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## Three Ethical Mystics

*The Poetics of Ethics in the Spiritual  
Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,  
Abraham Joshua Heschel, and  
Abraham Isaac Kook*

### ABSTRACT

This article posits, based upon a comparative reading of various writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Abraham Isaac Kook, that not only does ethics hold an important place in the spiritual life of these mystically oriented, ethically valenced writers, but that for them ethics and spirituality are inextricably intertwined. For these writers, ethics is a sine qua non for spirituality, and spirituality is intimately interlaced with, and lends support to, the ethical life. Concomitantly, this article postulates that in advancing this claim about ethics, Emerson, Heschel, and Kook wrote with a studied lyrical, poetic prose—a poetics of ethics—in order to impress upon their readers the importance, and the beauty, of the ethical life.

### KEYWORDS

*Ralph Waldo  
Emerson, Abraham  
Joshua Heschel,  
Abraham Isaac Kook*

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## INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Abraham Isaac Kook were three mystically oriented writers who each placed the strongest possible emphasis upon ethics in their spiritual writings.<sup>1</sup> Through the deployment of deftly chosen words, carefully constructed metaphors and similes, lyrical language, and linguistic eloquence, each managed to illustrate, in his own unique ways, that not only are the ethical and the spiritual equipollent, but that the spiritual is inaccessible *without* the ethical. That their spiritual writings are works of spiritual genius are beyond question; but are their writings also works of ethical genius? How do we know when a work of literature has transcended the realm of the merely good and risen to the stratosphere of the classically great? For Harold Bloom, the standard by which we determine whether a work of literature is a work of “genius” is whether the work has “contributed to the consciousness of [its] readers”:

The question we need to put to any writer must be: does she or he augment our consciousness, and how is it done? I find this a rough but effectual test: however I have been entertained, has my awareness been intensified, my consciousness widened and clarified? If not, then I have encountered talent, not genius. What is best and oldest in myself has not been activated.<sup>2</sup>

By these criteria, the spiritual writings of Emerson, Heschel, and Rav Kook are quintessential works of ethical genius: they expand our ethical consciousness to encompass all those around us—all human beings and even, in Rav Kook’s ethical universe, animals as well<sup>3</sup>—intensify our awareness of the importance of ethics in the spiritual life, endow us with a stereoscopic vision of a religious life in which ethics and spirituality are inseparably synthesized, and inspire us to sculpt our own characters (*pace* George Eliot’s “character is not cut in marble—it is not something solid and unalterable”<sup>4</sup>) until we reach our best ethical and spiritual selves.<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, the choice to study these three writers together for the purposes of a comparative ethical and literary analysis may be a bit surprising; after all, each writer lived in a different era, wrote for a different audience, and served a different religious constituency. Ralph Waldo Emerson, born in Boston in 1803, was educated in elite New England

schools, culminating in a stint at the Harvard Divinity School, where he was being groomed to become a Unitarian minister, like his father and several generations of men in his family before him. Emerson, however, after receiving his ordination in 1829, decided to break from this traditional religious career path and went on to become a highly influential writer whose essays and criticism defined the emerging contours of the American literary tradition<sup>6</sup> and became one of the most important voices in American intellectual life. Emerson, though, while becoming one of the dominant voices in nineteenth century American letters—he had a hand in elevating writers such as Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau to prominence—never relinquished his interest in American religion, and in matters of faith in general, topics he returned to again and again throughout his lengthy literary career, which ended with his death in 1882.

The near contemporaries Abraham Isaac Kook and Abraham Joshua Heschel share more chronological, ideological, and theological affinities with each other than does either with Emerson, but even betwixt Kook and Heschel several significant differences are readily apparent. Both Kook and Heschel were born and raised in eastern Europe in the early twentieth century—and both were born into, and raised in, Hasidic families. Kook was born in Latvia in 1865, and Heschel in Warsaw in 1907. Both were expected to become the scions of their families and the future leaders of their respective communities; they were recognized early in their lives as prodigies and given educational opportunities commensurate with their scholastic talents. Kook, educated in the storied yeshivot of Volozhin, did indeed eventually become a Hasidic “rebbe” (communal leader), though not necessarily one of the traditional sort: unlike most other Hasidic leaders, Kook became enthused with the idea of the religious significance of the Jewish people’s return to the state of Israel and became one of the founders of religious Zionism. Instead of staying in Europe, Kook traveled to Palestine in 1904 and eventually became the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of British Palestine in 1921. Like Emerson, instead of devoting the bulk of his career to pastoring a religious flock, Kook—while still engaging in a certain amount of traditional pastoral activity—took to the pen, writing prolifically and mellifluously, in a highly literate, Kabbalistically allusive,<sup>7</sup> and intellectual sophisticated Hebrew, on a variety of ethical, mystical, and theological topics. At his death in 1935, he left a formidable legacy as the rabbi and writer who shaped the burgeoning movement of

