

# “Fellow Travellers Along the Path”: Charismatic Fallibility in Neo- Hasidic Leadership<sup>1</sup>

Jonah Mac Gelfand, *Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley*

In the early 1960s, the spiritual landscape of North America shifted. As part of the broader counterculture movement, formerly secular people became convinced that there had to be “more” to life and began looking for someone, somewhere, sometime, who had lived a more meaningful existence. Their gaze quickly landed on religion and a spiritual revolution began. Integral to this re-engagement with religion was finding a spiritual teacher who could guide them along this path, and thus we see the mid-century explosion of Buddhist monks, Hindu swamis, and Hasidic rebbes claiming to have answers from ancient wisdom traditions. Some seekers found what they were looking for in traditional religiosity, others scoured the World Religions to piece together a syncretic New Age movement, and still others found a way to meld together modern sensibilities with traditional sources. Yet, a common denominator for each of these camps was the presence of charismatic

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leaders. These types of holy teachers are prevalent across religious divides, and while many groups maintained the traditional model, others understood that for many American individualists, submitting to a spiritual teacher was not an easy task. For this latter group the need to rethink leadership models became a pressing issue. How can one individual be uplifted as a divine intermediary in a worldview that values autonomy and individuality over all else?

One community that developed substantive models of leadership in response to this question was the North American “neo-Hasidic” movement.<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, neo-Hasidism refers to those who draw on the rich spirituality of Hasidic Judaism but maintain their sociological position outside of its contemporary communities. This impulse manifests differently in the liberal and Orthodox worlds, and this project will focus specifically on the liberal manifestation stemming from the counterculture movement. Since one of the defining features of Hasidism is the presence of charismatic leaders called rebbes, to truly understand this liberal neo-Hasidism we need to understand how its modes of leadership both draw and differ from conventional Hasidism. How can neo-Hasidism position itself within a Hasidic lineage while diverging from this basic tenet?

An exploration of North American neo-Hasidic leadership will show that redefining leadership models was in fact one of the central ways this movement differentiated itself from traditional Hasidism. The redefined conception of leadership was not that of perfected rebbes acting as divine intermediaries; rather, what emerged was a conception of rebbes as “fellow travellers” who are charismatic by virtue of their fallibility. By presenting teachers as

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2. Although there are manifestations of neo-Hasidism in other parts of the world – such as Israel, Australia, England, and France – I will not be discussing them here as they are outside the scope of this article.

being “just like you,” they became more relatable. Various communities actualized this in different ways – some continued to use the title “rebbe,” while others rejected it in favour of the title “Teacher.” And yet, even this updated model comes with the dangers of abuse inherent to the centring of any charismatic leader. The strands of non-Orthodox liberal neo-Hasidism that I will be exploring are the Jewish Renewal Movement and those inspired by the Havurah Movement.<sup>3</sup> Before beginning my analysis, I will need to situate our discussion by defining what is traditionally meant by the term “rebbe.”

### What Is a Rebbe?

“Rebbe” is the Yiddish pronunciation of “rabbi.” Despite this linguistic origin, the term came to mean much more within the eighteenth-century Eastern European mystical revival movement known as Hasidism.<sup>4</sup> In this tradition, “rebbe” became conflated with the term “tzaddik” (pl. *tzaddikim*), which is often translated as “holy man.” Literally meaning “righteous one” in Jewish mysticism, this

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3. This non-Orthodox scope differentiates our communities of study from those surrounding Shlomo Carlebach (who is very much a part of this story but somewhat maintained his position within Orthodoxy), current neo-Hasidic figures in the Modern Orthodox world, such as Rav Moshe Weinberger, and the Israeli neo-Hasidic movement. It is also worth noting here that the Havurah movement does not exist in the same formal way that the Jewish Renewal Movement does to this day.

4. For more of the movement’s history, see *Hasidism: A New History*, ed. David Biale, David Assaf, Benjamin Braun, Uriel Gelman, Samuel C. Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, and Marcin Wodziński (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017). For scholarship focused specifically on leadership, see Arthur Green, “Around the Maggid’s Table: Tsaddik, Leadership, and Popularization in the Circle of Dov Baer of Miedzyrzecz,” in *The Heart of the Matter: Studies in Jewish Mysticism and Theology* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

title became identified with the channel of divinity into the world. In Hasidism, we see a mass movement formed around those claiming it.<sup>5</sup> In virtually every case these central figures were men, and the pilgrimage-based spiritual fraternities surrounding them were male spaces.<sup>6</sup> While there is great diversity among different Hasidic dynasties and their various theologies, the only thing that can be called specifically “Hasidic” across the board is this institution of the *tzaddik*. In fact, many scholars have argued that this institution, termed *tzaddikism*, is the central revolution of Hasidism.<sup>7</sup>

Defined by Gershom Scholem as “the unlimited religious authority of an individual in a community of believers,”<sup>8</sup> *tzaddikism*’s four main components have been described as charisma (real or inherited), mutual devotion and responsibility, the embodiment of the divine dialectic, and linking the divine and material.<sup>9</sup> Due to the multifaceted nature of this role, a Hasidic *tzaddik* has been described

5. The proof text for this is Proverbs 10:25, which states that “the *tzaddik* is the foundation of the world,” (צַדִּיק יְסֹד עוֹלָם). To learn more, see Moshe Idel, “Zaddiq as ‘Vessel’ and ‘Channel’ in Hasidism,” in *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 189–207.

6. For a survey of the scholarship on the place of women in early Hasidism, see Tsippi Kauffman, “Hasidic Women: Beyond Egalitarianist Discourse” in *Be-Ron Yahad: Studies in Jewish Thought and Theology in Honor of Nehemia Polen*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019). One historical figure that breaks this model is the legendary Maiden of Ludmir; see Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Maiden of Ludmir: A Jewish Holy Woman and Her World* (Oakland: University of California Press: 2013).

7. Gershom Scholem, “Hasidism: The Latest Phase,” in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), especially 338–344; Rachel Elijor, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 126; Immanuel Etkes, “The Zaddik: The Interrelationship between Religious Doctrine and Social Organization,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996); Joseph Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism,” *Modern Judaism* 11, no. 2 (1991): 175–193.

