"All My Thinking Has But One Focus"

Contemplative Seclusion in (Early) Modern Jewish Spirituality

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ABSTRACT   This study investigates the way in which different concepts of contemplation and seclusion are negotiated in Jewish spiritual literature. Focusing on (early) modern examples, it particularly addresses the functions and goals of physical and mental exercises designed to achieve detachment from worldly concerns. It shows how practices denoted by the terms *perishut* (lit. "separation") and *hitbodedut* (lit. "solitude") serve as preparatory steps that enable individuals to approach the divine, with the ultimate goal of bringing about various experiences of oneness with the deity. Against this background, it elucidates how *perishut* and *hitbodedut* were considered by some authors instrumental to gain divine knowledge, and how this idea relates to earlier Jewish conceptions of prophecy. Lastly, it will illustrate how in contemporary sources, contemplative seclusion is presented as a practice that transcends the temporal framework to which humans are bound.

KEYWORDS   Jewish spirituality, (Early) Modern Kabbalah, Jewish morality, contemplative seclusion, hitbodedut, perishut

Introduction

Discussions that deal with contemplation are not uncommon in Jewish spiritual literature. Intentionality—referred to by the Hebrew term *kawwanah* (lit. "focus")—is, for example, one of the well-studied key concepts in kabbalistic systems of thought.[1] Kabbalistic texts contain a myriad of references that instruct the readership to "direct their mental focus" (*lehakhwin*) to certain (imagined) divine attributes during the recital of the words of the daily blessings or prayers, the donning of phylacteries and the prayer shawl, or other humanly performed

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1   The concept of *kawwanah* is one of the widely studied aspects of kabbalistic literature. I can therefore mention here only a fraction of the available studies. See, for example, Scholem (1934), Giller (2008), Idel (2020b). For a comprehensive discussion on intent in Jewish sources, see Margolin (2021, 78–105). On intentionality Kabbalah, see Paluch (2019). On intention in kabbalistic prayer, see Idel (1992, 1993, 1994).

actions.[2] Also authors of moral treatises (*musar*) frequently deal with the use and benefits of contemplation, usually referred to by the notion of *hitbonenut*, a term that describes an "engaged reflection amidst the travails of daily life" (Garb 2020, 295). *Hitbonenut* in this context ultimately serves to train a particular moral character trait or cultivate a state of mind that aims to approach God with reverence, love, humility, or other attitudes considered virtuous. In both frameworks, the language used and the actions described in connection with contemplation are transitive. They differ, however, in their mode of application. The practice of *kawwanah* in kabbalistic writings constitutes an effort that is typically performance-bound and applied temporarily. Furthermore, the common kabbalistic rationale behind the notion of *kawwanah* is theurgical, namely it serves to impact certain aspects of the Godhead and to restore those damaged due to human transgressive behaviour. In contrast, *hitbonenut* is a process of contemplating one's personal relationship to the divine. Its use in moralistic texts describes a constant effort, or training of the self. It is primarily aimed at improving the individual's everyday behaviour and at establishing permanent change. What both these concepts have in common, however, is that they can serve as preparatory steps to becoming receptive to divine knowledge. In other words, *kawwanah* or *hitbonenut* are instrumental in function, as they assist in achieving a higher goal.

The contemplative efforts of *kawwanah* and *hitbonenut* are often thematised in close connec- [2] tion with additional spiritual exercises, which are supposed to bring about a state of separation from the outside world. These modes of mental self-isolation—circumscribed by the Hebrew terms *perishut* (lit. "separation") and *hitbodedut* (lit. "solitude")—offer the key to reconciling a quest for a more ascetic way of life on the one hand, with the fulfilment of the social and legal obligations commanded in the Torah on the other.[3] Similar to the Weberian notion of an inner-worldly asceticism (Weber 1968, 2:541–56), this method aims at allowing participation in the world and the simultaneous turning away from it.[4] To be sure, the training of such states of consciousness was, by all accounts, an elite practice until the beginning of the modern era, when it started to be more widely disseminated by followers of the Hasidic movement from the late eighteenth century onwards.

This study investigates the different manifestations and functions of *perishut* and *hitbodedut* [3] in Jewish spiritual literature. Focusing on (early) modern examples, it particularly addresses how methods of contemplative seclusion are designed to achieve detachment from worldly concerns, and how they are intended to bring about a state of intimacy, or oneness with the deity. Against this background, it elucidates how *perishut* and *hitbodedut* were considered by some authors instrumental to gain divine knowledge, and how this idea relates to earlier Jewish conceptions of prophecy. Lastly, it will illustrate how in contemporary sources, contemplative seclusion is presented as a practice that transcends the temporal framework to which humans are bound.

To analyse these forms of mental detachment, the study employs the category of Jewish [4] spirituality in lieu of Jewish mysticism. Approaching the phenomenon under investigation as spiritual rather than mystical does not only do more justice to the conceptual underpinnings of the textual descriptions, which deal primarily with activities associated with "a devout re-

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2   See, e.g., Ḥayyim Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, which was later edited by his son Shmu'el and published under the title *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*. Pinchas Giller has already rightly emphasized that "there was a transition from the idea of *kawwanah*, which means, simply, 'intention' or 'concentration' in prayer, to the *kawwanot*, which [...] were ideas, texts, or formulae to be contemplated while reciting the liturgy." See Giller (2008), 21, and see also 19–38 for a broader discussion of kabbalistic *kawwanot*.

