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Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought

The Way Jews Live:

Obligation in Arthur Green's Neo-Hasidism

I remember exactly where I was sitting when my undergraduate professor first used the term “neo-Hasidic” in conversation. After spending the previous three years studying Hindu traditions in an attempt to find the spirituality I had deemed lacking in my native Judaism, I was immediately hooked. I had recently been exposed to Hasidism and was interested in the movement’s uniquely Jewish spirituality but knew I would never live the life of a full-fledged Hasid. Perhaps that is why those words still ring out in my mind to this day: “*neo-Hasidic*.”

Most broadly, neo-Hasidism refers to Jews who are not sociologically part of a Hasidic community but engage with Hasidic texts and practices.¹ For anyone studying this rich tradition, chances are the name ‘Arthur Green’ will come up repeatedly.² Self-identifying as a “neo-Hasidic heterodox traditionalist,”³ Green teaches a scholarly-informed and universalized Jewish spirituality that resists syncretism⁴ by grounding itself in Jewish tradition. Importantly, his main audience is the world of liberal Judaism that does not position itself within binding Jewish law, or *halakhah*. As someone who has recently taken on Jewish ritual myself, I am always fascinated by the ‘how’ of these philosophies. An interesting exegesis or innovative theology is

¹ There are many places to direct an interested reader to learn more about neo-Hasidism, but one succinct and engaging entry point is a 2014 lecture by Green that provides substantive historical contextualization for Hasidism, neo-Hasidism, and his own thought. See “Rabbi Art Green - ‘Neo-Hasidism: Origins and Prospects,’” Middlebury Media Services Vimeo Channel, 2014.

² For a full exploration of Green’s life and work, see Ariel Mayse, “Arthur Green: An Intellectual Portrait,” in *Arthur Green: Hasidism for Tomorrow*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes, The Brill Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers, (Boston, Brill, 2015).

³ Arthur Green, *Judaism for the World : Reflections on God, Life, and Love*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020), 23.

⁴ This is unlike other strands of neo-Hasidism, such as Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s Jewish Renewal, that were more syncretic in their incorporation of language and practices from other faiths. See “Sparks – ‘Confessions of a Longtime Seeker’ with Rabbi Arthur Green and Rabbi David Ingber.” H&H Photography Youtube Channel, January 19, 2018, 1:08:50, and Burt Jacobson, “Chapter Eight: Arthur Green: The Full Integration of Self,” in *The Spirit of the Ba’al Shem Tov: A New Hasidism in the Making*, (unpublished manuscript), 286.

beautiful on its own, but how does that manifest in the thinker's life vis-a-vis praxis? Although Green's perspective has changed throughout his life, his most recent publication states that "Although I am quite traditionally observant, I am well aware of my freedom of decision in choosing to live that way."⁵ In light of this assertion, this essay will focus on one aspect of neo-Hasidism that is in much need of exploration: the field of applied praxis.

What does it actually mean to "practice" neo-Hasidism? This is a question that is complicated, since neo-Hasidic tendencies manifest all along the spectrum of religious observance, from Modern Orthodoxy to Reform. For our purposes, we will be exploring its iteration among those "liberal" strands of Judaism that consciously position themselves within post-modernity and its reticence towards obligation. How then does Arthur Green, who founded a post-denominational pluralistic rabbinical school,⁶ deal with the question of halakhah and the place of the *mitzvot* (commandments)? By putting Green's writings in conversation with traditional Hasidic sources, we will discover grounding for his liberal theological assertions, and also trace how he can consider his radical re-presentations to be a direct continuation of the tradition. The result of this exploration will be a substantive neo-Hasidic theology of *hiyyuv* (obligation), as articulated by Rabbi Arthur Green. (Note that this is *a* neo-Hasidic theology of obligation, not *the*.⁷)

To do this, we will first need to understand how Hasidism and neo-Hasidism's relationships with halakhah are inherently different.

⁵ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 24.