religious Zionism; as a Hasidic leader who showed that Hasidic thought need not remain enclosed within the borders of Hasidism; and as a mystic and thinker who challenged other traditionalist Jews to view secular, non-traditionalist Jews as their fellow human beings who are created in the image of God no less than are Orthodox Jews.

Heschel, though also educated in Eastern European yeshivot, veered off the traditionalist path even more sharply than did Kook. After earning a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Berlin, Heschel escaped Nazi-occupied Europe and arrived in the United States in 1940, where he became a professor of Jewish studies, first at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and then eventually at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, which became his home for the duration of his career. Like Kook—yet to an even greater extent—Heschel saw the potential of teaching Hasidic and mystical thought to non-Hasidic audiences, and devoted his scholarly efforts to communicating the beauty, profundity, and life-enriching spirituality of mystical and Hasidic teachings to the American Jewish public. As a teacher, activist, and writer whose poetic, aphoristic essays and books were more accessible to the Jewish laity than were Kook's slightly more complex writings, Heschel transcended denominational (and at times even confessional) boundaries more so than did Kook; while Kook's voice never extended too far beyond the confines of the Orthodox community (indeed, even today, his primary readers tend to be Modern Orthodox), Heschel—a traditionally observant rabbi who, though never identifying with the Conservative movement as such, taught in a Conservative seminary, appeared to identify with many of the values of the early Conservative movement, and who was later claimed by the movement—had (and still has) a readership among Reform, Reconstructionist, and Modern Orthodox Jews. And, like his literary forebear Emerson—who was, and continues, to be read by Catholics as well as Protestants, by Jews as well as Christians, by secularists as well as by religionists—Heschel's influence extended to non-Jews in America as well, in part due to his active and outspoken role in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and in part due to the force and eloquence of his religious writings.

In spite of their differences, a comparative ethical and literary analysis of these three thinkers would be fruitful for students and teachers of ethics and literature by dint of several key commonalities they share: each thinker, while draped in the cloth of conservative tradition, was surprisingly progressive,

at times even radical;<sup>8</sup> each thinker's writings are marked by a dialectical struggle between tradition and modernity; each commanded the texts of their respective religious traditions and often deployed them for non-conservative ends; each was educated in what, for their respective faith communities, were highly traditional methods and in very traditional settings but each went on to have innovative, groundbreaking careers as theological free-thinkers and as writers whose audiences ultimately reached far beyond their original communities;<sup>9</sup> each writer wrote in a florid, distinctive, and—especially in the case of Emerson and Heschel—aphoristic literary style; and the poetic language itself of each thinker's writings—especially in the case of Heschel and Kook—are not mere stylistic flourishes, but rather are in the service of spirituality and ethics: the poetic language, coming from minds of persons whose cores are essentially spiritual, is carefully constructed and calibrated to evoke spiritual awareness and ethical concern. Each writer, as this article illustrates, was highly concerned with ethics, inwardness, and right action—and not in spite of their mystical orientations, but in many ways because of it. And, perhaps most significantly, because each thinker was what Michel Foucault would term a “discourse founder”—these thinkers decisively shaped the discourse on ethics, theology, and spirituality within their respective faith communities<sup>10</sup>—a comparative ethical and literary study of these three thinkers promises to yield salubrious fruits for the fields of ethics and literature.<sup>11</sup> This article endeavors to make a contribution toward such a cross-cultural comparative study in its study of the relationship between literary creativity and ethical illumination as reflected in the spiritual writings of Emerson, Heschel, and Kook.<sup>12</sup>

### THE SPIRITUAL WRITINGS OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Ethics held a preeminent place in the religious thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson; his essay “The Sovereignty of Ethics”<sup>13</sup>—both its content as well as its emblematic title—uncontestably attests to this fact,<sup>14</sup> as does his ardent activism on behalf of the cause of abolitionism.<sup>15</sup> A perusal of Emerson's other spiritual writings significantly buttresses this postulate.

