning] of this passage. The Besht said to him, “You do not know anything.” [Dov Baer] returned [to the passage] as before and said to the Besht, “The correct peshat is as I said. If one knows a different peshat from his high level, then let him speak and I will listen to whoever has the truth.” “Stand up!” the Besht said to him. And he stood. Now in this passage [of the ‘Etz Hayyim] there were some names of angels, and immediately when the Besht...said this passage, the entire house was filled with light, and fire flamed all around, and they saw sensorially (ke-hush) the angels mentioned. And [the Besht] said to...Dov Baer, “It is true that the peshat is as you said. But your study has no soul.” Immediately, Dov Baer...commanded his

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55 The term used here in the Keter Shem Tov version is ‘aral.
56 The version in Keter Shem Tov reads: “And he returned and read it and told him the correct peshat...”
servant to journey back home, and he stayed there with the Besht and studied with him great and profound wisdoms.57 There is much to say about this narrative. For our present purposes, however, let us highlight some ambiguities, and then we shall see how Buber attends to them in his renditions. First, why does Dov Baer remain so unimpressed with the Besht in their initial meetings? Is it simply because his stories are nonsensical? But the text says explicitly that all of the narratives that the Besht told contained “very wondrous wisdom (ḥokhmah nifla’ah me’od),” and Dov Baer simply, “did not understand (lo hevin zot).” What was it, exactly, that this brilliant scholar failed to appreciate?

The second major indeterminacy in this text that demands consideration is: What is so powerful about the Besht’s final teaching? What was it about his presentation of the passage from ‘Etz Ḥayyim that filled the house with sublime firelight and angels? We are told that these wild wonders erupted when the Besht “said this passage (amar zeh ha-ma’amār)”—but perhaps he also vocalized or contemplated some mystical interpretation deeper than the peshat of the passage that Dov Baer had explicated? If not, then what do we make of this scene?

Buber’s own re-tellings of the narrative in German and Modern Hebrew address these ambiguities in the original source. In short, his renditions hint that Dov Baer’s initial lack of understanding and his ultimate illumination had more to do with the dynamics of his encounter with the Besht than with the content, per se, of the teachings.58 For the most part, Buber’s renditions of this text are quite straightforward and faithful to

57 Walden, Qehal Hasidim, 24b-25a. I translated the text here as literally as possible in order to clarify Buber’s hermeneutical innovations.

the original, but he does introduce some subtle changes that serve to either elucidate or transform the original text—and usually some combination of the two.

Buber clearly detects in the original source that Dov Baer begins with an attitude of objectification. Indeed, we saw how this bookish prodigy journeys reluctantly to the Besht “to test him (lenasuto)” and seems uninterested in any of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s utterances that are not intellectually stimulating words of “Torah.” Yet Buber goes even further to accentuate the I-It textures of this interaction. When Dov Baer first arrives, he greets the Besht and then, Buber adds, “without even looking at him properly, waited for teachings from his mouth, in order to test and weigh them.”59 Buber’s small addition here about an absence of eye contact illustrates Dov Baer’s utter lack of interest in the concrete presence of the Besht. Furthermore, whereas the original source informs us that “all of the stories that the Besht told contained very wondrous wisdom, but…Dov Baer did not understand this,” Buber omits the first part of that line and writes only: “The Maggid did not understand what the tales were supposed to mean to him.”60 Thus, whereas the original text suggests that the Ba’al Shem Tov’s stories allude indirectly to some esoteric content that Dov Baer fails to discern, Buber’s versions suggest that Dov Baer fails to understand precisely because he listens only to that which he already knows and cares about. In short, for Buber, the hermeneutic that Dov Baer lacks in the initial meetings is not some mystical mode of interpretation, but rather a certain quality of dialogical attentiveness.