⁶ Learn more about Hebrew College Rabbinical School at <https://hebrewcollege.edu/>

⁷ This essay is in no way attempting to standardize neo-Hasidic praxis, but to shed light on *one* of its formulations. Green himself has asserted that every small community of seekers must establish norms on their own, and this emergent neo-Hasidism is "not ready for codification yet, and the rush to codify would be a mistake," ("Rabbi Art Green - 'Neo-Hasidism: Origins and Prospects,'" 1:12:30) For alternative framings of neo-Hasidic halakhah, see Ariel Evan Mayse's Orthodox exploration in "Neo-Hasidism and Halakhah: The Duties of Intimacy and the Law of the Heart," in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Mayse, (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2019) 155–223, and for a Jewish Renewal perspective see Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Daniel Siegel, *Integral Halachah: Transcending and Including*, (Victoria, Trafford Publishing, 2007). Additionally, since this essay will focus mainly on Green's discussion of praxis, it will not fully unpack his broader theology. To read more about this in Green's own words see "A Neo-Hasidic Credo" in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, and to find an overview, see Mayse, "Arthur Green- An Intellectual Portrait."

Wearing the Garment Lightly

Despite what early anti-Hasidic polemics would have us believe; Hasidism has always been a fully halakhic movement. Although they were famous for radical re-interpretations of the theories behind halakhah, the Hasidim always ultimately adhered to the system (albeit with some changes in prayer time and the knives used in kosher slaughter⁸). This becomes even more so the case after the movement's turn towards traditionalism which eventually crystallized into ultra-Orthodoxy.⁹ This conservatism is the case within Hasidism, but what of neo-Hasidism, which, as we have already seen, positions itself outside of the realm of halakhic obligation? One of Green's students puts it well when he says that Green "wears the garment of halakhah somewhat lightly."¹⁰ Green justifies this leniency by explaining that "Hasidism developed among people who were already observant, so they didn't have [this] issue. But neo-Hasidism begins with the spiritual journey, begins with the seeker and that seeker's finding a response to [their] quest in the heart-language of Judaism."¹¹ This distinction between normative halakhah and "the spiritual journey" arises out of the ultimate centrality of the individual's "seeker" experience in Green's thought, and will be a theme that comes up again and again in our exploration. Each practitioner must come to their own conclusions about how they want to "practice" neo-Hasidism.

So, if he doesn't see them as obligatory, then what exactly are the mitzvot, and why do we perform them?

⁸ For a full discussion of this history, see *Hasidism: A New History*, ed. David Biale, (Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2017), 90-91, 247.

⁹ Read more about this turn towards traditionalism in *Hasidism: A New History* and find a nuanced presentation of Hasidism's rejection of modernity as actually representative of its own modern identity in the introduction to Sam Berrin Shonkoff and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds. *Hasidism: Writings On Devotion, Community, And Life In The Modern World*, (Waltham, Brandeis University Press, 2020). Shonkoff and Mayse's introduction helps provide another key to the puzzle of Green's turn towards the individualized spiritual path (which will be explored in the coming pages), by showing that trend to be representative of modern religious movements in general. A full exploration of this connection is beyond the scope of this essay, but merits further research.

¹⁰ Mayse, "Arthur Green: An Intellectual Portrait," 38.

¹¹ Green's comments in Jordan Schuster, "A Closing Conversation with the Editors," in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, 435.

To answer this, we have to ask what has always been central to theologizing the mitzvot; *were these given by G-d on Sinai? And if so, does that mean we are obligated to fulfill them?* Judaism over the centuries and contemporary Orthodoxy would affirm both of the previous statements, while much of modern liberal Judaism would either assert the human origin of these time-worn rituals, and thus their position beyond the realm of obligation, or at least diverge from the traditional legalistic dogma of Sinaitic revelation.¹² Arthur Green walks an interesting middle ground between these two broad viewpoints, asserting that "it is indeed the divine voice that has called forth these forms from within the creative reservoir of our people's faith... The forms themselves have emerged-- and continue to emerge-- from our collective effort to hear and respond to the divine voice."¹³ This is to say that, like all things, their origin is in Divinity but their manifestation into the world is through the refracting prism of human experience and creativity. Put simply, humans created the mitzvot in response to the Divine presence they felt around them. This brings rise to another question: if they are human inventions, then why are they holy? Green explains that their holiness comes not from a top-down, commanding G-d, but from the accumulated loving-intention that thousands of years of Jews have put into their engagement with these rituals.¹⁴ Green asserts that "God does not "give us" the words of Torah, but G-d is to be found within them... [and] we marvel before the power that the ancient teachings have to stir our hearts."¹⁵

In summation, Green understands the mitzvot as a series of human-made practices that arose as a response to the presence of Divinity, whose holiness is due not to their divine origin, but instead to the accumulated love and intention of generations of engagement.¹⁶ This is

¹² This construction of a binary is slightly simplistic since there are strands of modern liberal Judaism which do uphold the necessity of fulfilling halakhah. This can be seen in the Conservative movement's understanding of halakhah as socially constructed and yet still obligated, and Modern Orthodoxy's joining of liberal tendencies with traditional adherence to the doctrine of the Torah being given on Sinai. How these nuances manifest in the world of neo-Hasidism merit further exploration.