8. Scholem, “Hasidism: The Latest Phase,” 342.

9. Elijor, *The Mystical Origins*, 130.

as a combination of a rabbi, a prophet, a king, a priest, and a preacher. This amalgamation was presented as a one-stop-shop for Eastern European Jewry's problems, both spiritual and material, and supplemented the traditional position of the *ba'al shem* (a practical Kabbalist who acted as a folk healer).<sup>10</sup> Moshe Idel has emphasized the centrality of this magical capability in their leadership,<sup>11</sup> as a *tzaddik's* prayer was understood to be able to cosmically shift the outcome of a situation. This was textually proven by the Talmudic dictum, "God issues a decree and the *tzaddik* nullifies it."<sup>12</sup>

Once formalized into a dynastic mass movement, the only way for the Hasidic masses to attain the rebbe's higher level of consciousness or interact with the divine realms was precisely *through* relationship and proximity to the rebbe.<sup>13</sup> The Hasidic *tzaddik* thus became understood as the "cosmic facilitator"<sup>14</sup> or even the "living incarnation of the Torah."<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that Scholem distinguishes this from the earlier idyllic Torah scholar, in that "it is no longer his knowledge but his life which lends a religious

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10. See Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Oakland, University of California Press, 1996); Samuel C. Heilman, *Who Will Lead Us? The Story of Five Hasidic Dynasties in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 1; Green, "Around the Maggid's Table," 125.

11. See Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

12. Babylonian Talmud, Mo'ed Katan 16b. Green has pointed out that this quote is one of Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev's most oft-quoted rabbinic sources. See Arthur Green, "Levi Yizhak of Berditchev on Miracles," in *The Heart of the Matter: Studies in Jewish Mysticism and Theology* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 259.

13. See Scholem, "Hasidism: The Latest Phase," 342.

14. Elijah Judah Schochet, "Hasidism and the Rebbe/Tzaddik: The Power and Peril of Charismatic Leadership," *Hakirah; the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* 7 (2009): 56.

15. Scholem, "Hasidism: The Latest Phase," 344.

value to his personality.”<sup>16</sup> This can be seen in the oft-told story of a Hasid going to a rebbe not to hear his teachings but to watch him tie his shoes.<sup>17</sup> Scholar and neo-Hasidic leader Arthur Green goes even further, and argues that the Hasidic *tzaddik* represents a “transference of sacred space imagery to that of sacred person,” thereby endowing their court with the role that Jerusalem normally plays in rabbinic Judaism.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Ada Rapoport-Albert has shown that the *tzaddik* was actually uplifted to a secondary “focal point” of worship in Hasidism.<sup>19</sup> These descriptions clarify how these figures were seen to be more-than-human and infallible – a tenet of leadership that most strands of neo-Hasidism reject outright in favour of some level of egalitarian communalism.

Central to claiming the title of “rebbe” was their relationship with Hasidim (sing. Hasid: this term literally connotes “pious one” but comes to mean “devotee” in the Hasidic context). A rebbe cannot be a rebbe without having a relationship with disciples; the title is bestowed upon them by their community.<sup>20</sup> This reality confirms

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16. Scholem, “Hasidism: The Latest Phase,” 344.

17. See Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, books 1 & 2 (New York: Schocken Books, 1947–1948). This story is often told in neo-Hasidic circles.

18. Arthur Green, “The Zaddiq as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 3 (1977): 327–329. Green makes sure to clarify that this is in addition to, and not instead of, honouring Jerusalem (330).

19. Ada Rapoport-Albert, “God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship,” *History of Religions* 18, no. 4 (1979): 296–325.

20. This idea is explored in many places, such as Samuel C. Heilman, *Who Will Lead Us? The Story of Five Hasidic Dynasties in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 258, and Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 203–204. While teacher-student relationships have always been central in Judaism, the innovation of Hasidism in this realm relates to how a Hasid is drawn to a specific rebbe by virtue of their shared soul root. For more on this soul relationship, see Ebn Leader, “Leadership as Individual Relationships: A Close Study of the No’am Elimelekh,” in *Be-Ron Yahad: Studies in Jewish*

sociologist Max Weber's assertion that "recognition on the part of those subject to authority is decisive for the validity of charisma."<sup>21</sup> "Armed with the power of [cleaving to God]," Rachel Elijah asserts that the rebbe "is obliged to occupy himself with the terrestrial in its social and material manifestations."<sup>22</sup> This is to say that the rebbe's power of attorney in the heavenly court must be used in support of their constituency, or else it is wasted. Similarly, a Hasid cannot be called as such without being a "Hasid of someone."<sup>23</sup> And yet the answer to this question becomes foggy in neo-Hasidism, where the traditional emphasis on finding a rebbe is drastically reformulated.<sup>24</sup>

### What Is Neo-Hasidism?

The basis for neo-Hasidism can be found in the diverse interwar writings of Europeans like I. L. Peretz, Martin Buber, and

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*Thought and Theology in Honor of Nehemia Polen*, ed. Ariel Evan Mayse and Avraham Yizhak Green (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 185. It is important to note that this shifted as dynastic succession took hold and rebbe-hood became inherited, but the successor still only maintained their legitimacy through the acceptance of the community.

21. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press Incorporated, 1968), 242–243.

22. Elijah, *The Mystical Origins*, 125.

23. Heilman, *Who Will Lead Us?*, 256; Dan, "A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism," 178. To see this question as it relates to neo-Hasidism, see Ebn Leader, "Does a New Hasidism Need Rebbes?" in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 318.

24. Interestingly, this "fogginess" can already be witnessed in the late nineteenth century, with the advent of Jewish urbanization. See the phenomenon termed "a la carte Hasidism" in Marcin Wodziński, "War and Religion; or, How the First World War Changed Hasidism," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 106, no. 3 (Summer 2016), 298.

Hillel Zeitlin,<sup>25</sup> but in America, its literary origins can be traced more specifically to the writings of Buber and the influence of Abraham Joshua Heschel.<sup>26</sup> Its lived origins begin in 1949 when two rabbis from the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement were sent by their rebbe to the new campus of Brandeis University to bring secularized Jews back to tradition.<sup>27</sup> This pair of rabbis – Zalman Schachter (later Schachter-Shalomi) and Shlomo Carlebach<sup>28</sup> – would not claim the mantle of neo-Hasidism for many years. However, their exposure to the beatnik and counterculture movements resulted in both eventually leaving Chabad and becoming the “rebbees of the hippie movement.”<sup>29</sup> Part of what they absorbed from this countercultural influence was a

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25. This group bridges the gap from totally secular Yiddishists (Peretz), to religiously observant former Hasidim (Zeitlin), to Buber’s unique non-obligatory conception of Jewish spirituality. For more on the use of Hasidic tradition by non-religious writers, see Nicham Ross, “Can Secular Spirituality be Religiously Inspired? The Hasidic Legacy in the Eyes of Skeptics,” *AJS Review* 37, no. 1 (2013): 93–113.