59 In German: “ohne ihn auch nur recht anzuschauen.” On the verb “schauen” and its various locutions in Buber’s thought, see above in footnote ___. Buber’s Modern Hebrew translation does not describe Dov Baer’s body language vis-à-vis the Besht, but does say that Dov Baer “waited for teachings in the words of his mouth in order to test and weigh them intellectually (kdei livhon ’otam ve-lisgolam ba-sikhlo),”

60 In German: “Der Maggid verstand nicht, was die Geschichten ihm sollten.” In Hebrew: “Ha-magid lo hevin mah yitnu u-mah yosifu lo ha-sipurim ha-’eleh.” Emphasis added.
Now let us turn to the second ambiguity of the narrative, namely: What is so different about the final meeting that triggers Dov Baer’s illumination? Again, with quite subtle alterations to the text, Buber hints that the sublime scene has everything to do with interpersonal dynamics. First of all, Buber sets the stage a bit differently: Whereas the original source suggests that Dov Baer returns simply to the house of the Besht, Buber’s rendition adds that he enters “his room,” a more intimate space. And whereas the original text suggests that the Ba’al Shem Tov’s servant is present in this final scene—remember, the Besht asks him to fetch the ‘Etz Hayyim book—Buber omits any mention of a third person, so one imagines this late-night meeting as one-on-one. Furthermore, in the original source Dov Baer explains the “peshat,” or plain meaning of the passage, which the Besht deems correct but “without soul (beli neshamah).” In Buber’s rendition, however, he substitutes the word “interpretation” (German: Deutung; Hebrew: peyrush) for the more specific term of peshat. In this light, the lack of “soul” in Dov Baer’s teaching lies not so much in the fact that it is a superficial interpretation, but that it is merely an interpretation, just a product of bookish analysis.

What, then, is so powerful about the Ba’al Shem Tov’s exposition of the passage? In truth, this remains as mysterious in Buber’s rendition as it was in the original—in all versions, we are told simply that the Besht “said the passage.” However, Buber’s substitution of the term “interpretation” for “peshat” quietly fills in this gap, for it discourages us from imagining that the Besht conveys an alternate interpretation, and affirms, rather, that he really does just speak the words of the passage with a spiritual gravity that Dov Baer heretofore lacks. And, in fact, we see that Buber’s version hints

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61 In German: “seiner Kammer”; in Hebrew: “ba-hedro.”
62 In his Modern Hebrew rendition, Buber changes the verb from ‘amar to higid. In the German, Buber uses the verb “sprache.”
subtly that the “soul” of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s teaching is inseparable from the qualities of his concrete presence, as well as the now awakened attention of Dov Baer there beside him. While in the original text, the Besht made Dov Baer “stand up” for the climactic teaching, Buber goes even further to suggest that physical posture and sensory alertness are foundational for this theological pedagogy. When the Besht commands Dov Baer to stand up, Buber adds that he then stands “over-against him (ihm gegenüber),” and then after the dramatic vision of fire and angels, the Besht again stands “over-against him (ihm gegenüber)” — a key term throughout Buber’s writings for the spatiality-cum-spirituality of dialogue. Thus, for Buber, when Dov Baer first meets the Besht, he does so without even looking at him (anzuschauen), but now he beholds him face-to-face — and this makes all the difference. It is fitting, therefore, that Buber portrays the flaring flames and flying angels as pressing upon the senses of Dov Baer, and not simply as phenomena filling the home and seen plainly by all, as in the original source. Buber emphasizes that the fire passed “before the eyes of Rabbi [Dov] Baer,” and he personally “heard the angels…until his senses forsook him.” In Buber’s imagination, the Maggid is out of his mind—not in the sense of insanity, but in the sense of bursting out of heady inner-

63 In his Modern Hebrew rendition of this narrative, Buber adds the term “over-against him” (k-negdo) only in the second instance. For some illuminating instances of the key term “gegenüber” in Buber’s dialogical writings, see “it bodies over against me (gegenüber)” (I and Thou, 58; Ich und Du, 8); “The I of the basic word I-It, the I that is not bodily confronted (gegenüber leibt) by a You” (I and Thou, 63-4; Ich und Du, 13); “No thing is a component of experience or reveals itself except through the reciprocal force of confrontation (Kraft des Gegenüber)” (I and Thou, 77; Ich und Du, 26); “The man who has acquired an I and says I-It assumes a position before (vor) things but does not confront (gegenüber) them in the current of reciprocity” (I and Thou, 80; Ich und Du, 29); “I see it, radiant in the splendor of the confrontation (Glanz des Gegenüber)… Not as a thing among the ‘internal’ things, not as a figment of the ‘imagination,’ but as what is present (das Gegenwärtige)” (I and Thou, 61; Ich und Du, 10-11); “The created work is a thing among things and can be experienced and described as an aggregate of qualities. But the receptive beholder may be bodily confronted (leibhaft gegenübertreten) now and again” (I and Thou, 61; Ich und Du, 11). These few examples demonstrate sufficiently that the term “gegenüber” is definitive of dialogical encounter and that it gestures especially toward bodily presence.