3   For the articulation of this notion in medieval philosophical thought, see Kreisel (1988, xxii).

4   See also Melchert (1996), who applies Weber's approach to Islamic mysticism.

ligious life" that relate to the "metaphysical and non-material realms," as well as to practices "intended to subdue the physical, in order to increase the power of the spiritual" (Huss 2014, 48, 50–51). The more inclusive category of Jewish spirituality also allows for a comparison of sources and notions that have been largely treated separately in academia. It permits integrating pre- and para-kabbalistic forms of pietism (*musar*) with kabbalistic sources, as well as with modern Hasidic materials and contemporary interpretations derived thereof, while stressing the currency of *perishut* and *hitbodedut* within these discourses. Indeed, considering Jewish paradigms of contemplative seclusion as an expression of spirituality—that is, the desire to bring about a state in which the soul or spirit (*ruaḥ*) communicates with its source during its existence in the human body—holds great potential as a model for the comparative study of Jewish and non-Jewish (neo-)Platonically inspired materials.[5]

Between Physical Withdrawal and Concentrated Thought: *Perishut* and *Hitbodedut*

In the lesser-known, first version of his moral treatise *Mesillat Yesharim* (Path of the Just), the Italian kabbalist Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto (1707–1746) presents his vision of a spiritual way of life in the form of a dialogue between a wise person (*ḥakham*) and a pietist (*ḥasid*).[6] During the first exchange of words between these contrarily constructed characters, the *ḥakham* asks about the regular daily activities of his interlocutor. The *ḥasid* replies: "All my thinking has but one focus. I have a single vocation, namely that of *perishut*" (Luzzatto 2007, 4). Even though Luzzatto expresses here the one-dimensional orientation of the pietistic path with great clarity, he still keeps his readership in the dark in regard to the practices and forms of behaviour this way of life entails. Only towards the second half of *Mesillat Yesharim* he reveals that *perishut* implies "to withdraw and keep one's distance from the prohibited, … forbidding oneself the permitted to avoid encountering what is forbidden" (2007, 161, see also 410–11).

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Luzzatto's understanding of *perishut* follows in several respects that of his predecessors, especially those who held the idea that a legally acceptable way of life is not necessarily a morally justifiable one. Already the Andalusian philosopher Baḥya ibn Paquda (second half of the eleventh century) described the pietists' behaviour as "distancing themselves seventy gates from the permitted" (see Ibn Paquda 1962, 2:314–17). The Catalonian kabbalist Naḥmanides (1194–1270) stressed in his commentary on the Torah the segregated quality of the notion of "holiness" (*qedushah*), writing that the latter requires to "abstain from the permitted […]

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5   To the best of my knowledge, a systematic phenomenological comparison of early Christian monastic literature, Sufi writings, and Jewish (neo-)Platonic writings is not yet available. Such comparison could be particularly fruitful in the context of the topic under discussion. In the present study, these parallels can only be mentioned in passing.

6   *Mesillat Yesharim* is extant in two distinct versions: the dialogue version (SV) that has only been discovered recently, is preserved in an autograph manuscript of Luzzatto completed in 1738 (MS Guenzburg 1206, Russian State Library, Moscow). The highly popular thematic version (SP) is structured according to a famous saying (*baraita*) attributed to the second-century Tannaitic figure Pinḥas ben Ya'ir, following a gradual, ladder-like sequence of traits. This second version was first printed in Amsterdam in 1740 and continues to be published in numerous editions to this day. Both versions have been published together with an English translation in Luzzatto (2007). In most cases I follow the English translation of this bilingual edition. In some instances, however, particularly when I found it necessary to offer an alternative rendition of the Hebrew original, I deviate from it. For a comprehensive discussion of the *baraita* and its centrality in Jewish moralistic writings (*musar*), see Koch (2015, 46–77).

and separate from impurity" (Naḥmanides on Lev. 19:2).[7] Since its introduction in these, as well as in other medieval sources, the concept of *perishut* has been used with reference to a diverse repertoire of practices. Constituting a Hebrew rendition of the Arabic *al-zuhd* (lit. "detachment" and in a broader sense "asceticism"), Jewish authors expanded the former's range of meaning—particularly its Sufi connotation—offering an anachronistic reading by associating it with phenomena and actions that were already designated by the root *p-r-sh* in biblical and rabbinic literature.[8]