26. For more on Heschel as a neo-Hasidic thinker, see Arthur Green, “Abraham Joshua Heschel: Recasting Hasidism for Moderns,” *Modern Judaism - A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 29, no. 1 (2009): 62–79.

27. Their rebbe was the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn. It has been pointed out to me that this narrative is contested and many different versions of it exist. I received this version in Burt Jacobson, *The Spirit of the Ba’al Shem Tov: A New Hasidism in the Making* (unpublished manuscript).

28. It is important to note that neither Carlebach nor Schachter-Shalomi were raised Hasidic, but rather “joined the Hasidic group in [their] quest to find a new spiritual and intellectual meaning to life.” See Yaakov Ariel, “Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius: The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 1967–1977,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 2 (2003), 140.

29. This phrasing was used in Jacobson, *The Spirit of the Ba’al Shem Tov*. A similar sentiment is expressed in both Ariel, “Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius,” 61, and Arthur Green, “Renewal and Havurah: American Movements, European Roots,” in *Jewish Renaissance and Revival in America: Essays in Memory of Leah Levitz Fishbane*, ed. Eitan P. Fishbane and Jonathan D. Sarna (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 146.



pull towards egalitarianism that will become relevant in our discussion about leadership. In fact, this willingness to draw from diverse non-traditional sources represents one of the unique aspects of the neo-Hasidic projects emerging in their wake.

“We come to modernity as full participants in the modern and postmodern world,” writes Green, who was close colloquies with Schachter-Shalomi. “But we come with this very deep rerooting in those essential values. ‘Avodat ha-Shem – we are here to serve the One.’”<sup>30</sup> Just like traditional Hasidism, neo-Hasidism holds as its primary mission the spiritual life but asserts that it will use all the tools at its disposal to live it – including influence from other faith traditions and the secular world. Its use of Hasidism is therefore always “selective,”<sup>31</sup> and related to an attempt to provide spirituality “without reverting to beliefs and norms that the [...] secular conscience and conviction prevent[s] them from accepting at face value.”<sup>32</sup> This is put well by Green’s old friend Barry Holtz, who said that their community “took elements from Hasidic prayer, but it had a kind of modern Americanized spin to it.”<sup>33</sup> And yet different communities manifest this balancing of Hasidic influence differently.

As mentioned, this study will focus mainly on the non-Orthodox leaders within and around the American Jewish Renewal Movement founded by Schachter-Shalomi and those inspired by the Havurah movement co-founded by Green.<sup>34</sup> Although intricately

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30. See Jordan Schuster, “A Closing Conversation with the Editors,” in *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 429.

31. Ariel Evan Mayse’s comments in Schuster, “A Closing Conversation,” 425.

32. Ross, “Can Secular Spirituality be,” 111.

33. Barry Holtz, “Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project,” interview by Jayne K. Guberman, *University of Pennsylvania*, Dec. 21, 2016, transcription, 50.

34. Both movements will be defined below.

intertwined, Green himself shares a story to highlight the differences between the two leadership models:

I want to tell you about two [students] of mine [...] Ebn [Leader] [...] and Or Rose. [...] One summer Or was invited to speak at the National Havurah Institute, which is the descendent of Havurat Shalom that I created in Boston. Ebn went to speak at the [annual Jewish Renewal conference]. The same week they happened. They both came back and told me about their experiences. And Or said “When I gave my session it was very nice. And then I went to some other people’s sessions and there were interesting things to hear. I learned a lot and I liked the people there and it went very well.” And Ebn came back and said, “After my first session, they asked me to lead [prayer], and then they asked me to do more, and then they all wanted to make appointments to talk to me, and then they were doing this, and they were doing that, and I saw [...] if I stayed five more minutes, they were going to make me into a rebbe.” And I understood that [the ALEPH community] were Zalman’s [students] and these were my [students].<sup>35</sup>

This illuminating story shows not only the inherent differences in the two movements, but also that it’s not the leaders themselves, but the communities, that bestow rebbe-hood onto the leader. And yet, the underlying ideological agreement that connects these two communities to each other – and differentiates them from *tzaddikism* – is the idea that their leaders are ultimately “just like you.”

### Leaders as Fellow Travellers

An important component of what Holtz termed the “Americanized spin” on Hasidism was a general discomfort with endowing teachers with cosmic significance. That a leader was on a

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35. Rabbi Arthur Green, personal interview with the author, June 8, 2021.

level inaccessible to virtually all their followers was uncomfortable to this community steeped in the countercultural values of egalitarianism and autonomy.<sup>36</sup> Instead of seeing their leaders as quasi-divine or cosmic facilitators, many neo-Hasidim prefer to think of them as “fellow travellers” who just so happen to have been on the path longer than the student. This accumulated experience – not an inherently closer relationship with the divine – is what equips them with valuable wisdom and insight that is meaningful to their students. In an essay entitled “Does a New Hasidism Need Rebbes?” Rabbi Ebn Leader argues that the traditional devotional relationship to the rebbe is no longer warranted in our day and age. Leader asserts that this traditional relationship was defined by recognition of the distinction between the spiritual practice of the leader and the followers. In theory, then, the spiritual attainments of the *tsaddik* are available to anyone who is willing to devote the effort to achieving them (though in some versions this also requires a particular skillset). Practically speaking, however, this spiritual leader model assumes that the *tsaddik* is serving a larger community of people who are not on the path to becoming *tsaddikim* themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Leader posits that this framework should be diffused and replaced by a matrix of mentors and a community of deeply engaged spiritual seekers,<sup>38</sup> and thus understands the perfected rebbe figure to

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36. It is worth noting that there are instances of counter-culturalists joining traditional communities structured around a charismatic leader, but a full analysis of this nuance is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, we are looking at those who chose not to go that route.

37. Leader, “Does a New Hasidism,” 318–319. This claim became increasingly true as Hasidism ossified over the centuries, but is complicated by the writings of the earlier generations where the rebbes were trying to support their students in becoming *tsaddikim* themselves,

38. Both Green’s Havurat Shalom and Schachter-Shalomi’s B’nai Or (both mentioned below) have influenced this position. Not to mention earlier neo-Hasidic proposals for intense spiritual community, such as Hillel Zeitlin’s

be a thing of the past. For him, then, the ideal neo-Hasidic leader needs to be on the same path as the community.<sup>39</sup> The dangers of allowing a teacher to live according to a different set of standards have been seen in many charismatic leader-based communities and will be unpacked further below. This egalitarian impulse is obviously an immense divergence from the infallibility of traditional *tzaddikism* and represents one of neo-Hasidism's primary innovations. A teaching shared with Dev Noily, senior rabbi at Oakland's Kehilla Community Synagogue, communicates this well:

You're beginning rabbinical school. You maybe think you're on your path to becoming some kind of rebbe. And what this means is that you will know more than other people; you're gonna be better than other people; you're gonna have a stronger connection to [the divine] than other people. And guess what? You're a person. You'll have good days; you'll have bad days. You might help some people. Hopefully you will. But you'll also be that rabbi [who makes mistakes].<sup>40</sup>

A fellow traveller is meant to be relatable, and what is more relatable than making mistakes?