64 The root-word Schauen is also a key-term throughout Buber’s writings for a dialogical mode of “seeing” or “beholding.” See Walter Kaufmann’s footnote on the term “Schauen” in Buber, I and Thou, 61f. Cf. above, footnote ___.
monologue into the palpable perceptivity of dialogical life, represented here in a wild storm of sensation.

These subtle but significant alterations to the original text reflect Buber’s sense that religious truth does not lie in esoteric interpretation so much as in opening oneself up to genuine encounter. Whereas the Besht tells Dov Baer in the original source, “It is true that the peshat is as you said, but your studying (limud) has no soul,” Buber’s Besht says: “The interpretation you said is correct, but you have no knowledge; for your knowledge (German: Wissen; Hebrew: yedi’ah) has no soul.” In this alternate formulation, Dov Baer is not instructed to develop new methods of studying, but rather new ways of knowing. It follows, then, that Buber omits the concluding clause of the narrative, where Dov Baer “stayed there with the Besht and studied with him great and profound wisdoms.” For Buber, it is enough simply that Dov Baer “stayed.”

Through such hermeneutical analysis of Buber’s Hasidic legends, we observe that so many of his alterations steer a way from the transmission of esoteric mystical knowledge, preferring more embodied, pre-conceptual modes of theological pedagogy. The changes are usually quite subtle, and oftentimes they offer plausible readings of the sources. Consider, for example, the following tale from Seder ha-Dorot mi-Talmidei ha-Besht:

[Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah] used to speak about the rabbis who ‘say Torah (she-’omrim torah).’ What does it mean ‘to say Torah’? Isn’t it that one should take heed and take notice so that all his actions and conduct will be Torah and he himself will be Torah? That is, one should conduct himself in all his ways according to the Torah, so that people will learn from him and from his conduct,

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65 In an alternate account of this meeting between Dov Baer and the Besht in Bodek, Seder ha-Dorot, op. cit., 16:24, the retelling is virtually identical to the version in Keter Shem Tov, but it continues at the end to emphasize all the great esoteric wisdom that the Besht taught to Dov Baer after their partnership began. Since we know from elsewhere in Buber’s Hasidic corpus that Buber worked quite extensively with Seder ha-Dorot, the ending to his version of this legend is all the more striking.
his actions, his movements, his cleavings, and his speaking (\textit{ume-dibburo}). His
closest actions should be Torah to learn from.\footnote{Bodek, \textit{Seder ha-Dorot}, 46. Cf. Pinhas of Dinowitz, \textit{Siftei Tzaddikim} (Warsaw/Józefów, 1893), 67; Yo’etz Kim Kaddish Rokatz, \textit{Siftei Qodesh} (Lodz, 1929), 26:16. Cf. above, note \textsuperscript{66}.}

Buber’s version is quite faithful to the original, but when the text says that one’s
“conduct, movements, cleavings, and speaking” should be Torah from which to learn,
Buber omits only the last action: “speaking.”\footnote{See \textit{MBW}, vol. 18, §297; Buber, \textit{Or ha-Ganuz}, 162.} In this subtle alteration, we witness
Buber’s embrace of the strongest possible reading of the source, indicating a wholly
embodied theological instruction. Indeed, he entitles this tale “To Say a Teaching and to
Be a Teaching (German: \textit{Lehre sagen und Lehre sein}; Hebrew: \textit{Lomar Torah ve-Lihiyot
Torah}),” highlighting the opposition between verbal and non-verbal religious pedagogy.\footnote{Although it is clear that Buber’s rendition of this legend is based primarily on \textit{Seder ha-Dorot}, it is also possible that he justified his omission of “speaking” through reference to the version in \textit{Siftei Tzaddikim}, which bears no mention of speaking. Indeed, Buber lists \textit{Siftei Tzaddikim} as a source for this tale. See \textit{Or ha-Ganuz}, 476.}