¹³ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 32.

¹⁴ Arthur Green, "Road Back to Sinai: The Post-Critical Seeker," in *Arthur Green: Hasidism for Tomorrow*, 157.

¹⁵ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 49.

¹⁶ Green's thinking here is reminiscent of earlier postmodern liberal constructions of Judaism by thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig and the neo-Hasidic trail-blazer Martin Buber.

obviously very different from the classic understanding of the *halakhah* as a divine “law” that must be followed unswervingly since it was given by G-d. Green differentiates between this “law” and his preferred re-formulation of “discipline”:

Discipline is a regimen that I voluntarily take upon myself. I live up to it, or I don't; the responsibility is only to myself. Law is an institution imposed by authority, external or internal, upon a society and its members. If something is law, its violators will be -- or at least should be-- punished.¹⁷

This quote encompasses Green's *halakhah* very succinctly: a freely-chosen spiritual path that provides the bumpers needed to live a spiritual life.

If Green does not see the mitzvot in the traditional framework, we must ask: where does that leave the practitioner? Should we rip off our *kippot* and eat a cheeseburger, according to Green? Far from it! Green's conception of *halakhah* still frames it as “obligated” in some capacity, just not the traditional, legal one. If *halakhah* is normally construed as classical music, wherein beauty occurs by virtue of learning the rules, practicing, and playing according to what's written, Green moves it to the world of jazz, wherein one learns the rules rigorously, but reserves the right to diverge from them when the moment strikes. Importantly, these divergences are not merely an affront to tradition, but are meant to enhance its beauty. Like music theory to a jazz musician, *halakhah* “still has a hold on us: not a binding hold of law, but a hold the way one's deepest and most ancient psyche continues to have a powerful grasp on a person's actions throughout life.”¹⁸

By virtue of their amassed holiness (which Green assures us is “real holiness”¹⁹), and our generationally accumulated disposition towards their fulfillment, the mitzvot “*cal*” for our *engagement*-- but that engagement must be freely given without any thought of punishment. Our “marvel[ing] before the power that the ancient teachings have to stir our hearts”²⁰ is where

¹⁷ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 30. Reverberations of Rosenzweig and Buber's differentiation between *gebot* (commandment) and *gesetz* (law) can be found in this formulation. For more on this see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Law and Sacrament: Ritual Observance in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green, (New York, Crossroad Books, 1987), 317-346.

¹⁸ Green, “Road Back to Sinai,” 152.

¹⁹ Green, “Road Back to Sinai,” 157.

²⁰ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 49.

the “hold on us”²¹ comes from-- a connection to the past, not a legal obligation to a covenant. As we will see below, this position is not arrived at in a vacuum, but instead is steeped in tradition and represents the commandment which Green holds up above all others: Torah study.²² Although he obviously believes in the importance of personal decision, he asserts that divergences should stem from an informed engagement with the sources, and not mere disdain for the rules. An important caveat to this is that for many people-- me and Green included-- nonadherence to certain halakhot comes not from a ‘mere disdain for the rules,’ but from a moral stance. Most notably, this includes the Torah’s prescribing of hetero/cis-normativity and its discussion of non-Jews. Green explains that his fulfillment of all mitzvot must first pass the question “does this practice diminish or degrade the divine image of some group of human beings? If it does, it simply can’t be Torah.”²³ Having said that, he believes that this decision should be “invoked carefully and conservatively, only when [one] find[s] no moral alternative.”²⁴

Circling back to his distinction between Hasidism’s emergence within halakhah and neo-Hasidism’s emergence outside of it, Green explains that in the period of Hasidism’s birth halakhah was “also the way most people did live, just as matter of course.”²⁵ This is to say that unlike previous contexts, it is no longer a ‘given’ that modern Jews would be halakhic in the first place. Therefore, Green’s neo-Hasidic engagement with halakhah is a conscious nod to tradition, and is “first and foremost, because that’s the way Jews live.”²⁶ This quote beautifully summarizes Green’s conception: the holiness of the mitzvot is real inasmuch as they are born from the loving devotion of generations of Jews, not from the watchful eye of a legislating Deity. Therefore, modern engagement should be from a love of the former, rather than a fear of the latter. He says, “I love that way of life, a way of “walking toward God,” hence I choose to live

²¹ Green, “Road Back to Sinai,” 152.