In general, *perishut* depicts self-induced states of seclusion that are intended to trigger a condition in which a person becomes entirely detached from worldly distractions. In doing so, this ultimately facilitates and enables a more intimate experience of the divine. The various strategies subsumed under this term may manifest themselves physically, such as in prolonged withdrawal from society or temporary seclusion in a deserted space (e.g., an empty house or a room). However, and particularly from the early modern period onwards, it is also increasingly used to describe a state of mental isolation from external sensory influences. As a result of the fluid transition between these two types of separation, it oftentimes implies both. The underlying principle that necessitates such a practice in the first place assumes that worldly things pose a potential danger that can lead a person astray from observation of their religious duties. They are considered to evoke desires that strengthen one's inborn evil inclination.[9] By amplifying the evil inclination's effective power, the latter eventually overrides the scope of action of its positive counterpart; that which enables a God-fearing attitude (Luzzatto 2007, 165). The antidote by which one can protect the innate vulnerability of the human creation is thus to stay as far away as possible from potentially negative influences. The dynamics at play work similarly to a magnetic field: Evil acts on a person's religious-moral compass, and as its attraction becomes increasingly powerful, so does the potential for escape. Remaining outside this radius, therefore, ensures not getting caught in the maelstrom of sin. This means that contact with society and with material things, as well as the satisfaction of one's own physical needs and desires, are not regarded as problematic per se. Rather, the real challenge lies in the extent to which one's own thoughts and actions are affected by these influences. Accordingly, the ultimate purpose of *perishut* is to erect a protective shield of a person's inner life. Only then one can "deny oneself pleasure, even at the moment of pleasure" (Luzzatto 2007, 166).[10]

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7   It is noteworthy to highlight that the examples brought forward by Naḥmanides in this context are quite similar to the ones that Luzzatto refers to in his *Messilat Yesharim* (see especially Luzzatto 2007, 165–66 [SV]). For a more comprehensive discussion of this passage, see Yisraeli (2020) and Koch (2015, 171–72).

8   For a general study on the concept of *al-zuhd* in its Islamic context, see Kinberg (1985). On forms of external and internal *zuhd* in Islamic mysticism, see Sviri (2002, 200–201). On the term *zuhd* in Baḥya, see, e.g., Kreisel (1988, vii); see also Ilan (2005, 456). On the impact of the Islamic concept of *zuhd* on Baḥya, see Lazaroff (1970, 20–21). It is noteworthy that Kreisel and Lazaroff render the term *zuhd* as "asceticism." I generally follow Leah Kinberg, who states that the term *zuhd* indicates rather a notion of abstinence (1985, 27–28). Furthermore, I would suggest that the Sufi concept of *adab* appears to show some affinities to the notion of *zuhd*, see also Mahdavi Damghani (1999, 33–36 and 46). For the rabbinic use of the term *p-r-sh*, see Diamond (2004, 85–91).

9   Quite frequently, the Hebrew term *yeṣer*—usually translated as "inclination"—is used with a clear negative connotation, even though generally speaking, it is neutral and usually complemented either by the attributes "good" (*tov*) or "evil" (*ra'*). On the *yeṣer ha-ra'* in rabbinic literature, see Rosen-Zvi (2011). On the good and evil inclination in the *Zohar*, see also Tishby (2002, 2:761–70 and 795–807).

10   This position here clearly refers to the pleasures of sexual intercourse that Luzzatto discussed in the larger context of the passage. He argues that one must suppress the formation of feelings of pleasure, which he describes as "a desire that may draw him to the forbidden" (2007, 165). It is also noteworthy that Luzzatto was quite certainly aware that his attitude created a tension in relation to Jewish law, according to which procreation not only counts among the most important commandments, but also regulates the husband's

Within the greater framework of Luzzatto's path, *perishut* is presented as a prerequisite for [8]
attaining the rank of *ḥasidut* (lit. "piety") (2007, 160)—the very quality that is both emblematic of the group of pietists (*kat ha-ḥasidim*) and the main character of the dialogical version
of the treatise, the *ḥasid*. The biblical scholar and reform rabbi Emil G. Hirsch (1851–1923)
has already poignantly stated that for Luzzatto, the *ḥasid* "is in a positive way what the *parish*
is negatively, the latter abstains from the permitted, the former goes beyond the commanded"
(Hirsch 1913, 162).[11] Hirsch's assessment may be expanded by remarking that the transition
between these two mental states—and I assume here that Luzzatto's use of the term *perishut*
indeed points to the spiritual realm—describes the transformation of an initially restrictive
attitude through habituation into one that is affirmative and expansive. What is more, Luzzatto uses *perishut* as an umbrella concept that subsumes additional contemplative practices
and types of seclusion. Thus, while elaborating on behaviour that he considers beneficial, he
writes:

> *Perishut* in conduct[12] entails seclusion (*hitbodedut*) and one must segregate (*ha-* [9]
> *hibbadel*) from societal company to turn one's heart towards [divine] service and
> proper contemplation (*hitbonenut*) upon it, provided that someone does not take
> this matter to the extreme. […] Rather, one should associate with the worthy for
> whatever time is necessary for his livelihood or studies, and afterwards seclude
> oneself (*yitboded*) to attach to his Creator and to attain the ways of the just and
> true [divine] service. (1999, 270)