### Charismatic Fallibility

Paradoxically, the decentering of the leader's uniqueness can function to legitimize their charismatic authority. Katie E. Corcoran and James K. Wellman Jr. have shown, in the context of American megachurches, that the ordinariness of charismatic leaders "can be a

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Yavneh. For more on this, see "Hillel Zeitlin," in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019) 15–25.

39. Leader, "Does a New Hasidism," 320, 325.

40. Rabbi Dev Noily, personal interview with the author, July 1, 2021.

part of their charisma.”<sup>41</sup> This complicates and revises Weber’s definition of charisma, which emphasizes that charisma stems from the individual’s “otherness.” Weber says that charisma is:

A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader.”<sup>42</sup>

In his classic essay “Hasidism and the Routinization of Charisma,” Stephen Sharot has already shown how the traditional Hasidic *tzaddik* exists within Weber’s model of a “mystagogue” whose authority derives from their “personal charisma, as opposed to the priest’s charisma of office.”<sup>43</sup> As a result, unlike the *tzaddikim* who fall into the aforementioned “supernatural” and “superhuman” categories, the charisma of a neo-Hasidic leader is rooted in their charismatic “naturalness” rather than “supernaturalness.” Although they may still be seen as exceptional Teachers – as will be discussed below – they no longer represent unreachable heights. Therefore, the neo-Hasidic leader may colloquially be called “rebbe,” but is never seen as a *tzaddik*.

In the article “People Forget He’s Human,” Corcoran and Wellman compare the charisma of leaders in New Religious Movements and institutionalized religions and make a distinction

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41. Katie E. Corcoran and James K. Wellman Jr., “‘People Forget He’s Human’: Charismatic Leadership in Institutionalized Religion,” *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 4 (2016), 310.

42. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 241.

43. Stephen Sharot, “Hasidism and the Routinization of Charisma,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19, no. 4 (1980), 328.

between their “backstage” and “onstage” personas. Their study showed that, when leaders are seen as infallible onstage, their followers experience cognitive dissonance when they see them in different contexts or witness them display human flaws, resulting in a desire to keep the idealized leader at a distance. “In New Religious Movements that rely on the leader being seen as divine,” Corcoran and Wellman explain, “if people interact with them a lot they see that they are only human and their divineness goes away.”<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, in movements that consciously present their leaders as imperfect or “just like you” (such as in neo-Hasidism), their backstage and onstage personas actually merge into one identity: a flawed teacher who can be revered inasmuch as they exemplify how to work through the imperfect humanness that we all experience. These leaders are therefore charismatically fallible, rather than infallible. In these communities running into the leader in normal places was a privilege and not cause for cognitive dissonance.<sup>45</sup>

Rabbi Ruth Gan-Kagan illustrates this when she recounts how she ran into Schachter-Shalomi in a coffee shop before a book talk. She was excited to “grab Reb Zalman’s time,” but he was playing tic-tac-toe with his wife and was “just totally impatient.” She said that she “got so used to seeing him spacious all the time. But it was like [he only had] fifteen minutes [...]. [And I could] see that: he’s humanity. He’s fallibility.” When probed about what effect that had on her calling him her rebbe, she enthusiastically insisted, “It helped!”<sup>46</sup> In fact, most neo-Hasidic teachers’ views on traditional conceptions of infallibility were quite strong. Above all, Leader insisted that infallibility is:

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44. Corcoran and Wellman, “People Forget He’s Human,” 311.

45. Corcoran and Wellman, “People Forget He’s Human,” 327.

46. Rabbi Ruth Gan-Kagan, personal interview with the author, June 28, 2021.

such a stupid idea to even begin with. The only people who can say something like that are people who have never had a real personal relationship with the rebbe. [...] You can only hold the infallible thing if that's how you know them. If you know them as figures on your bookshelf. Once you actually get close to the people [...] [the rebbes] have the sides and moments in life when they will be shining, and they will be holding something immensely. And they'll have moments in their lives where they're screwups.<sup>47</sup>

The notion of the idealized teachers can only function if they maintain distance from their constituency. Once the leader and followers are in close contact – which Leader argues is necessary for this type of relationship to be worthwhile – their infallibility fades away as their humanness comes to the forefront. And yet Corcoran and Wellman have shown that this humanness sometimes functions to make the leader's charismatic authority even stronger.

Rabbi Nancy Flam takes Leader's point even further by arguing that infallibility is unhelpful for the spiritual development of the constituency. "It's not a good example to be infallible," she says. "How could I relate to that person? How could that person relate to me?"<sup>48</sup> Here she is reiterating the idea that the spiritual teacher is a fellow traveller who is further along the path. After all, if they were walking a different path altogether, then they could not tell us where the roadblocks and hazards are along our way. This mentality also informs neo-Hasidic interactions with the historical rebbes. By tending to engage with early texts where dynastic succession was not yet established, neo-Hasidim are thus able to draw from the example of rebbes who were still teaching their Hasidim how to become

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47. Rabbi Ebn Leader, personal interview with the author, June 14, 2021.

48. Rabbi Nancy Flam, personal interview with the author, September 1, 2021.

*tzaddikim*.<sup>49</sup> Through this focus, neo-Hasidism can slightly bypass the infallibility model and conceptualize the early rebbes as being extreme examples of those “further along the path.”

For Flam, this manifests in the plausibility that the early rebbes had what she termed “superhuman powers.” This wordplay is meant to convey powers that are exceptional but still fully available to all humans who put in the spiritual work, such as “clairvoyance, or deeply, deeply intuitive skills and gifts. Special powers of a contemplative sort to really concentrate the mind.”<sup>50</sup> This explanation of traditional rebbes’ seemingly supernatural capacities depicts a being who, through spiritual practices that are still available to us today, was able to achieve high levels of consciousness. This understanding enables some in the neo-Hasidic world to hold onto the loaded title of “rebbe” while restructuring it to mean something radically different. This understanding will be explored in depth below, but first, it must be noted that the charismatic fallibility that I have argued is central to neo-Hasidic leadership can also easily lend itself to abuses of power.