Let us examine two more examples of Hasidic texts that Buber alters only subtly
in ways that simultaneously reveal his embodied theology and offer plausible
interpretations of the original sources. First, consider a tale from \textit{Qehal Hasidim} wherein
young Ya’akov Yitzḥak of Lublin meets a rabbi whose every movement is visibly aflame
with ecstasy. Ya’akov Yitzḥak asks him if he served a tzaddik, and the man answers no.
The text then reports: “This matter was confusing to [Ya‘akov Yitzḥak], for he knew well
that the way of Ḥasidism cannot come to mind except through receiving (\textit{leqabel}) [it]
from a tzaddik of the generation that received it one from the other (\textit{zeh mi-zeh}) from the
mouth of the Ba‘al Shem Tov.”\footnote{Aharon Walden, \textit{Qehal Hasidim} (Warsaw, 1870), 49.} There is an ambiguity here in the source. Is the way of Ḥasidism an esoteric teaching whispered, as it were, from one tzaddik to another, or is it
truly only conductible through pathways of interpersonal contact? Listen to how Buber rewords the sentence: “This astonished Rabbi Ya’akov Yitzḥak, for the way cannot be [learned] from any book or any report, but only experienced (erfahren) from person to person.” Buber gestures here toward an experiential knowing at the heart of Hasidism. He refines the original statement in the fire of his religiosity and thereby offers us simultaneously an interpretation of the passage and a window into his own concept of theological orientation.

Similarly, consider this tale from Tif’eret Hayyim about Rabbi Israel of Koznitz:

“Before he traveled to the great Maggid of Mezritch, he had already learned (lamad) 800 books of Kabbalah. But when he came to the holy Maggid, he saw (ra’ah) that he still had not begun to learn (lilmod) anything.” This tale does not identify what it was, exactly, that made Rabbi Israel “see” how much more he had to “learn.” Was this an

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70 For an alternate formulation and discussion of this question, see Arthur Green, “The Ḥasidic Homily,” 237ff.
71 Although there is no verb here in his German rendition, Buber adds the verb lilmod (to learn) in his Modern Hebrew translation. See Buber, Or ha-Ganuz, 235; MBW, vol. 18, §485. Cf. the next footnote.
72 “Das verwunderte Rabbi Jaakob Jizchak, denn es kann ja der Weg aus keinem Buch und keinem Bericht, sondern allein von Person zu Person erfahren werden.” MBW, vol. 18, §485. In place of “erfahren” in his Modern Hebrew translation, Buber uses the same term from the original source, “legabel,” to receive. For the rich resonance that this term legabel possesses for him, see Buber, Der große Maggid, xxxiv; MBW, vol. 18, §875. In these sources, Buber presents a teaching attributed to Moshe of Kobryn about how one should bear in mind that the term Kabbalah derives from the word “kabbel,” which Buber translates into German as “aufnehmen.” It is significant for our purposes that this verb “aufnehmen” tends to denote an eminently interpersonal and dialogical form of learning. For example, see Buber’s portrayal of the Besht’s “Geschichten, die gerade vermöge ihrer Primitivität und anscheinenden Ungeistigkeit den Hörer aufrühren, bis er sie als Hinweis auf seine eigenen heimlichsten Nöte erfaßt und annimmt” (MBW, vol. 18, 140). Also, in his explanation of how the tzaddik teaches his true disciples, Buber suggests that the interaction must attain a personal intimacy: “er muß sich mit dem Volk so abgeben, daß es ihn aufnehmen kann” (MBW, vol. 18, 134). Given what we observed earlier in Buber’s rendition of how Dov Baer became a disciple of the Besht, it is telling that Buber entitles this narrative “Die Aufnahme” (MBW, vol. 18, §124). As a final example, consider Buber’s rendition of another teaching attributed to Moshe of Kobryn: “In dieser unsrer Zeit…ist die größte Frömmigkeit, über alles Lernen und Beten, wenn man die Welt annimmt, wie sie steht und geht” (MBW, vol. 18, §874). In the original Yiddish source, the verb here is nemt, which Buber would go on to translate into Hebrew as “legabel,” and he would entitle the tale “kbbalat ha-olam,” or receiving the world. See Moshe Hayyim ben Avraham Yosef Kleinman, ’Or Yesharim (Warsaw, 1924), 163; Buber, Or ha-Ganuz, 354.