Luzzatto draws a very lucid picture of the practices that one must implement in approach- [10]
ing God. In particular, he promotes a method that he refers to as *hitbodedut*. Like *perishut*,
the Hebrew *hitbodedut* embodies a notion that was adopted by medieval Jewish authors from
their Muslim surroundings, in alignment with biblical and rabbinic narratives (Idel 1988a,
105). The Arabic template, *al-khalwa*, is a derivative from the Syriac *ḥulla*, which originally
designated a Christian monk's cell (Fenton 1995, 274). It refers therefore also to a physical
place of retreat. Emerging from this spatial connotation, *al-khalwa* was rendered by medieval
Jewish translators of Judeo-Arabic literature with the Hebrew term *bedidut* or *hitbodedut* to describe states of loneliness or solitude.[13] Authors of philosophical and kabbalistic works would
explicitly associate *hitbodedut* with an internal process of mental concentration (Idel 1988a,
39–60). For example, in his commentary on Isaiah 44:25, the twelfth-century philosopher and
grammarian Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) does so by explicitly stating that the root *b-d-d*
means " 'alone,' and signifies such persons that pretend to be able to emancipate their souls
from the influence of the body, which some in reality can do" (Ibn Ezra 1873, 1:204). The

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duty to satisfy his wife's conjugal needs on a regular basis (see, e.g., Exodus 21:10, and see m. Ketub. 5:6).
Luzzatto himself merely claims that it is "absolutely permitted (*heter gamur*)" to have conjugal relations
with one's wife, which, given the legal specifications, is a mere understatement.

11   A similar tendency has been demonstrated in the medieval Castilian context by Brown (2020, 177–214,
especially 189).

12   Luzzatto distinguishes between three different elements of *perishut*, which relate to (1) pleasures (*hana'ot*),
(2) ritual law (*dinim*) and (3) conduct (*minhagim*) (Luzzatto 2007, 171 [SV] and 420 [SP]). Avraham
Shoshanah renders the third category as "social conduct." I would, however, prefer to read it more broadly
as pointing to aspects that deal with human conduct in general.

13   Abraham Maimuni differentiates between an external and an internal quality of *al-khalwa*, the latter of
which he regards as the highest level a human could attain in his own right. See Maimuni (1938, 2:387–
91). This internal degree of *khalwa* precedes the final stage of prophecy, which can be only awarded by God.
On *hitbodedut* as a technique that leads to prophecy, see also Maimonides (1981, fol. 42b). For a similar
categorisation, see also de Vidas 1984 (1984, 3:2:90, Gate of Holiness, chapter six, paragraphs 18–19).

idea of *hitbodedut* became particularly popular among advocates of the so-called prophetic or ecstatic traditions of Kabbalah, describing a technique of concentrated thought associated with letter combinations and permutations, as Moshe Idel has convincingly shown in several studies (see, e.g., 1988a, especially 142n8).[14]

Over the course of time, the semantic and conceptual similarities of the terms *perishut* and *hitbodedut* ultimately led to their equation, especially in kabbalistic and moralistic literature written during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[15] Due to the wide distribution of these latter works in Central and Eastern Europe, the followers of the Hasidic movement, which emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, also widely adopted a synonymous use of the two terms.

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Illuminating the Soul, Receiving the Holy Spirit: Contemplative Seclusion and the Acquisition of Divine Knowledge

Kabbalists and Jewish moralists portray interactions with the divine in very different ways. Medieval proponents of the theosophical-theurgical current of Kabbalah commonly situate them in the realm of the ten *sefirot* (lit. "emanations"), namely those intermediate powers or potencies that represent and act according to different divine qualities, such as lovingkindness (*ḥesed*), stern judgement (*gevurah*), or mercy (*raḥamim*). Philosophically inclined kabbalists, first and foremost followers of the so-called ecstatic or prophetic type of Kabbalah, such as Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291/2), are rather oriented towards a unitive experience of a neo-Aristotelian type that aims toward the 'Active Intellect.'[16] Additional variants of human-divine interaction emerge during the early modern period. Many of them draw heavily from the imageries and ideas introduced by their medieval predecessors. Thus, their innovative component lies primarily in the combination and expansion of already established concepts. To give one example: The school of Lurianic Kabbalah—a highly complex metaphysical system named after Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572)—is deeply rooted in the anthropomorphic representations of the Godhead as they appear in the *Idrot* sections of the *Zohar* (The Book of Splendour).[17] This is particularly evident in the division of the upper world into the five major configurations, or *parṣufin*, of *arikh anpin* (the "long countenance"), *abba* ("father"), *imma* ("mother"), *ze'ir anpin* (the "lesser countenance"), and its female counterpart *nuqba de-ze'ir anpin*.[18] The permanently changing relationships between the members of the divine nuclear family—manifested in their separation, partly unilateral and partly mutual attraction, union, and reintegration—and the effects that the kabbalists' actions can exert on them, provide the conceptual foundation of Lurianic metaphysics.

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One Lurianic compilation of contemplative practices encompasses the following instruction that includes so-called "unifications" (*yiḥudim)* of the letters of divine names a person should

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14   See also Fishbane (2009b, especially 248–282) on *hitbodedut* in the writings of the medieval kabbalist Isaac of Acre (fl. second half of thirteenth century).

15   For a seminal discussion on modes of contemplation in sixteenth-century Safed, see Werblowsky (1961).

16   On Abraham Abulafia, see e.g. Idel (1988b), Idel (1989); and most recently Idel (2020a). See also Wolfson (2000).

17   For a comprehensive discussion of the *Idrot* and their impact on Safedian writers, particularly Luria, see Giller (2001, 89–157) and Hellner-Eshed (2021). Even though attributed traditionally to the second-century tannaitic sage Shim'on bar Yoḥai, it is scholarly consensus that the gamut of Zoharic literature is a medieval product that surfaces for the first time in the second half of the thirteenth century in Castile (see e.g. Tishby 2002, 2:1:1–126).