Emerson's spiritual writings clearly demonstrate his belief that ethics is not some ancillary component of the spiritual life; it is the fundament of the spiritual life without which spirituality could not stand.<sup>16</sup> As Emerson writes in his essay *Nature*, “The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference.”<sup>17</sup> And as he writes in *Essential Principles of*

*Religion*, “[I]t is by no means necessary that I should live, but it is by all means necessary that I should act rightly.”<sup>18</sup> According to Emerson, ethics and morality<sup>19</sup> are inseparable from the natural world and should be recognized as such; in order to help us arrive at this state of awareness, Emerson writes about right action in environmental terms, painting morality with colors and tones from the natural and animal world: “It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process. All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel?” In Emerson’s evocation of the spirituality of the ethical life, morality and ethical behavior are part and parcel of nature to such extent that, if we were truly sensitive to our surroundings, we could learn ethics from a farm—or, as the Talmud would have it, from farm *animals*: “Rabbi Yochanan states: ‘had the Torah not been given, we would have learned modesty from the cat, not to commit theft from the ant . . . and manners [*derekh erets*] from the rooster.’”<sup>20</sup> In his essay “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” Emerson was even more explicit about his conviction that humans can learn ethics from animals, writing,

Experiment shows that the bird and the dog reason as the hunter does, that all the animals show the same good sense in their humble walk that the man who is their enemy or friend does; and if it be in smaller measure, yet it is not diminished, as his often is, by freak and folly. St.-Pierre says of the animals that a moral sentiment seems to have determined their physical organization.<sup>21</sup>

Emerson, unwittingly following in the ethico-literary footsteps of the Talmud, employs a literary sleight of hand here that is as defamiliarizing as it is effective, having us take as our ethical paragons not saints or monks but dogs and cats. It is at once characteristic of Emerson—after all, his prose is pervaded with ecological and environmental metaphors, similes, and turns of phrases which bespeak his profound love of nature—and potentially unsettling for us readers, instructed as we are by the elder American ethical statesman par excellence to take our ethical cues not from our elders but from our pets.

If religion fails to move us, the fault is not in its lack of spirituality, Emerson believes, but in its lack of attention to morality. “The progress or religion,” Emerson asserted—sermonically, and in a “prophetic” literary modality that Heschel would later adopt—“is steadily to its identity with

morals.”<sup>22</sup> In our era, writes Emerson, “when the old faiths which comforted nations . . . seem to have spent their force,” he no longer finds “the religions of men at this moment very creditable” because

[t]he fatal trait is the divorce between religion and morality. Here are know-nothing religions, or churches that proscribe intellect . . . slave-holding and slave-trading religions; and, even in the decent populations, idolatries wherein the whiteness of the ritual covers scarlet indulgence.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage that evokes the whited sepulchre of the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 23:7), Emerson interestingly characterizes immoral religions as “know-nothing[s],” a term that has become somewhat of a byword for anti-intellectualism after having famously been the moniker of the populist movement in mid- nineteenth century American politics. It is a fascinating and significant linguistic move, indicating that Emerson—also a figure ordinarily associated with a more intellectual brand of religion—believed that true “know-nothingness” was moral, not intellectual; that ethical malfeasance, rather than philosophical insufficiencies, are what truly merits rhetorical opprobrium. For Emerson, the intellectual was not superior to the ethical; *au contraire*, the ethical is superior, as he writes in “The Sovereignty of Ethics”—if anything, it is the intellectual that can elevate itself by uniting with the ethical: “The moral is the measure of health.”<sup>24</sup>

Neither is the literary distinct from, or superior to, the ethical; for Emerson an ethical sensibility can only but improve the literary quality of a work of writing: “The finer the sense of justice, the better [the] poet.”<sup>25</sup>

Emerson goes one step further; in addition to utilizing his unparalleled literary abilities to limn immoral action as fundamentally irreligious, Emerson makes the case for the spirituality of ethics by adorning morality with terms normally reserved for mystical experiences and encounters with the holy. After making reference to Christ’s “genius as a moral teacher,” Emerson writes of the “*sublimity* of the moral laws.”<sup>26</sup> In Emerson’s ethos, the ethical life is not one comprised of prosaic, rote actions of propriety whose effects upon the performer are no different than what one feels when completing an ordinary task at the office; the ethical life, rather, is one comprised of prosaic, proper conduct whose effects upon the performer are no different than what one feels when contemplating the unspoiled, mist-covered mountains of New Zealand, meditating at the foot of Iceland’s



Snæfellsjökfull glacier, or gazing at the Hubble Space Telescope's latest series of photographs of the Ultra Deep Field of galaxies—the ethical life, no less than the spiritual, mystical, nature-communing life, yields sublimity. And it is through his writing's uniquely simple, sweet-sounding, epigrammatic (“[m]en are respectable only as they respect”<sup>27</sup>) literary style that Emerson makes his case that spiritual transcendence is achieved through ethical excellence.