### **Dangers of Charismatic Fallibility**

Although charismatic fallibility is an attempt to correct the traditional model, it still centers on charisma and thus maintains the inherent dangers of abuse contained therein. In the history of neo-Hasidism, we need not look any further than to one of its formative teachers for evidence of this: Shlomo Carlebach and his sexual

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49. Additional justifications for turning to earlier generations include the potential for antinomianism to be read into older generations and the lack of clarity over who is the legitimate heir to their legacy.

50. Rabbi Nancy Flam, personal interview with the author, September 1, 2021.



abuse.<sup>51</sup> Despite being slightly outside of our area analysis because of his continued involvement with the Orthodox world, his connection to Schachter-Shalomi justifies including him in our discussion. It is important to note that, uniquely in neo-Hasidism, Carlebach was seen by many followers as being on a “higher” level – there are even mentions of his prayers connecting those around him closer to God<sup>52</sup> – yet he is still understood to be fallible.<sup>53</sup>

Carlebach’s teachings have been termed a “Torah of brokenness”<sup>54</sup> by one of his students, and although it is unclear if this was meant to refer to his history of sexual abuse, it is evident that her

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51. For the first exposé of his abuses, see Sarah Blustain, “Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s Shadow Side,” *Lilith Magazine*, March 9, 1998, <https://www.lilith.org/articles/rabbi-shlomo-carlebachs-shadow-side/>. How to deal with Carlebach’s legacy is a polarizing issue in both the religious and scholarly worlds of neo-Hasidism. For some examples of its scholarly treatment (or lack thereof), see primarily Sarah Imhoff, “Carlebach and the Unheard Stories,” *American Jewish History* 100, no. 4 (2016): 555–560. For further discussion of Carlebach’s legacy see *A New Hasidism: Roots*, 191; Natan Ophir (Offenbacher), “Evaluating Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s Place in Jewish History,” *American Jewish History* 100, no. 4 (2016), 543; Yaakov Ariel, “Can Adam and Eve Reconcile? Gender and Sexuality in a New Jewish Religious Movement,” *Nova Religio* 9, no. 4 (2006): 53–78.

52. Jacobson, *The Spirit of the Ba’al Shem Tov*.

53. Despite acknowledging his fallibility, Carlebach’s followers still elevated him to a level that made confronting him almost impossible. Blustain quotes Sara Shendelman in her exposé as saying that when attempts were made to address his actions while he was alive, people got “cold feet” because they “felt he just had ‘too much light’ to be confronted” (Blustain, “Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s Shadow Side”). From this, we see that Carlebach somewhat straddled the line between traditional *tzaddikism* and the neo-Hasidic model, but a full exploration of this nuance is beyond the scope of this paper.

54. Mimi Feigelson, “Jewish People and Ideas: Conversations with Jewish Thought Leaders,” interviewed by Barak Hullman, *Stitcher*, March 24, 2020: 48:55, <https://www.stitcher.com/show/jewish-people-ideas-conversations-with-jewish-thought-leaders/episode/mimi-feigelson-orthodox-female-rabbi-68260047>.

sentiment can be connected to the discussion which I have labelled as “charismatic fallibility.” She explains that his life was a lesson in how our leaders are not perfectly aligned with Torah,<sup>55</sup> and that this lesson presents a realistic model to follow. But the Carlebach story also shows that relatability by virtue of humanizing can be dangerous. Sarah Imhoff, for instance, sees his abhorrent actions as continuous with his theology. She argues that “consent was irrelevant for the kind of [utopian] love Carlebach preached.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Rachel Werczberger argued that the abuse by another neo-Hasidic leader was “the result of a juxtaposition of three forms of authority: charismatic leadership, the authority of Jewish tradition and morality, and New Age spirituality’s creed which emphasizes the authority of the self.”<sup>57</sup> Whether or not this assertion can be mapped onto Carlebach’s situation is difficult to judge, but it does make clear the potential dangers of charismatic leadership.

Some in the neo-Hasidic world feel that Carlebach should be fully cast aside and relegated to a dark past from which the community is healing. Others just caveat their conversations with mentions of “inappropriateness,” but even those references come after long discussions of his positive effect on the Jewish world and the beautiful Torah he offered. Regardless of how individuals personally feel, Imhoff points out that much scholarship on Carlebach focuses on the oral stories surrounding him, and argues that “we must take all the stories about him seriously, whether they are positive or

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55. Feigelson, “Jewish People and Ideas,” 49:40–50:20.

56. Imhoff, “Carlebach and the Unheard Stories,” 558–559.

57. Rachel Werczberger, “Spirituality, Charisma, and Gender in a Jewish Spiritual Renewal Community in Israel” in *Spirituality against Religion: The Role of Gender and Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). I thank Professor Werczberger for sharing this source with me.

negative.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, if we are going to be talking about neo-Hasidic leadership and the role of charismatic fallibility therein, we must tell all the stories – including how that very fallibility can result in serious harm.

When discussing this potential for abuse by charismatic leaders with Maggid Jhos Singer,<sup>59</sup> he used an example from his own life to show how the love bestowed upon idealized leaders by followers can quickly become a slippery slope. He shared, “I had one occasion of somebody confessing that they were in love with me. That was a breaking point for me.”<sup>60</sup> He explained that he was going through a difficult time in his own life and feared putting himself in a situation where he might act inappropriately. He acknowledged that since leaders are equally flawed individuals who can feel unexceptional, permitting idealized love can lead one to believe that they are exceptional and thus, potentially cause them to act in inappropriate ways. Moreover, Flam notes that:

People want to project on you all the time. So, if someone starts projecting on you – ‘You’re so great. You know so much.’ – it’s my job to cut that down immediately. ‘Nope, a fellow traveller. You want to see my warts? I’m gonna show you them.’<sup>61</sup>

In Singer’s case, he was able to extricate himself from that community and relocate to another congregation where he permitted no rebbe sentiment from his constituents. His ability to distance

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58. Imhoff, “Carlebach and the Unheard Stories,” 560.

59. “Maggid” is the traditional Jewish title for “preacher.” Although this term has fallen out of vogue in modern times, its relevance in Hasidic history means that some neo-Hasidic leaders (mainly in the Renewal world) take on that title as an alternative to the traditional rabbinate.

60. Maggid Jhos Singer, personal interview with the author, August 13, 2021.

61. Rabbi Nancy Flam, personal interview with the author, September 1, 2021.

himself from that community so that he could work on himself and not permit idealization by his new constituency shows the best-case scenario; the example of Carlebach shows the worst.