73 Hayyim Me’ir Yekhiel of Mogelnica, Tif’eret Hayyim (Jassy, 1909), 13.
immediate epiphany upon arrival, or perhaps only after he started studying with the Maggid? Also, what sort of learning did he realize he must undertake? Indeed, the tale uses only one verb, *lilmod*, to denote Rabbi Israel’s learning both before and after his meeting the Maggid. Listen now to Buber’s rendition: “Rabbi Israel had searched through (German: *durchforscht*; Hebrew: *he’emiq lahqor*) 800 books of Kabbalah. But when he first stepped before the face of the Maggid, he recognized (German: *erkannte*; Hebrew: *hikir*) instantly that he knew nothing (German: *nichts wußte*; Hebrew: *sh-lo yada’ klum*).”\(^74\) In Buber’s mind, then, Rabbi Israel begins with bookish research, but then the very palpable presence of the Maggid over-against him is transformative. Rabbi Israel’s realization in that moment is not that he failed to “learn” enough, but that he had not “known” truly. As the Maggid’s student, he needn’t study a new branch of discourse; he must open himself to new ways of knowing. Indeed, Buber entitles this tale “Recognition”—“Die Erkenntnis” in German and “Ha-Hakarah” in Hebrew—highlighting the moment in the tale when Rabbi Israel “recognized” a new epistemology in the Maggid’s face for which no intellectual knowledge could prepare him.\(^75\)

Of course, not all of Buber’s alterations are so subtle. Let us conclude with a remarkable Hasidic tale about Israel of Rizhin, and an equally remarkable reworking of that source by Buber. The original tale from the collection *Keneset Yisrael* is as follows:

> Once when the Rizhin rebbe sat down at the table and some rabbis sat before him, he began his holy words suddenly and asked: Why do [people] speak against Maimonides? One rabbi responded to him, saying: [He says] in one place that Aristotle comprehended (*hisig*) [all the way] to the sphere of heaven more than Ezekiel did, so why not speak against him! The Rizhin rebbe responded: Because the words of Maimonides are correct. He compared the matter to two human beings

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\(^74\) *MBW*, vol. 18, §546. Cf. *Or Ha-Ganuz*, 249.

\(^75\) This title is especially poetic in the German. Insofar as “Erkenntnis” tends to denote intellectual “knowledge,” Buber nudges his readers here to consider more intuitive forms of religious insight. For Buber’s differentiation between *Erkenntnis* and *Erkennen*, see above, pp. ____.
who went to a great kingdom. One was a sage and one was a fool. The sage goes [directly] to behold (lir’ot) the actual kingdom and does not look (mabit) at all to the sides at the majesty, splendor, and preciousness of the king’s halls, for nothing [of] jewels and dyes and embroidery will be lacking in the king’s house. But the fool, when he comes to the king’s yards and sees (u-mistakel) the beauty of his intoxicating treasures—sapphire, onyx, and jasper, and every precious stone—he then forgets about the king and gives all his attention to the precious things mentioned.  

The implications of this tale are astonishing. In the Rizhiner’s parable to illuminate how Maimonides knew more than Ezekiel did about the sphere of heaven, the “sage” is clearly Maimonides and the “fool” is Ezekiel. The philosopher is unfazed by all the flashy materiality of the kingdom, keeping his mind’s eye set on the goal to behold the king himself—that is, to set his intellect upon knowledge of God. Ezekiel, however, gets intoxicated by images that are, it seems, relatively superficial visuals—and the language here is reminiscent of the “sapphire,” “onyx,” and “jasper” of Ezekiel 28:13, as well as the “sapphire stone” of Ezekiel’s chariot vision. While scholarly Maimonides penetrates beyond the antechambers to behold heavenly heights, awe-struck Ezekiel just cannot take his eyes off the shiny stuff. 