#### **ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, *MAN IS NOT ALONE***

The twentieth-century sage who, perhaps more so than any other writer, can be characterized as “the Jewish Emerson”<sup>28</sup>—Abraham Joshua Heschel, who took Emerson's lyrical, aphoristic, prophetic style of writing<sup>29</sup> to its logical literary conclusion—likewise, in his spiritual writings, reveals a robust belief that ethics lies at the heart of the spiritual life. Heschel's ethical activism is well-known and has been well-documented;<sup>30</sup> according to Arthur Green, Heschel was instrumental in expanding the Jewish mystical tradition to encompass “the ethical commandments regulating behavior between human beings”:

When I injure a fellow human being, Heschel wrote, I injure God. Similarly, the good deeds performed by human beings give strength to God. Green explains that “the urgency and cosmic vitality the Kabbalists associated with religious action was re-assimilated [by Heschel] to the religion of the Biblical prophets and the absolute demands they made for justice, care for the needy, and compassion for a God who ultimately depends upon man to do His bidding.”<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, it should be remembered—for, unfortunately, it is often not—that Heschel was Professor of Mysticism and Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary for many years, a fact which in itself is revelatory of the way in which, for Heschel, mysticism and ethics are part of the same spiritual fabric, and strands of both are needed if one wishes to weave a wholesome, genuine religious life.

Ethics is one of the central concerns of *Man Is Not Alone* as well, a work in which Heschel returns to one of his perennial ethico-religious literary undertakings—advocating that biblical (specifically, prophetic) ethics should form the basis of our contemporary *modus vivendi*:

Perhaps the most fundamental statement of ethics is contained in the words of the last prophet of Israel: “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God made us? Then why do we break faith with one another, every man with his fellow, by dishonouring our time-honoured troth [sic]?” (Malachi 2:10). The ultimate principle of ethics is not an imperative but an ontological fact. While it is true that what distinguishes a moral attitude is the consciousness of obligation to do it, yet an act is not good because we feel obliged to do it; it is rather that we feel obliged to do it because it is good.<sup>32</sup>

Discussing ethics—and doing so with trademark Heschelian literary flourishes (such as the attempt to persuade through rhetorically pleasing aphorisms, as seen at the end of this quotation)—in the middle of the work that some regard (along with *God in Search of Man*) as Heschel’s theological magnum opus is revelatory,<sup>33</sup> it is indicative of just how essential ethics is within Heschel’s spiritual weltanschauung. As Heschel goes on to write in *Man Is Not Alone*, in the context of discussing supremely spiritual concepts such as the “Supreme Being” and his signature spiritual concern, “the ineffable,” Heschel discusses a concern that, though not necessarily always construed as a “spiritual” concern, by every right should be: ethics. “If there is morality in us,” writes Heschel, “it must eminently be in God. If we possess the vision of justice, it must eminently be in God.”<sup>34</sup> It may not be the most verbally felicitous line Heschel has ever written—it is uncomfortably syllogistic—but it nonetheless reveals Heschel’s desire to persuade more through the force of his rhetoric and linguistic gifts than through meticulously reasoned, discursive philosophical argumentation.

According to Heschel, spirituality (symbolized by God) is intertwined with morality: “The statement: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour [sic] as thyself,’ concludes with the words: ‘I am the Lord.’”<sup>35</sup> The fact that appended to the greatest ethical principle in the Jewish tradition<sup>36</sup> is an acknowledgment of the Ineffable Being demonstrates in the clearest possible terms that the source of spirituality (and goal toward which mystics strive)—God, cares most not about the mystical pursuit of Him<sup>37</sup> but about the ethical pursuit of loving him and her, of “not doing to one’s neighbor what one does not want done to oneself.”<sup>38</sup> As Shai Held observes, Heschel’s writing often discloses “the intertwining of profound theocentrism with a radical ethical passion.”<sup>39</sup>

While the immoral Greek gods, writes Heschel, care about sensual pursuits, the moral Jewish God cares primarily about ethics:

Zeus is passionately interested in pretty female deities and becomes inflamed with rage against those who incite his jealousy. The God of Israel is passionately interested in widows and orphans.<sup>40</sup>

The implication from this suggestive, invidious (from a pagan perspective) comparison is unambiguous: all those who worship the God of Israel, and who strive to imitate Him (per the biblical command “and you shall walk in His ways” [Deut. 5:33, 30:16]), should engage not primarily in solitary meditation or in isolated intellection but in the simple, fundamental ethical acts “upon which the world is founded.”<sup>41</sup> Much as “Heschel’s critique of theological modernity is at once *ethical and theological (the two, for him, are inextricably interwoven)*,”<sup>42</sup> Heschel’s critique of Greek polytheism is perhaps even more ethical than it is theological: Heschel does not incriminate Greek polytheism from a philosophical, theological perspective, but from a moral, ethical one—the problem of Greek polytheism, according to Heschel, it would seem, is that (perhaps somewhat echoing Plato’s remonstrance in *The Republic* that the gods that humans create should be moral so that citizens of the polis will have good role models—for what are the gods if not the ultimate role models?—to emulate) its gods do not behave ethically. Monotheism is superior, it would seem, for Heschel not only (and perhaps even not primarily) on account of its possessing a rationally superior theology but on account of its possessing an ethically superior God.

#### ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK

The Orthodox spiritual literature writer who exalts ethics to a greater extent than perhaps any sage save Rabbi Israel Salanter is Abraham Isaac Kook (henceforth “Rav Kook”). Rav Kook, in addition to believing that “ethics stands at the center of Judaism,”<sup>43</sup> also maintained that synthesis of spirit and ethics is “of the essence of tradition.”<sup>44</sup> Ethics was a lifelong literary concern for Rav Kook; in his early-career writings, he wrote an essay on ethics<sup>45</sup> and critiqued Christian doctrine for its theology that proper beliefs without ethical behavior can make for salvation.<sup>46</sup>

In his prodigious, lifelong literary endeavors, Rav Kook continuously returned to the subject of ethics. In his notebooks, he wrote about the

importance of studying Mussar,<sup>47</sup> and in his 1910 essay “Dewdrops of Light,” he wrote that—as Yehudah Mirsky puts it—“the mitzvot of today are a means to the higher ethics of the future, which will reach beyond Judaism toward all humanity and even to the animal and natural worlds.”<sup>48</sup> At the same time, Rav Kook urged those around them to found new journals and increase their literary efforts,<sup>49</sup> signifying the very concrete way in which, for Rav Kook, ethics was the handmaiden of spiritual writing: for Rav Kook, the expansion of spiritual writing was at once the prerequisite as well as the catalyst for the expansion of his ethical program.

In his spiritual writings, Rav Kook places ethics on an even higher celestial realm than even Heschel appears to do, describing ethical behavior with words and terms typically reserved for prophetic, even mystical experiences: “When the longing to be good to all is intensified in a person, then he knows that an *illumination from the higher realm* has reached him.”<sup>50</sup> For Rav Kook, the ethical life resides on the same supernal plane as the mystical life—ethical behavior, no less than mystical experiences, require (or at least significantly benefit from) “illumination from the higher realm.”

Rav Kook not only ascribes mystical terms to ethical behavior;<sup>51</sup> in phrases like “*genius of compassion*,”<sup>52</sup> he, like Emerson before him—whose writings Harold Bloom has characterized as evocative of “the mysticism of genius”<sup>53</sup>—assigns intellectual superlatives to ethical character traits as well. By yoking an intellectual honorific such as “genius” to the ethical term “compassion,” Rav Kook, following—wittingly or not—Emerson’s linguistic lead, lends intellectual weight to ethics by discussing it in the kinds of laudatory terms normally reserved for cerebral excellence, thereby reminding us that ethical excellence is just as—if not more so—worthy of recognition as scholarly brilliance.

But the bulk of Rav Kook’s literary labors on this front appear to have been guided by an effort to lend spiritual and mystical weight to ethics by discussing it in the kinds of terms normally reserved for spiritual endeavors and mystical pursuits. The supreme importance he places in his religious writings on universal love for all human beings is illustrative, Ben Zion Bokser notes, of the way in which “[m]orality for Rabbi Kook is not an autonomous order of values, but is integrally related to the larger world of religion. . . . The moral life expresses the highest response to God’s existence.”<sup>54</sup> Rav Kook further emphasizes the interconnection between mystical and ethical activism in his letters to Ridbaz Wilovksy, wherein he writes that Jewish mystics are motivated

to engage in outreach because they are “filled with the light of love of the Torah of love”.<sup>55</sup> it is the love of Torah—the love of and the desire to cleave closer to God—that impels mystics to deepen their love of their fellow human beings, and it is their love of their fellow human beings that moves them to cleave closer to God.