This possibility for abuse thus represents a primary reason why neo-Hasidism needed to reconceptualize *tzaddikism*.<sup>62</sup> As Green puts it, “we have to avoid that [...] sense that there is a master who takes over your decision-making and your spiritual life.”<sup>63</sup> To create safe religious communities, the centralized rebbe model that permits idealization to such a degree that certain individuals are seen as “too holy” to confront, must be dismantled. And the first step in this restructuring is to conceptualize the teachers not as on a different level but as merely “further along the path” – irrelevant of whether they use the title of “rebbe” or not.

### **Jewish Renewal’s Functional Rebbes**

Most neo-Hasidic leaders who claim the title of “rebbe” are found within the Jewish Renewal Movement. Founded by Schachter-Shalomi, the Jewish Renewal Movement has been described as “a modern and countercultural American ‘post-Hasidic’ Hasidism,”<sup>64</sup> something which represents “the mystical legacy of Hasidism and

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62. The potential for abuse inherent to the rebbe model is acknowledged by Green in his discussion of the early Hasidic movement organized around the Maggid of Mezritch (d.1772). He notes that the unmediated spread of Hasidism and the centrality of its leaders “created a situation ripe for abuse, and the many reports of abuses were surely not only the product of the anti-Hasidic imagination” (Green, “Around the Maggid’s Table,” 121). Green argues that the Maggid did not want his students to “go public” with their ideas, and even goes so far as to assert that the potential abuses of their leadership model were a reason for this hesitance (Green, “Around the Maggid’s Table,” 133).

63. Green’s comments in Schuster, “A Closing Conversation,” 442.

64. Shaul Magid, “Rainbow Hasidism in America: The Maturation of Jewish Renewal,” *The Reconstructionist* 68, no. 2 (2004), 34.

Kabbalah in dialogue with a variety of religious, social, and cultural developments in contemporary American life.”<sup>65</sup> Its origins can be found in Schachter-Shalomi’s unrealized call for a quasi-monastic Jewish order in the sixties and his eventual forming of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal in 1993.<sup>66</sup> Coming out of the traditionally Hasidic world of Chabad-Lubavitch where he had a devotional relationship with its rebbe, Schachter-Shalomi maintained that there is a psychological-spiritual need for some sense of hierarchy in the spiritual path.<sup>67</sup> Without reimagining the rebbe role, he believed that neo-Hasidism would remain an abstract theology and not a lived, “devotional practice.”<sup>68</sup> This belief eventually resulted in his formulation of the “functional rebbe” model.<sup>69</sup>

This terminology of “function” comes from Schachter-Shalomi’s habit of shifting words that are normally construed as nouns into verbs. Gan-Kagan explains that “he coined the term ‘God is a verb,’” and notes that “if God is a verb, and Judaism is a verb, of course rebbe-ing is a verb.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, although having a rebbe

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65. Ariel Evan Mayse, “Renewal and Redemption: Spirituality, Law, and Religious Praxis in the Writings of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi,” *The Journal of Religion* 101, no. 4 (2021), 456.

66. See “Schachter-Shalomi,” in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 230–240.

67. The importance he placed on spiritual hierarchy can be found in his dissertation-turned-monograph. See Zalman Meshullam Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy: A Study of Counseling in Hasidism* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996).

68. Magid, “Rainbow Hasidism in America,” 38.

69. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Netanel Miles-Yepez, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of The Hasidic Masters* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 10–15. For a full exploration of this model see Shaul Magid, “From Sainthood to Selfhood in American Judaism: Artscoll’s New Jewish Hero and Jewish Renewal’s Functional Rebbe,” *Modern Judaism* 32, no. 3 (October 2012): 270–292.

70. Rabbi Ruth Gan-Kagan, personal interview with the author, June 28, 2021.

is essential, rebbe-ing itself is a role that anyone can step into. In his exploration of this theology, Shaul Magid explains that full horizontality would mean no flow of spiritual energy. To adopt a “functional hierarchy” – where the role of rebbe is constantly shifting – thus avoids either extreme (i.e., a firm hierarchy or complete horizontality).<sup>71</sup> This “functionality” can be seen in the fact that Gan-Kagan called Schachter-Shalomi her rebbe, and, moreover, permitted some of her students to call her rebbe as well, but she was not the rebbe for all her students. As she explains, “to some of them I became a rebbe, but that’s because they wanted it.”<sup>72</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi termed this model “organismic,” as it portrays each member of the community as a vital – and yet unique – organ.<sup>73</sup> To justify this radical restructuring of the traditional rebbe model, he writes:

When we are playing – yes playing – Hasid and Rebbe, something good happens. I like the idea of play, and I don’t want you to think of it as ‘mere play.’ By ‘playing,’ we make sure we don’t get stuck in thinking that we always are that Rebbe. We understand that these are temporary roles that we assume for the benefit of that mutuality that we try to create.<sup>74</sup>

The archetypal example of the functional rebbe is the story of Schachter-Shalomi sitting at the head of a table and giving a sermon, then asking everyone to stand up and shift to the left, leaving a new

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71. Magid, “From Sainthood to Selfhood,” 281.

72. Rabbi Ruth Gan-Kagan, personal interview with the author, June 28, 2021.

73. Schachter-Shalomi and Miles-Yeppez, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 13. See also Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*. Levi Cooper pointed out that this concept has roots in traditional Hasidic texts, such as *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* by Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov.

74. Schachter-Shalomi and Miles-Yeppez, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 14.

person to act as rebbe and share Torah.<sup>75</sup> Magid asserts that this shifting authority “maintain[s] the notion of hierarchy without undermining equality.”<sup>76</sup> Whenever one speaks to followers of Schachter-Shalomi about matters of leadership, this story of shifting chairs inevitably comes up as a beautiful example of how willing he was to step down from the head of the table. Leader, however, does not view the story as exemplary. He recounts a conversation where he raised this with Schachter-Shalomi:

Hasidim love telling that story about moving one to the left on the table, and so on [...] and I asked [Schachter-Shalomi], “You know, your [community] like[s] telling this story [and] it sounds like bullshit to me” [...]. You can’t sit in a chair and become a rebbe. It doesn’t work that way. It’s like me singing the lead role in an opera at the Met; it’s a role. It’s true; it’s a role. But you have to fill that role. You have to spend a lifetime of practice, of work, of developing, of bringing yourself to it. I can’t go in, stand on stage, and sing that role. The confusion between saying “It’s a role” and saying “Oh, OK, so I’m just gonna go in and do it” is absurd. It is a totally absurd thing. [...] So Zalman said [...] “Of course, you’re right. But I felt at that point people needed the kind of empowerment to know that they could.”<sup>77</sup>

This window into Schachter-Shalomi’s rationale complicates the feasibility of a functional rebbe-hood. It might have been possible for Schachter-Shalomi himself to step in and out of the role because he was practicing it all his life, but for just anyone to pick up one day and sit at the head of the table would be unrealistic. Additionally, although they might believe that their constituents also have this capacity, the lived reality of many Renewal communities is such that

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75. Magid, “From Sainthood to Selfhood,” 281.