²² Mayse, “Arthur Green,” 40.

²³ Alan Brill, “Arthur Green- Judaism for the World.” *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions* (blog), February 18, 2021. <https://kavvanah.blog/2021/02/18/arthur-green-judaism-for-the-world/>.

²⁴ Brill, “Arthur Green- Judaism for the World.”

²⁵ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 25.

²⁶ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 26.

it."²⁷ Like with all loving relationships, its perpetuation is a decision that must be made every day, uncoerced:

I will freely decide-- often, but not consistently-- to live a rather traditional Jewish life, but it is vital to me that I am the one making that decision... The choices I make are my own; only the God who dwells within my heart knows how wisely or not I have chosen.²⁸

This justification by reference to “the God who dwells within my heart,” requires some exposition. Our next section will explore what Green actually means when he refers to “G-d.”

Looking In, Not Up

Drawing on the rabbinic tradition that Abraham observed halakhah before Sinai, Green asserts that "He knew it from seeking within."²⁹ That Abraham’s halakhic observance was a result of his inward glance provides grounding for Green’s understanding of G-d more broadly. Most simply, Green looks for G-d *in* rather than *up*:³⁰ his G-d is not the anthropomorphic deity that we read of in the Torah, but a panentheistic/monist Unity that he maps onto the unspeakable name of G-d: the Tetragrammaton, Y-H-W-H. Admittedly, this attempt at a “simple” explanation merits its own explanation. Perhaps it would be best to allow Green to speak for himself:

I believe that there is only One. Better said: I have glimpses of an inner experience that tells me that there is only One. That One embraces, surrounds, and fills all the infinitely varied forms that existence has taken and ever will take. We Jews call out that truth twice daily in reciting *Shema’ Yisra’el*, “Hear, O Israel.” “Y-H-W-H is One” means that there is none other. Our daily experience of variety, separate identity, and alienation of self from others renders an incomplete and ultimately misleading picture of reality.³¹

In classic Hasidic manner, Green explains that our ever-diversifying world is in truth the unfolding of a Divine Unity garbing itself in multiplicity. In our current creation myth of the Big Bang, this is the primordial point (the One) exploding outward and creating the universe and all its contents out of the same matter that was once contained within it (the garbing of the One in

²⁷ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 26. This is a classic play on halakhah’s root associations of “to walk.”

²⁸ Green, “Road Back to Sinai,” 158-9.

²⁹ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 172.

³⁰ Brill, “Arthur Green- Judaism for the World.”

³¹ Brill, “Arthur Green- Judaism for the World.”

multiplicity).³² Green asserts that during this process the One “calls out” to us to be known, and this is that “call” to which halakhah responds. It is not a verbal “call” in any sense of the word, but a “calling out” from the innermost dimension of Being. The use of this word “Being” holds a special place in Green’s conception of G-d, which he calls “a constant stretching forth of Y-H-W-H (“Being”) in the endless adventure of becoming HWYH (Hebrew for “being” or “existence”).”³³ Through this word-play, Green presents G-d as the very nature of Being, and our interactions with G-d as our tapping into this inner essence.

Similarly, Green sees revelation in fully psychologized terms that are accessible always and to everyone:

We are seeking a more fully *internalized* version of that foot-of-the-mountain experience, one in which *Sinai is a vertical metaphor for an inner event*. The journey "up the mountain" is in fact a journey to a "higher" rung of consciousness. That "higher," in our contemporary parlance, needs to be rendered as a *deeper* truth than that of ordinary perception or reason. The "heaven" that is its goal exists within the human soul.³⁴

Translating spatial language into psychological/spiritual language is the centerpiece of Green’s neo-Hasidic theology, and also helps scaffold our above discussion of the mitzvot. If G-d is accessed by looking inward, then the human origin of the mitzvot is less problematic: they were created as a response to the “call” of the in-dwelling Presence. It is important to note here that Green is aware of the danger of this inward glance in our “very self-gratification-orientated culture.” He distances himself from “self-help” by asserting spirituality is *not* about fixing yourself, but about waking up to the One.³⁵ This is another way in which Green presents obligation: our tuning into the One is *required* in response to G-d’s ‘calling out.’