18   For an introduction to the Lurianic conception of the twelve or thirteen *parṣufin*, see Magid (2008, 24–29).

apply during the time of prayer. Ḥayyim Vital (1542–1620), who is considered the author of this passage, addresses the reader directly by writing "concentrate yourself single-mindedly (*titboded*), shut your eyes, and turn your thoughts away from this world altogether, and then imagine seeing […] the three [different writings] of the Tetragrammaton" (1783, 8b).[19] It is beyond the scope of the current study to offer a more detailed analysis of the practice of meditating on the letters of divine names, nor to elaborate on the different ways of writing the unpronounceable four-letter name of God, which involve hermeneutical techniques based on the numerical values of the letters (*gemaṭriot*). It should suffice here to echo Eitan Fishbane's observation, who pointed out that "a central feature of the kabbalistic enterprise is the attempt to unify and restore that which has been separated above … and it is therefore incumbent upon the kabbalistic adept to exercise his cosmic power in the reunification of the divine Whole'"" (2009b, 127). In other words, by means of his theurgic capacity, the kabbalist can act on the dynamics of the upper world and unify aspects of the divine. However, to activate this mode of action, he must simultaneously dissociate from his worldly habitat. Viewed against this background, Vital's brief instruction offers a glimpse into how contemplative seclusion was applied in an early modern Jewish setting. Shutting the eyes was considered by some kabbalists "the essence of *hitbodedut*" (Idel 1988a, 134–36). It not only plays a crucial role during the time of prayer. It is also part of the preparatory steps required to attain a prophetic state of consciousness, which Vital refers to as the attainment of the holy spirit (*ruaḥ ha-qodesh*). Accordingly, he writes in his ethico-kabbalistic work *Sha'arei Qedushah* (The Gates of Holiness) that a person shall

> enter into an empty house […], a place where he will not be distracted from human voices and the chirping of birds, […], and he shall shut his eyes and remove his thoughts from all matters of this world, as though his soul had departed from him, like a dead person, who feels nothing. […]. And he shall concentrate his thoughts (*yitboded be-maḥshavato*) as though the holy spirit would rest upon him. (Vital 1985, 101)[20]   [14]

Elsewhere, he again stresses that the "unifications," when performed privately during the practice of *hitbodedut*, serve as a means to attain knowledge of the Godhead. They have the effect of cleansing a person from sin so that "his soul will be illuminated to serve him as a vessel ready to receive the supreme enlightenment" (Vital 2017, 39).   [15]

Even though Ḥayyim Vital's writings were not printed until the end of the eighteenth century, they nevertheless influenced many kabbalists who had access to the considerable number of manuscript copies of his teachings that circulated in the early modern and modern Jewish world. This also included the Padua-born polymath Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto, who was profoundly impacted by Lurianic Kabbalah.[21] In *Mesillat Yesharim*, he considers "deep reflection and abundant contemplation" as the most beneficial ways by which a person recognizes the greatness of God on the one hand, and one's own insignificance on the other hand. To acquire this mental state,   [16]

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19   See also MS Hamburg, Cod. hebr. 280, fols. 1a–b, which includes a slightly different variant of this passage, as well as Vital (1912, fol. 6b). It is noteworthy that the edition which is arguably based on the autograph manuscript of Vital does not include the discussion on *hitbodedut* in this context, instead only referring to the "unifications" and "intentions" (*kawwanot*) that need to be performed (see Vital 2017, 26).

20   English translation in Idel (1988a, 135). See also Luzzatto (1999, 174 (SV)), who states that it is "the propensity of the eyes to suffer seduction," which he associates with the first sin: that the "woman saw that the tree was good for food."

21   For a comprehensive study of the life and works of Luzzatto, see Garb (2014).

a person must seclude himself (*yitboded*) in one's chambers, gathering all his knowl-
edge and understanding for the consideration and study of these truths. He will
undoubtedly be helped in this by constant preoccupation with and study of the
Psalms of David, and by reflection upon their statements and ideas. (Luzzatto 2007,
240)

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One might be tempted to understand Luzzatto's request to "seclude himself in his chambers"
as a reference to a physical form of retreat. However, it is more likely that it points in a
figurative sense to a process of internal withdrawal, using the term "chambers" in its ancient
rabbinic connotation to describe inner spaces both in the human body as well as within the
Godhead. In the Babylonian Talmud, the human soul is depicted as residing in a "chamber
inside a chamber" (*be-ḥadrei ḥaderim*), in analogy to God residing in His inner sanctum (b.
Ber. 10a). In medieval interpretations of the ancient Hekhalot literature, the interior of the
chamber was also identified with the site where the visual experience of the ascents to the
heavenly palaces takes place. Thus, the famous medieval theologian and head of the Talmudic
academy of Pumbedita, Hai Gaon (939–1038), interpreted these spiritual journeys to the
upper spheres as a visual experience brought about by introverted contemplation, in which
the practitioner "sees and gazes in the chambers of their heart as a person sees gazes upon
something clear with his eyes" (Lewin 1971, 4; Margolin 2021, 235).[22] Reading Luzzatto's
instruction in this sense is further supported by the opening passage of the dialogic version of
Mesillat Yesharim, which describes how the wise person observes a group of pietists (*ḥasidim*)
that "recite many Psalms and draw out their prayers, and other similar practices" (Luzzatto
2007, 1–2). Luzzatto portrays here a lived piety—or the vocation to implement *perishut*—
that is publicly performed and thus visible to outsiders. At the same time, the practitioner,
epitomized by the *ḥasid*, becomes more and more alienated from the outside world—a process
that remains invisible to the observer's eye. Correspondingly, Luzzatto describes the effects
of the pietistic path at the very end of his treatise in the following way:

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When a person detaches himself by degrees from the material and directs his every
deed and movement to accord with supernal secrets, […] a spirit is poured upon
him from on high, and the Creator causes His Name to rest upon him—then will
he be, quite literally, like an angel of God, and all his deeds, even the lowly and
material ones, will be like sacrifices and acts of worship. (Luzzatto 2007, 283–84,
and cf. 520)[23]

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Not only does this passage exhibits a striking resemblance to the objectives outlined by
Vital in *Shaʿarei Qedushah*. Similar to the (neo-)Platonic idea of the soul's detachment from all
outward things in order to vacate space "within it for the presence of the One" (Margolin 2021,
219), disengagement from the material creates also here a vacuum that is filled with divine
spirit. It initiates the transformation from a human into a quasi-spiritual being. It is quite
possible that Luzzatto's statement may also have been inspired by his medieval predecessor,
the kabbalist Naḥmanides, who in his commentary to the Bible offers an even more radical
statement when he writes:

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22 B. M. Lewin (ed.), *Oṣar ha-Geʾonim*, vol. 4: Tractate Yom-Ṭov, Ḥagigah, and Nashim (Jerusalem: Vagshal,
1971), 61, quoted in Margolin (2021, 235).

23 See also Luzzatto (2007, 176 (SV)), where he states that "Dearer than all else is *hitbodedut*. For when a
person removes worldly matters from before his eyes, he also removes the desire for them from his heart."
He continues to write that the ancient sages found it "to be the most effective means of acquiring the
perfect form of *perishut*."

> Those who abandon altogether the concerns of this world and pay no attention to   [21]
> it, acting as if they themselves were not creatures of physical being, and all their
> thoughts and intentions are directed only to their Creator, just as was the case
> with Elijah, [these people] on account of their soul cleaving to the Glorious Name
> will live forever in body and soul. (Naḥmanides on Lev. 18:4, trans. Yisraeli 2020,
> 142)

Although this passage does not refer explicitly to the notions of *perishut*, Oded Yisraeli has   [22]
convincingly argued that the "self-abstinence Naḥmanides preaches in his commentary on
'You shall be holy' [where Naḥmanides interprets the holiness mentioned in Leviticus 19:2 as
'abstinence' or *perishut*] takes on flesh and bones here, being revealed as merely the outer shell
of the full religious life, whose ultimate purpose is the concentration of thought on God alone"
(Yisraeli 2020, 143).[24] More importantly, according to Naḥmanides the perfect execution of
a constant and single-minded focus on God leads to the attainment of immortality, for which
he cites Elijah as an example, who "went up to heaven [alive] in a whirlwind" (2 Kgs 2:11).

In the thought of Vital and Luzzatto, the practices of *hitbodedut* and *perishut*, the attainment   [23]
of the holy spirit, and the achievement of divine understanding (*hasagah*) are closely related
to their notions of prophecy.[25] This association is certainly not new, as it reverberates a causal
link that can be found in medieval kabbalistic writings. Consider, for example, the medieval
kabbalist Isaac of Akko (late thirteenth to mid-fourteenth century), who in his *Me'irat 'Einayim*
writes that if one merits "the secret of *hitbodedut*, then he will merit the holy spirit, and from
that he will reach prophecy" (Fishbane 2009b, 256; Idel 1988a, 112). In their understanding of
prophecy, however, Vital and Luzzatto diverge: The former defines it as a dream-like state in
which the intellective soul ascends on high. There, it "observes and looks" and descends back
again to impact the animal soul (*nefesh ha-ḥayyah*), where the imaginative faculty is located.
Once the individual returns to a waking state, the animal soul remembers this transmitted
divine knowledge by virtue of its memory (Vital 1985, 90). The latter, on the other hand,
conceives prophecy as a condition in which the individual "clearly realizes that the One to
whom he is bound is God" (Luzzatto 1981, 206–7).[26]

Transcending Time, Being in the Present: Contemplative Seclusion and Temporality

To date scholars have mainly studied the concepts of *hitbodedut* and to a lesser extent *perishut*   [24]
on the basis of medieval kabbalistic and philosophical writings, emphasizing their relevance in
evoking an experience of attachment to, or union with, the Godhead. Little to no consideration
has been given to the profoundly important question of how these practices relate to a specific

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24   Yisraeli substantiates this point with further reference to Naḥmanide's interpretation of Deut. 11:22, where
      he states that "it is possible that the term 'cleaving' includes the obligation that you remember God and His
      live always, that your thought should never be separated from Him […] to such a degree that [a person]
      during his conversation with people by mouth and tongue, his [entire] heart will not be with them, but
      instead be directed towards G-d."