76. Magid, “From Sainthood to Selfhood,” 283.

77. Rabbi Ebn Leader, personal interview with the author, June 14, 2021.

there is usually one communal leader at the front of the room. And as different as these functional rebbes are from Hasidic *tzaddikim*, it is important to note that this leader is often still willing to give out blessings to their communities.

Lastly, it is significant to note that charismatic leadership extends beyond traditional gender boundaries in Jewish Renewal.<sup>78</sup> Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb's ordination by Schachter-Shalomi in 1980 was a huge turning point in legitimizing women's leadership in neo-Hasidism and Judaism more broadly.<sup>79</sup> The weight of this cannot be understated and represents the importance placed on egalitarianism in neo-Hasidism. Thus, we find statements from teachers like Rabbi David Wolfe-Blank that Jewish Renewal is "Hasidism meets Feminism."<sup>80</sup> Additionally, the movement left space for its constituency to develop what Chava Weissler terms a "gender-differentiated" leadership model, called *Eshet Hazon* (Woman of Vision), which was particularly important when non-male rabbinic ordination was still uncommon.<sup>81</sup> Schachter-Shalomi encouraged "women rabbis in the Renewal movement to cultivate their distinctive leadership styles rather than imitating traditional male models."<sup>82</sup> Although gender in neo-Hasidic leadership merits much more exploration than a mere paragraph, it is unfortunately beyond

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78. Chava Weisler, "'Women of Vision' in the Jewish Renewal Movement: The Eshet Hazon ['Woman of Vision'] Ceremony," *Jewish Culture and History* 8, no. 3 (2006), 65.

79. To learn more about Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb's rabbinate and extensive social justice work, see <http://www.rabbilynngottlieb.com/>.

80. Chava Weissler, "Folklore and History," *American Jewish History* 98, no. 1 (2014), 9.

81. Weissler, "Women of Vision," 63.

82. Reena Sigman Friedman, "Women in Jewish Renewal," in *The Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Reuther (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 803.



the scope of this paper. Regardless of their titles, Jewish Renewal teachers are often central charismatic leaders at the front of the room, which is different from the other neo-Hasidism we are exploring.

### Havurah-Inspired “Teachers”

The above model of functional rebbes differs very much from the other primary stream of neo-Hasidic leadership developed by leaders of the Havurah<sup>83</sup> movement, most notably Green.<sup>84</sup> Although not everyone in these communities was overtly neo-Hasidic – and some were specifically not – Hasidism was drawn upon heavily by many of the founders of the first Havurah, called Havurat Shalom. Therefore, in this article, I have chosen the phrasing “Havurah-inspired” to describe the leaders that fall into this second camp, rather than just “leaders of the Havurah movement.” Created in 1968 in Somerville, Massachusetts, by a few of Schachter-Shalomi’s younger colleagues,<sup>85</sup> Havurat Shalom was originally designed as a countercultural rabbinical school that offered Vietnam War draft deferrals to its students.<sup>86</sup> This intention to ordain rabbis quickly melted away to be replaced by a new form of community that was

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83. A “Havurah” is a small fellowship of Jews who gather to pray, learn, and/or do Jewish rituals together. In the late sixties, the Havurah Movement was founded to create such groups that were countercultural alternatives to the suburban synagogue. To learn more broadly about the Havurah Movement see Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

84. To learn more about Green and his work as a neo-Hasidic pioneer, see Ariel Mayse, “Arthur Green: An Intellectual Portrait,” in *Arthur Green: Hasidism for Tomorrow*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 1–52.

85. These colleagues were Arthur and Kathy Green. Schachter-Shalomi was also a guest teacher for the first year of Havurat Shalom’s existence.

86. Holtz, “Jewish Counterculture Oral History,” 17.

somewhere between a traditional “religious fellowship”<sup>87</sup> and “a Jewish spiritual cooperative.”<sup>88</sup> In 1972 Green wrote:

We know that each of us must find his own spiritual path and we would seek in the Havurah the context, knowledge, and atmosphere that would enrich this search for each of us. It is hoped that we will grow in the ability to share elements of this search with one another, and that we will all be concerned with one another's spiritual and personal growth.<sup>89</sup>

In this short explanation, we see a joining together of American liberalism's emphasis on individuality with the traditional Hasidic emphasis on communal spirituality. The result of this mixture is an uplifting of personal religious agency within the context of communal obligation and a complete lack of “rebbe” language to refer to themselves or their teachers.

One rationale for this can be found in what Green designates “the legitimacy of religious personalism”<sup>90</sup> and a subsequent distrust of submitting one's agency to a charismatic leader. Thus, there was never a fixed leadership, and all decisions “took place in egalitarian, nonhierarchical settings.”<sup>91</sup> Reflecting on its formation in a recent interview, Green said that despite founding it, he tried to be

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87. Arthur Green, “Havurat Shalom: A Proposal,” in *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship in Theory and in Practice*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York: Ktav Publishing House Inc, 1972), 149.

88. Judy Petsonk, *Taking Judaism Personally: Creating a Meaningful Spiritual Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 8.

89. Green, “Havurat Shalom: A Proposal,” 150.

90. Green, “Havurat Shalom: A Proposal,” 150.

91. Prell, *Prayer and Community*, 94.

“just another voice in the community” and empower all the members to co-create the space.<sup>92</sup>

Green has often discussed why he avoided rebbe terminology.<sup>93</sup> Noting that he “had two of the greatest candidates in the Western world to be [his] rebbe: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Zalman Schachter,”<sup>94</sup> he explains that he was not willing to submit his will to them, and thus did not deem it fair or possible to ask others to submit their will to him. He notes that:

I was always worried about disillusioning somebody and hurting them. That they would wind up seeing that I was not who they thought I was, and they would be disappointed and hurt. I didn’t want to do that to anybody. So, I just couldn’t let myself do it.<sup>95</sup>

The title that most people in Green’s lineage were comfortable with was “Teacher,” in which the uppercase “T” is intentional to show the way in which this can still be a revered role, but understood in a less cosmologically-significant manner than “rebbe.”<sup>96</sup>

Although Green doubled down that he “will not send you kugel” (as in the traditional Hasidic practice of *shirayim*),<sup>97</sup> he conceded that “I feel I’m a little in the business of *rebistve* [being a

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92. Penn Libraries, “Art Green Interview,” July 16, 2019, YouTube video, 3:24:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsD-2rdFR7s>, 2:54:14.