³² More precisely, this primordial point would be associated with the potential contained within the sefirah *hokhmah* rather than the Primordial Nothingness of *Ein Sof* that existed even before the point. To see more on this topic, see the book by Green’s old friend Daniel Matt entitled *God & the Big Bang: Discovering Harmony Between Science & Spirituality*, (Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publication, 1996). For Green’s own exploration of evolutionary biology through the lens of spirituality, see his *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010). Significantly, Green asserts that such widely accepted scientific norms as evolution and the dating of the universe should be accepted wholesale by the seeker. (Mayse, “Arthur Green: An Intellectual Portrait,” 30).

³³ Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism*, 24.

³⁴ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 172.

³⁵ Brill, “Arthur Green- Judaism for the World.” Simultaneously, Green asserts that this turning inward to the ultimate Oneness of Being leads directly to the realm of interpersonal ethics. A full exploration of this is also beyond

Halakhah is only one half of responding to this call; the other half is prayer. Despite his rejection of the traditional Father/King of the prayerbook on a philosophical level, Green reserves the right to personalize the Divine in moments of religious praxis. After all, it is hard to call out to an undifferentiated Unity in times of crisis. Declaring that “religion is all about intimacy,”³⁶ Green says that it is necessary to personify since “love is relational.”³⁷ Having said that, this construction of G-d-as-Other (the ‘Atah’ of the traditional blessings formulation, *Barukh Atah* [Blessed are You]³⁸) is still a bridge to the One. So, if any personalization of this One is merely a construction of our mind, then how exactly can we interact with this G-d?

Revelation: According to Each Generation’s Needs

As we saw in his internalizing of Sinai, Green sees his version of G-d as radically accessible. Anyone able to cultivate the proper “internal glance” finds a piece of the One waiting for them. A helpful way to understand how Green makes this claim is by looking at Hasidism’s radical re-theorizing of revelation. When it comes to discussing Hasidic thought, it is worth noting that each thinker had a slightly different framing,³⁹ but it is still possible to speak broadly about trends and influences. Two figures who were in dialogue with this re-framing and were also foundational thinkers in early Hasidism are Menahem Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl and Levi Yitshak of Berdichev.⁴⁰

the confines of our topic but can be explored in his *Judaism for the World*, particularly in Part 3 “World: Living in God’s Creation.”

³⁶ “Sparks – ‘Confessions of a Longtime Seeker,’ 26:58.

³⁷ “Sparks – ‘Confessions of a Longtime Seeker,’ 31:00.

³⁸ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 56. For more on this topic, see the section in this book entitled “Barukh Atah,” 52-70.

³⁹ Ariel Evan Mayse, “The Voices of Moses: Theologies of Revelation in an Early Hasidic Circle,” *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 1 (January 2019): 101–25.

⁴⁰ The following sources are *not* being presented as specific source texts for Green’s theological processing. They were chosen from the Hasidic corpus in an effort to provide evidence that his ideas are grounded in tradition. Having said that, the highlighted thinkers were chosen because of Green’s specific affinity for them. This affinity can be seen in the years he spent translating Menahem Nahum’s main text (See Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *The Light of the Eyes: Homilies on the Torah*, trans. Arthur Green, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021)) and in the fact that Levi Yitshak’s text *Kedushat Levi* is one of the most commonly cited texts in his writings on Hasidism.

Although the specifics differ in each sermon, generally speaking Menahem Nahum teaches that Moses was not passively receiving, but was "actively summoning the Torah from the divine mind and creatively shaping it through words."⁴¹ This is a unique framing of the Talmudic assertion that the Torah includes all future innovations⁴² because the exegete is no longer uncovering pre-existing Torah, but instead "translat[ing] the ineffable Divine into language, through the process of developing unique exegesis."⁴³ This passage presents Torah as constantly unfolding, thereby suggesting that *it is still unfolding today*. Not only this, but the unfolding occurs by virtue of *active engagement*. These two assertions lead to the Hasidic claim that *each generation must reinterpret Torah to fit its new context*.⁴⁴