25   On the perception of prophecy in an Aristotelian sense as "inspiration" or as a "maximum realization of
      the 'acquired intellect'" in Jewish philosophical and mystical thought, see Werblowsky (1961, 16–17). On
      prophecy and its relationship to joyfulness, see also Fishbane (2009a, 408–9).

26   See also Luzzatto (1981, 214–17), where he clarifies that one draws closer to God by means of devotion,
      good deeds, and self-purification. Aryeh Botwinick reads Luzzatto's notion of prophecy against the back-
      ground of the naturalistic approach of Maimonides: see Botwinick (2000, 205–7 and 212).

understanding of temporality. Although this aspect does not seem to play a central role in the earlier materials, it emerges very clearly in contemporary discussions. Hence, it seems appropriate to look at this connection in more detail, to illuminate how these mental forms of self-isolation offer the possibility to transcend the temporal framework to which humans are subjected, or to become in sync with the 'eternal present' of God.[27] Apart from several pioneering studies of Elliot R. Wolfson (e.g., Wolfson 2021), there are still disproportionally few scholarly examinations that investigate the centrality of temporality in Jewish spiritual literature. As recently as 2015, Brian Ogren published a collection of essays that represent a first attempt to approach this topic more systematically (Ogren 2015). Many of the basic assumptions underlying the following discussion are owed to these important contributions to the field.

Despite the many differences in the ideological outlooks of philosophical and kabbalistic au-   [25]
thors, there seems to be a consensus that God exists and acts outside of our time structure. This notion, which developed among Jewish authors in the wake of the impact of (neo-)Platonism, is captured in statements that God is "above time" (*le-ma'alah me-ha-zeman*) (see, e.g., Idel 2015, 190, 198), or that "the infinite, blessed be he, […] has no temporality" (*ein bo zeman*) (Luzzatto 1988, 150–51; and see Wolfson 2015, 47). At the same time, such an understanding serves as the basis for the practitioner's aspiration to achieve a state of temporal transcendence, in which the discrepancy between the supratemporal reality of the divine and human finitude is overcome. The latter appears in a particularly pronounced form in the literature produced by the Hasidic movement that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century around the figure of Israel Ben Eli'ezer (ca. 1700–1760, also known as the Ba'al Shem Ṭov or Besh"t).[28] In Hasidic thought, both *hitbodedut* and *perishut* are closely connected to the idea that the eradication of the ego (*biṭṭul ha-yesh*) is required to strive towards 'nothing' (*ayin*), which in kabbalistic nomenclature refers to the infinite reality of the Godhead (*ein sof*).[29] In that vein, one of the Besh"t's foremost students, the Great Maggid Dov Ber of Mezeritch (1700–1772), writes in his seminal work *Maggid Devaraw le-Ya'aqov* that "someone should think that he is a nothing, and he will totally abnegate himself […]. And, then he will come higher than time, […], where everything is equal, life and death, sea and land" (Dov Ber of Mezeritch 1990, 186).[30] Self-annihilation as a means to be fully absorbed in the divine epitomises an approach that is arguably more radical than imagining "not being a physical being" as instructed by Naḥmanides, or "being like a dead person who feels nothing" as specified by Vital. These previously mentioned examples still distinguish between the divine and a quasi-spiritual or an immortal human creature, who either receives divine efflux or who is in a state of communion with the Godhead. This duality is also reflected in the use of reciprocal language in descriptions that deal with self-isolation as a means of achieving intimacy with God (Koch 2015, 177–78). The Hasidic notion, however, appears to be much closer to the Sufi-concept of *fanāʾ*, or "to die in God" (Wilcox 2011, 95). It aims to surpass any category of difference, generating a unity of opposites.

Yet another strategy that emerges in the Hasidic context is to achieve a state of temporal   [26]
dilation, namely, to expand the experience of the present moment by means of contemplative

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27   On the notion of "eternal presence," see Garb (2015, 157) and 159 on dreams as a state of eternal presence. On the time of creation as an "eternal now," see Wolfson (2015, 24).

28   On temporality in the early thought of Ḥabad Hasidism, and particularly its founder Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745–1812), see Tworek (2019).

29   On the idea of *biṭṭul ha-yesh* as a form of apophatic embodiment in Ḥabad Hasidism, see Wolfson (2009, 66–129).

30   English translation in Idel (2015, 199–200).

seclusion. In this case, presence is perceived as a gateway of sorts through which the divine can be approached. With reference to Elliot R. Wolfson's remarks on the paradoxical temporalization of the eternal and the eternalization of the temporal, Jonathan Garb has pointed out that such an understanding

> opens the possibility for the presence of a radically different present—not a median   [27]
> and ephemeral phase in a linear progression from the past to the future, but rather
> a deeply full experience, as deep and full as the true and the true fullness of time
> itself, as ever-recurring. (Garb 2015, 153; and see Wolfson 2006, especially 92)[31]