93. For one such example, see his comments in Schuster, “A Closing Conversation,” 442.

94. Rabbi Arthur Green, personal interview with the author, June 8, 2021.

95. Rabbi Arthur Green, personal interview with the author, June 8, 2021.

96. None of my interviewees expressed this grammatical differentiation (the uppercase “T”) to describe themselves. It is merely meant to convey their sentiments succinctly. Of course, most of these leaders use their ordination title, whether that be “rabbi,” “maggid,” etc.

97. *Shirayim* is a practice wherein Hasidim receive leftover food from the rebbe’s table. For a brief theological explanation of this practice, see *Hasidism: A New History*, 195.

rebbe], though I haven't admitted it to myself. I'm less afraid of it than I used to be."<sup>98</sup> He explained that as he got older and the age gap between him and his students grew, the peer relationship he used to aspire to was no longer possible. When asked directly about people publicly calling him their "Teacher," he said, "I'm very happy to have them say, 'I'm a student of Art Green.' I have no hesitation about that. Now if they said, 'Art Green is my rebbe,' I might flinch a little bit, but at this point not too terribly anymore."<sup>99</sup> From this quote, it is possible to see that the binary of using or avoiding rebbe language between the Renewal and Havurah camps is more nuanced than the clear-cut divide we have drawn above.

And yet their differences are still apparent, especially when entering a religious service. As Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels point out:

If you look at a traditional Jewish service and you look at a Renewal service: Renewal services are much more held and led. You're being told what to do at any moment. There's the charismatic leader who's taking you along, right? And Havurah services are [...] in a certain sense more traditional, in that there's more space. But also, they may do things like there's not only one leader for that service; there's like five different people or each person is doing a piece.<sup>100</sup>

These differences are ultimately manifestations of the two movement's divergent theologies around leadership.

The extent of this deviation was highlighted by Leader when he shared that, "Zalman [Schachter-Shalomi] worked with *ruach*

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98. Rabbi Arthur Green, personal interview with the author, June 8, 2021.

99. Rabbi Arthur Green, personal interview with the author, June 8, 2021.

100. Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels, personal interview with the author, August 30, 2021.

*hakodesh* [the holy spirit]. Art [Green] would never do that.”<sup>101</sup> This is to say that Schachter-Shalomi opened himself to the possibility that the divine spoke actively through him, and if a stranger came to him for advice “he would trust *ruach hakodesh* to give [them] an answer.”<sup>102</sup> Leader asserts that those in Green’s lineage would never allow themselves to do that. Although he seemed to agree with the functional rebbe idea that anyone could theoretically have this capacity, he asserted that its proper use required extensive training that was not a worthwhile investment.<sup>103</sup> For the Havurah-inspired lineage, teachers would rather empower their students to answer their own questions than trust that *ruach hakodesh* will bring it to them. This is why Flam described her only true rebbe as being wisdom itself, and explained that her job is not to answer students’ questions, but to “help people discover the wisdom that’s running through them.” She beautifully deemed this work as “much more midwife than it is guru.”<sup>104</sup>

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101. Rabbi Ebn Leader, personal interview with the author, June 14, 2021. It is worth noting here that in an early meeting with Reverend Howard Thurman, Schachter-Shalomi (who was still a good Lubavitcher Hasid at the time) was expressing reservations about being in non-Jewish spaces and Thurman asked him “don’t you trust the *ruach hakodesh*?” (Daniel Epstein, “Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi,” *Portraits in Faith*, July 22, 2021, <https://portraitsinfaith.org/reb-zalman-schachter-shalomi/>). This experience was a shifting point in Schachter-Shalomi’s understanding of other religions, and he eventually referred to Thurman as one of his rebbes.

102. Rabbi Ebn Leader, personal interview with the author, June 14, 2021. It must be noted that the teacher did not hold a monopoly over access to *ruach hakodesh*, but just might be the most practiced at channeling it.

103. Rabbi Ebn Leader, personal interview with the author, June 14, 2021.

104. Rabbi Nancy Flam, personal interview with the author, September 1, 2021.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, restructured leadership models are a primary avenue through which North American neo-Hasidism differentiated itself from traditional Hasidism. This is because the central tenet of *tzaddikism* – namely, the uplifting of the leader to some level of divine intermediary – is precisely what many countercultural neo-Hasidim have had issues with. Instead, they conceptualize leaders as “fellow travellers along the path,” which makes them more relatable by virtue of their imperfectness. Thus, their charisma is based on their fallibility, rather than traditional *tzaddikism*’s infallibility. And yet, this correction does not automatically eliminate potential abuses of power, a possibility that still needs to be actively combatted.

While the Jewish Renewal movement retains a claiming of “rebbe” language – albeit only inasmuch as it is “functional” – the Havurah-inspired lineage rejects that title. Although there is so much more about neo-Hasidic leadership that remains in need of scholarly exploration – such as the place of gender, sexuality, and further updates since Schachter-Shalomi and Green’s models – these are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper.

And so, with all this in mind, we must ask: how can these leadership models help in the production of healthy neo-Hasidic communities today? Ultimately, a religious landscape that contains perfected teachers and imperfect followers is one that remains uncomfortable for this strand of neo-Hasidism. Although there may still be a place for the historical figures as exemplary archetypes, the lived community requires a more nuanced and relatable vision of leadership. Therefore, neo-Hasidism’s ability to combine traditional religious influence with contemporary cultural disposition can

provide an example for overcoming this obstacle, one that many religious traditions today face.

One potential avenue forward is avoiding communities built around one central teacher. As Flam shared, “we used to joke that our tagline should be ‘friends don’t let friends teach alone.’”<sup>105</sup> By maintaining a few teachers at the front of the room, the possibility of making one into the idealized rebbe decreases, since it is immediately countered by the presence of another. “It’s always more about the teaching than the teacher,” she continued. “We don’t want it to be about us ... we want wisdom to lead.”<sup>106</sup> This emphasis on teaching over teacher is the “fellow traveller” model par excellence and presents a path forward for the neo-Hasidic future.

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105. Rabbi Nancy Flam, personal interview with the author, September 1, 2021. Here she is referring to her work with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

106. Rabbi Nancy Flam, personal interview with the author, September 1, 2021.

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