Like his near contemporary Heschel, for whom the interstructuring of ethics with spirituality was axiomatic, Rav Kook often emphasized the way in which “the most extreme demands of ethically sensitive spirits” and the (penitential) demands of “the holy spirit” “constitute an inseparable whole.”<sup>56</sup> It may not be so significant for non-spiritual specialists to see Rav Kook conceptually link ethics with penitence, but for those at least cursorily familiar with mystical literature on the concept of repentance—or for those who simply read further in Rav Kook’s “The Lights of Penitence”—one immediately becomes aware that this is an extraordinary ethico-literary knight’s move, for while ethical behavior may not normally be regarded as something which, for mystics, upholds the universe, repentance is regarding thusly. Repentance, in more “normative” (that is, rationalistic) Jewish thought, is the process through which a person attains atonement for sins.<sup>57</sup> But repentance in Rav Kook’s thought (basing himself on long-established strands of mystical Jewish thought) is much more than mere atonement—it is “the reason for the foundation of the world.”<sup>58</sup> Penitence, according to Rav Kook, is a virtually omnipotent spiritual force that possesses the power to “restore[] the world and life to their original character;”<sup>59</sup> and its “hidden life-force” enables the penitent to overcome “every factor that limits and weakens existence.”<sup>60</sup> Repentance, writes Rav Kook, is “the renewal of life,”<sup>61</sup> and is something so necessary for the world’s continued existence that it “was planned before the creation of the world.”<sup>62</sup> Conceptually—and mystically—linking ethics with penitence strongly suggests that for Rav Kook, ethics should be regarded as part of the foundation of the spiritual world order as well.

Lest we think that this conceptual and spiritual link between ethics and penitence is a weak, easily frayed bond, Rav Kook dilates upon it in his writings, assuring us that the connection is as unbreakable as a sailor’s knot:

As the will is conditioned to the quest for the good<sup>63</sup> through the profound commitment to penitence, the good becomes a fixed attribute of the soul, and all the resultant effects, all the benefits seeded in the world by the true penitent, derive from the realm

of good. These are the people with enlightened souls in whom is embodied the ideal light of the higher holiness.<sup>64</sup>

By once again appending plaudits ordinarily reserved for intellectual achievement (“*enlightened* souls”) and spiritual striving (“*light* of higher holiness”) to those who strive for ethical exaltation (“the quest for the good”), Rav Kook emphasizes that we too should view ethical accomplishments as being on par with, if not superior to, intellectual and spiritual achievement.

The multiple literary and conceptual methods through which Rav Kook, like Heschel, links the ethical to the spiritual demonstrates that at the core of their thinking, ethics is not a separate category from spirituality, but rather an indispensable component of it. Indeed, even in Rav Kook’s mystically oriented religious philosophy, ethical propriety is so crucial that *it*, and *not* mysticism, is the basis upon which a religion should be judged: “The test of religion at its highest,” states Ben Zion Bokser, summarizing Rav Kook’s religious philosophy, “was in the passion it inspire to bend life toward ethical and moral perfection”<sup>65</sup>—a locution that evokes one of the more famous sayings of another great twentieth-century ethico-spiritual preacher, Martin Luther King Jr.: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” As if to inscribe this point upon the walls of our hearts, Bokser declares that according to Rav Kook, spiritual and religious “ideals become man’s moral imperatives under whose impulse he is forever seeking to refashion his life and that of the world toward truth, justice, freedom and peace.”<sup>66</sup> It is not enough, according to Rav Kook, for us to hope that the arc of history will bend towards justice; we, through our ethical behavior—our “quest for the good”—have to be the ones who do the bending.