A very similar idea has been articulated by the contemporary Hasidic rabbi Avraham Tzvi   [28]
Kluger, head of the Nezer Yisro'el yeshivah in Beit Shemesh. In a recently published collection of his lectures and essays, Kluger writes that

> the present isn't a servant of the past and future, functioning as a bridge between   [29]
> them. Instead, the past and the future serve the present. There is nothing greater
> than the "now." In the life of a Jew, the present moment is all there is, and in it
> he can illuminate the blessed Creator's present. (Kluger 2018, 55, 2011, 53)

What then is the connection between the experience of "true fullness" of the present and the   [30]
practices of contemplative seclusion? One answer is that the latter is considered the method that needs to be implemented to reach a state in which one no longer thinks about the past and makes predictions about the future. Kluger presents this process by using the image of a helpless child, stating that "*hitbodedus* is when a person comes to a clear realization that he has nothing and he can do nothing" (2018, 52, 2011, 52). Elsewhere, he equates *hitbodedut* with "wholehearted simplicity" (*temimut*) (2018, 54, 2011, 54). Most importantly, however, he explicitly describes the complete presence of mind in the now as the main goal of contemplative seclusion. Thus, he writes that

> Even the person who sits alone in his room, uneasy because he doesn't know what   [31]
> the future has in store for him, is also trying to predict the future. The main thing
> is to be one with the present moment, to be calm with what one is feeling and
> living now, as it is happening. "Don't try to predict the future" is not meant only
> to protect a person from thoughts about the future. It is a directive to connect
> oneself to the present. This is the primary goal of *hisbodedus*. (Kluger 2018, 55,
> 2011, 54)

It is probably no coincidence that Kluger begins his explanation with a subtle critique of a   [32]
purely physical form of isolation, which is not beneficial per se in inducing a state of single-minded focus on God. Rather, the actual goal here is to overcome being affected by feelings, emotions, and thoughts, which are considered the product of a linear and tripartite conception of time. Kluger's idea for being in sync with the present appears to be a modern, and arguably

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31   See also Wolfson (2021, 256) on the indistinguishability of the three modes of time within the immutable
     divine nature and the question of "speaking meaningfully of an interval if a being is past, present and future
     all at once?" Wolfson states that "contemplation of this imponderable idea helped foster the kabbalists'
     notion of a time that is not time, a timeless time that ensues from the intersection of all three tenses in the
     moment, an equiprimordiality of past, present and future that mimics the eternality of the divine ipseity,
     a time out of time that, at all times, is comported temporally in the here and now by the recollected
     projection of the beginning discerned from the projected recollection of the end."

simplified, version of what his predecessors represented in more philosophical or kabbalistic terms as a process by which one can attain a unitive experience of recognizing the divine, or gaining divine knowledge, by virtue of contemplative seclusion.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has offered a brief overview of various contemplative practices designed to facilitate states of mental seclusion. It has shown how the different interpretations and applications of *hitbodedut* and *perishut* serve as prerequisites to establish a connection with the divine. These communicative states manifest themselves in form of vertical, out-of-body experiences in which the soul ascends on high and experiences divine reality. They are also depicted as introspective contemplative experiences, during which the body is transformed into a vessel that receives the holy spirit. In modern and contemporary sources, they are associated with a state of either transcending human temporality, or the participation in the "eternal present" of the divine initiated by merging the tripartite model of past, present, and future. Furthermore, it has been shown that in terms of their function, *hitbodedut* and *perishut* can denote exercises that are designed to trigger prophetic states and to acquire divine knowledge. They can serve a protective purpose, "to withdraw and keep one's distance from the prohibited" (Luzzatto 2007, 161), and they can have a purifying function (Idel 1988a, 135). It has become clear that medieval and early modern conceptualizations of *hitbodedut* and *perishut* exhibit a pronounced spatial dimension, implying that withdrawal from the world opens the possibility to enter the divine sphere. This spatial dimension is, however, closely related to the temporal perception of the experience, an aspect that comes particularly to the fore in the late Hasidic materials.

[33]

At the beginning of the essay, it was pointed out that in Jewish spiritual literature, contemplative language and actions belong to the realm of the transitive. It is difficult to tell whether this transitivity is turned into intransitivity when achieving one's goal—be it attachment to or unity with God, reception of divine efflux, transcendence of a this-worldly reality, or attainment of the eternal now. The few literary accounts, most of which are decidedly short, frequently apply a language of "as-if" (*ke'ilu*). This linguistic device may point to the ineffability, or non-translatability of the experience into human language. It would also be plausible to understand it as an expression that pays due respect to the mental, imaginative character of the exercises. What can be stated, however, is that authors of kabbalistic and moralistic literature frequently stress that the attainment of divine understanding cannot be obtained solely by one's own power. It requires a divine agent that grants access to or transmits this type of supernal knowledge. This is not to say that such states—often described in very intimate language—constitute an entirely passive experience in which the self dissolves into a great whole. Rather, to become receptive for divine revelation entails processing the information conceived. In this sense, the concept of non-doing, or any other comparable state, does not seem to play a central role in Jewish forms of contemplation.

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Acknowledgment

[35]

reviewers for their many constructive comments and suggestions, which helped me to refine the arguments brought forward in this study.

Abbreviations

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