The centrality of this idea in Hasidism can be seen merely by skimming through anthologies of Hasidic sources. Lines like "Since the world was formed with Scripture, the continuous renewal of creation must also take place by means of new interpretations of Torah, ... in every generation"⁴⁵ and "In each generation and in every era, a new understanding ... of Torah comes along from heaven... [that] is fitting for that generation"⁴⁶ ring out from the pages. It is evident from our exploration that Green sees himself as a new iteration of this impulse.⁴⁷ Clear evidence of this can be found in an anthology of Hasidic sources that Green put together with three of his students, entitled *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from around the Maggid's Table*. This two-part series provides a unique window into Green's thinking for two reasons: first, the principle of selection renders each source important in his eyes, and second, each source includes original commentary. If we see the original Hasidic texts as the 'A source', and

⁴¹ Mayse, "The Voices of Moses," 111.

⁴² Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 19b.

⁴³ Mayse, "The Voices of Moses," 111.

⁴⁴ Furthermore, each individual's exegesis is needed to pull out that aspect of revelation that could only arise from their unique positionality.

⁴⁵ Avraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apt, *Ohev Yisra'el*, Toledot, 10a, (Zhitomir, 1863) in *Hasidism: Writings On Devotion, Community, And Life In The Modern World*, 102.

⁴⁶ Yitshak Meir Alter, *Hiddushei ha-RIM* (Jerusalem, 1985), ha'azinu, 263 in *Hasidism: Writings On Devotion, Community, And Life In The Modern World*, 156.

⁴⁷ To see this idea unpacked in the metaphor of Green being a 'bridge', see "Sparks – 'Confessions of a Longtime Seeker.'

Green's theology as the 'C source' then this anthology provides a 'B source' that actively wrestles with the question *what can this mean for our generation?*

For example, after a sermon by Levi Yitshak of Berdichev about the building of the tabernacle that concludes with the familiar assertion that each generation must develop novel exegesis, Green's commentary⁴⁸ states:

If the building of the Tabernacle is indeed parallel to the creation of heaven and earth, as the sages teach, it must have the same open-ended quality, leaving room for the participation and partnership of new minds as they arise in each generation. *It is only a short stretch* to say that in this teaching Levi Yitshak understands that both the natural order and human civilization are in a constant state of evolution and the sacred forms of *religion must evolve* with them.⁴⁹

Here Green makes it clear that he sees the logical conclusion of Levi Yitshak's thinking to be the evolution of religious praxis. His above reformulation of halakhah therefore can be understood as not only permitted, but necessary. Although he admits that this conclusion is a bit of a "stretch," we can look to his commentary on another Levi Yitshak sermon to understand why he feels comfortable making that assertion. The original source reads as follows:

... This is what Scripture means when it says: "*Like all that I show you*"-- according to your framework of prophecy, so should the tabernacle and vessels be. Then Scripture adds: "*and thus shall you do*"-- for all generations. This means that in every generation, when you want to build the Temple, the structure should be in accord with the prophecy that is attained at that time.⁵⁰

And Green follow up with this commentary:

In this and similar passages, the early Hasidic masters make a bold claim for their right, even *their need, to innovate in the realm of spiritual praxis*... Interestingly, this theoretical assertion was never used to justify large-scale praxis change, and later generations of leaders shifted the movement toward an ultra-conservative stance. But these passages remain a part of the Hasidic legacy. *How might they be reinvoked today, in a different age?*⁵¹

⁴⁸ I will be referring to the commentaries in this anthology as "Green's" although I admit that I do not know the writing process of this book, and they were possibly penned by one of the other editors. Having said that, the fact that Green's name appears as the primary author gives the impression that all content was ultimately filtered by him, and thus contains his fingerprint. Additionally, the other editors are his closest students, thereby rendering their thought deeply influenced by his.

⁴⁹ Kedushat Levi on Parshat Va-Yakhel in *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid's Table (Volume 1)*, ed. Arthur Green, Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse, and Or N. Rose, (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), 238. (Emphasis mine)

⁵⁰ Kedushat Levi on Parshat Terumah in *Speaking Torah*, 218-219. The importance of this concept to Green can be seen in a lecture he gave at Middlebury College in 2014 during which he referenced each generation's building of the tabernacle. Interestingly for our discussion, he follows up this invocation with the unanswered question "what happens when you do that without the framework of Jewish law? Can it sustain itself?" (Rabbi Art Green - 'Neo-Hasidism: Origins and Prospects,'" 59:46).