Perhaps the most forceful method imaginable of bending this arc toward justice and peace is to apply the commandment of “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18) to its greatest possible extent by expanding it to its greatest possible scope. This is precisely what Rav Kook does, envisaging a maximization of this ethical maxim (“the greatest principle in the Torah,” according to Rabbi Akivah in the Talmud) from its original parochial interpretation as a commandment which only applies to “those who are like your [religious] ‘neighbors’ in the observance of the 613 commandments (“*achikha b’torah uv’mitzvot*”)”<sup>67</sup> to a universal ethical imperative which obligates us to love all human beings regardless of

whether they share our religion, even regardless of whether they practice any religion. As Rav Kook writes, “[t]he love for people must be alive in heart and soul, a love for *all* people and a love for *all* nations, expressing itself in a desire for their spiritual and material advancement.”<sup>68</sup> Rav Kook applies no religious litmus test to his insistence that love should be spread to “all people” and “all nations”—they need not be religious people nor monotheistic nations; so long as they are *people*—human beings created in God’s image—they should be loved.

In his poetics of universal love, Rav Kook affirms this above-mentioned read in the most radical, potentially subversive of ways, proclaiming that this ethic of love applies to all peoples, even to the most hated nation of all:

The degree of love in the soul of the righteous embraces all creatures, it excludes nothing, and no people or tongue. Even the wicked Amalek’s name is to be erased by Biblical injunction only “from under the heavens” (Exod. 17:14). But through “cleansing” he may be raised to the source of the good, which is above the heavens, and is then included in the higher love. . . . our love for people must be all-inclusive, embracing the wicked as well. . . .<sup>69</sup>

It is hard to overstate how radical Rav Kook’s injunction to love even the wicked is—one would daresay it is the Jewish anti-antinomian response to Jesus’s injunction to love thy enemy (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27). And it is similarly difficult to overemphasize the iconoclasm inherent in Rav Kook’s suggestion that the icon of hatred in the Jewish tradition—the nation of Amalek, the archetype of evil in Jewish tradition—is susceptible to love, a difficult message for many Jews to hear. But this is precisely what Rav Kook suggests—an ethic of love that literally extends to all human beings (and in stark contrast to an earlier stage in Jewish interpretive history where the command of Lev. 19:18 was parochially foreshortened). One feels that in this respect, it is as if Rav Kook is somewhat comparable to Norman Mailer’s Jesus of *The Gospel According to the Son*, knowing that he needs to tell his followers things—such as love thy enemy—that they would rather not hear.<sup>70</sup>

Expatiating upon his radical, all-inclusive ethic of love, Rav Kook writes:

Much effort is needed to broaden the love for people to the proper level, at which it must pervade life to its fullest depth . . . love for

people . . . must embrace every single individual, regardless of differences in views on religion, or differences of race or climate. . . . The narrow-mindedness that leads one to view whatever is outside a particular nation, even what is outside the Jewish people, as ugly and defiling is a phase of the frightful darkness that undermines altogether every effort to reach that state of spiritual development whose dawn is awaited by every sensitive spirit. One must discipline himself to the love of people. . . . It is necessary to recognize the light of the good in the best of the people, for it is through them that the light of God is diffused in the world.<sup>71</sup>

From a literary—and, consequently, a religio-philosophical—perspective, Rav Kook’s repeated use of the admonition “embrace” here (both in this quotation and in the quotation immediately preceding it) is quite significant. “Embrace” is a very strong verb, pregnant with both warmth and force. It is a stronger term than the verb “love,” for one can love—either abstract or tangibly—a multiplicity of people, things, and even concepts, but one only *embraces* a few things; “to embrace” someone, something, or a way of life, connotes a particularly strong attachment. The reiterative use of the word “embrace” suggests that in order to properly fulfill the biblical commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself, it is necessary to not merely love but to go one step further and *embrace* the other; it is almost as if Rav Kook is outlining a salubrious corrective to two millennia of failed, unrealized neighborly love: for far too long, we have failed to properly love our fellow human beings as ourselves—we have myopically confined this ethical maxim to only those who are like us instead of expanding it to every human being, even to those who are not like us “in Torah and Mitzvot”—and we must now ameliorate this deficiency by doubling our efforts to love our neighbors and move from “love” to “embrace.”

Rav Kook’s repeated use of the word “embrace” in his “The Moral Principles” also illuminates the way in which literary craft carries religio-philosophical consequences. In Rav Kook’s writing, his recurrent literary choice of the verb “embrace” results in a recalibrated ethico-religious philosophy wherein “embrace” metamorphoses into a noun: what is commanded now, according to Rav Kook’s religious philosophy (which embraces the concept of continuing revelation), is not merely love, but *embrace*—a globalized embrace of all human beings, and an embrace of the right and the good in any person and in any culture where goodness can be found.<sup>72</sup>