Buber’s version transforms the message of this narrative.  

His rendition begins similarly to the original, but listen closely to the Rizhiner’s parable as mediated by Buber:

Two people (German: Menschen; Hebrew: anashim) came to a king’s palace. One lingered in every hall, contemplated with an expert gaze (German: betrachtete mit kundigem Blick; Hebrew: ve-hitbonen be-‘einei mumheh) the splendorous fabrics and jewels, and he could not see enough. The other walked through the halls and

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76 Reuven ben Zvi David Zak, Kenesset Yisrael (Warsaw, 1905/6), 14. Arthur Green drew my attention to the fact that this tale is a variant of the parable attributed to the Besht in earlier Hasidic sources about the king who makes an illusory palace. For exact citations and penetrating analyses, see Moshe Idel, “The Parable of the Son of the King and the Imaginary Walls in Early Hasidism,” in Haviva Pedaya, Ephraim Meir, and Rebecca Horowitz (eds.), Yahadut: Suguṭ, Keta’im, Panim, Zehuyot: Sefer Rivkah (Be’er-Sheva’: Hotsa’at ha-Sefarim shel Universitat Ben-Guryon, 2007), 87-116.

77 See MBW, vol. 18, §636; Buber, Or ha-Ganuz, 278-9.
knew only: This is the king’s house, this is the king’s garment, a few more steps and I will behold (German: schauen; Hebrew: ve-’er’eh) [the face of] my lord king.

In Buber’s retelling of the parable, the two characters are no longer sage and fool but simply two types of Menschen, both of whom seem respectable enough. The one who lingers in the halls is not drunk on visions, but rather contemplative and even scientific with an “expert gaze.” This scholarly figure is, of course, Maimonides, not Ezekiel. In fact, Buber omits the Ezekialian imagery of precious stones from this scene. For Buber, it is the prophet, not the philosopher, who walks with simplicity and decision directly to meet the king, declaring, “I will behold.” The German verb Buber uses here is schauen, a key term in his writings for dialogical clear-sightedness, an utterly concrete, sensuous-cum-spiritual way of seeing. The Hebrew term here in both the original source (and in Buber’s own Hebrew rendering) is lir’ot—and perhaps this is all the Ezekialian language that Buber needs to identify this character with the prophet. Indeed, words related etymologically to lir’ot appear a staggering twelve times in the last three verses of Ezekiel’s chariot vision—and the idiosyncratic translation of those lines in the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible confirms that Buber was well aware of those ocular poetics. Thus, in

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78 The additional phrase “the face of” appears only in Buber’s Hebrew rendition.
79 For example, see: “Looking away (wegblicken) from the world is no help toward God; staring (hinstarren) at the world is no help either; but whoever beholds (schaut) the world in him stands in his presence.” Buber, I and Thou, 127; Ich und Du, 75. Kaufmann notes in his translation of I and Thou: “Schauen is a way of looking that…is not associated with experiencing, with objects, with It” (61f). Cf. above, footnote ____.
80 In the original Hasidic source, the verb lir’ot appears only once, namely, in the case of the sage who goes straight to “behold” the king. In Buber’s version, too, this is the only appearance of the verb lir’ot (or schauen, in the German).
the eyes of Buber’s Rizhiner rebbe, the philosophical theologian may very well possess superior comprehension of celestial mysteries, but such cosmic knowledge is a far cry from real theological knowing, where the face of the moment reveals more than any abstract thought.\footnote{Indeed, Buber renders the original “galgal ha-shamayim (sphere of the heavens)” as “sefirot ha-shamayim,” which intimates perhaps that Maimonides ponders theosophical “emanations” of God, but not the actual essence of divinity itself. For Buber, philosophers and mystics alike err when they ruminate on abstractions that lie beyond or above corporeal existence. Such intellectualism subordinates devotio to gnosis.}