⁵¹ Green, *Speaking Torah*, 219. (Emphasis mine)

This use of ‘reinvoking’ is very significant. Here Green argues that while it never happened historically because of Hasidic adherence to halakhah, the radical reformulation that was afforded by their exegeses must now be taken up by those Jews who do not feel traditionally beholden to halakhah.⁵² This presents neo-Hasidism as not only a novel religious movement, but as a necessary step in the unfolding of revelation.

Conclusion

Now that we have clarified some of Green’s views on halakhah and tradition, we might wonder: why does he go through the trouble at all? Why justify his heterodoxy through tradition? And why is that relevant to other neo-Hasids today? The answer to these questions resides in his ultimate reasoning for adhering to traditional religious praxis; it’s just “the way Jews live.”⁵³ Believing that the holiness of the One manifests in the world through the actions and novel exegeses of each generation and not from a commanding G-d presents a way for us newcomers to “try on” traditional Jewish praxis without abandoning our modern sensibilities.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it endows our engagement with holiness as well.

To put it into Green’s own words:

I do not know a God who personally watches to see whether I am observing the commandments or not observing the commandments. No. The commandments to me are a gift that the tradition has given me for disciplining and regularizing my spiritual life. I choose to accept them insofar as they work to enhance that spiritual life. Because the tradition has lots of experience and lots of wisdom, I find myself open to hearing from it.⁵⁵

⁵² It is important to note here that most Hasidic sources present the main figure capable of performing this revelatory exegesis as ‘the *tzaddik*’. Put over-simply, the spiritual level of a *tzaddik* is the equivalent of an ‘enlightened holy person’ in Judaism (see Arthur Green, “The *Zaddiq* as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 3 (1977): 327–47.). This begs the question: is Green presenting himself as a *tzaddik*, and thus capable of understanding the Divine will? Put succinctly, no. Green is unequivocally not presenting himself as the *tzaddik*, nor does he even have the hubris to claim any sort of spiritual level higher than that of those he teaches. (see his remarks in Schuster, “A Closing Conversation,” 442 and “Sparks – ‘Confessions of a Longtime Seeker,’ 1:10:15) Instead, he pivots towards other Hasidic models that present a more democratized revelation, such as Levi Yitshak’s collectivist view of revelation (Mayse, “Voices of Moses,” 118) and Menahem Nahum’s presentation of the *tzaddik* as theoretically within the grasp of anyone. (Biale, *Hasidism: A New History*, 107) A full exploration of this nuance is beyond the confines of this essay but merits further research.

⁵³ Green, *Judaism for the World*, 26. I hope this has come across in my presentation of Green’s thinking, but I will note it explicitly here: Green is *not* arguing that all Jews should be halakhic. He is just providing an opening in the traditional praxis for those Jews who were not raised in it (as well as a new understanding for those that were) by appealing to constantly evolving Jewish culture.

⁵⁴ And perhaps a new way of thinking for those who were raised within halakhah.

⁵⁵ *Judaism Unbound Episode 133 - God Is One*. Podcast. Judaism Unbound, 2018, 27:35-28:07.

If this formulation speaks to you, run with it! If it doesn't, construct your own! If nothing else, our exploration of Green's writings exposed his belief that each individual must arrive at their path alone. We might understand his only caveat to be that we must construct our praxis from *within* the tradition: not from a place of 'I want to do less,' but from a place of 'I want to engage more deeply.'⁵⁶

Green admits that his traditionalism often surprises readers of his theology⁵⁷ but he ensures them that it took him fifty years of searching to arrive at his current practice. Although he hopes that his example will help speed up that process for others,⁵⁸ he is quick to remind us that each seeker must find what works best for them. At the end of the day, he admits that he still doesn't "have the same halakhic of-course-I'm-going-to-do-it" of other Jews,⁵⁹ and that's okay. For Arthur Green, authentic spirituality will always come before all else.

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⁵⁶ A traditional saying comes to mind when thinking about each individual taking on as much/little halakhah as is meaningful for them: 'the *ba'al teshuva* (a newly religious person) makes their own *Shulchan Aruch* (the code of Jewish Law).'

⁵⁷ Green's remarks in Schuster, "A Closing Conversation," 431.

⁵⁸ Green's remarks in Schuster, "A Closing Conversation," 435.

⁵⁹ Green's remarks in Schuster, "A Closing Conversation," 439.

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