## CONCLUSION

Readers of literature of the spiritual life tend to devote the bulk of their attention to examining how writers addressed certain standard spiritual themes: the oneness of all things (*unio mystica*); receptivity and mindfulness; the importance of gratitude; the benefits of meditative solitude; how to achieve a sense of the holy, how to experience the sacred, and how to commune with infinity within our finitude, and other such issues that are customarily expected when encountering such literature. What can easily be overlooked, though, when studying literature of the spiritual life is a subject which should never be overlooked, neither in literature nor in life: the indispensable place that ethics has in the spiritual life. This article has posited, based upon a comparative reading of various writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Abraham Isaac Kook, that not only does ethics—along with such practices as meditation, prayer, and the pursuit of holiness—hold an important place in the spiritual life of these mystically oriented, ethically valenced writers, but that for Emerson, Heschel, and Kook, ethics and spirituality are so inextricably intertwined to the extent that one cannot be experienced without the other. A reading of the spiritual writings of these writers strongly evinces the unequivocal proposition that ethics is a *sine qua non* for spirituality, and that spirituality is intimately interlaced with, and lends support to, the ethical life. Spirituality, according to these three writers, is not envisioned as a stand-alone end in and of itself, a self-sufficient *summum bonum* of human existence; spirituality, if it is to have any merit, must necessarily lead to ethical behavior. Concomitantly, this article—cutting across cultural boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers—has postulated that in advancing this claim about ethics, Emerson, Heschel, and Kook wrote with a studied lyrical, poetic prose—a poetics of ethics—in order to impress upon their readers the importance, and the beauty, of the ethical life, seeking to show their audiences that beauty and artistry are just as constitutive of the ethical life as they are of the sublime spiritual life—for both “lives,” in effect are really one “life”: the sublimity of the spiritual is unachievable without ascending to the empyrean of the ethical.

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## NOTES

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1. The term “spirituality” is one that has not been defined in a single, unvarying way by scholars of religion. Scholars of religion have interpreted the meaning of the term spirituality in a wide variety of ways. N.b.: “spirituality” must be distinguished from “spiritualism,” which is a phenomenon associated with beliefs in supernatural powers; on spiritualism in America, see, e.g., Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), and Philip Goff and Paul Harvey, eds., *Themes in Religion and American Culture* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 71–98.) Because of the plethora of types of spirituality, and because of the great variance of these types of spirituality, Nancy Ammerman has helpfully suggested that scholars concentrate less upon the non-helpful quest to arrive at an accepted definition of spirituality and more upon social and psychological examinations of the ways in which individuals actually experience spirituality—whatever spirituality may mean for such individuals—in their everyday lives. The “definitional strategy,” Ammerman concludes—the attempt to pin down spirituality into a fixed definition that applies in all times and places and to all peoples—“is of little utility.” Nancy T. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 325n3. On the difficulties of defining spirituality, see *ibid.*, 23–27. On the scholarly literature concerning the multifarious ways in which spirituality (in an American context) has been attempted to be defined, and for a survey of the scholarly literature on spirituality in America, see Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* (4 vols.; Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010), 2139–53, and the many sources cited therein (see, e.g., *ibid.* at 2139: “Spirituality. . . . [i]n common speech . . . usually refers to the idiosyncratic beliefs of those who are said to be . . . not tied to any established denomination or local church. . . .”). Lippy and Williams note that “[s]trictly speaking, *spirituality* is a new word, not in regular use until the mid- to late nineteenth century. Within western Christianity, it usually appeared in a specific theological context, as a technical term for denoting anything nonmaterial or as a particular attribute to God. . . . [b]ut the idea was there long before the word itself . . .” *ibid.*, at 2140. Leigh Schmidt notes that “American ‘spirituality,’ as the term is now broadly configured in the culture, was invented through a gradual disentanglement from these model Protestant practices or, at a minimum, through a significant redefinition of them. Only through some dissociation from those Protestant habits does the term *spirituality* come to be distinguished from religion; only at a step removed from evangelical Christianity does *spirituality* begin to refer to ‘direct mystical experiences’ and ‘an individual’s solitary search’

for “the absolute or the divine.” Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005), 3–4, citing Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering the Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), 10. Schmidt also observes that “in the early Protestant vernacular of personal devotionalism, *spirituality* was usually employed as a theological term in opposition to *materiality*. It pointed, in other words, to the fundamental contrast between the physical and metaphysical worlds, matter and spirit.” *Restless Souls*, 6. Hewing closer to Ammerman’s non-definitional tack is Wade Clark Roof, who has commented upon the inherent vagueness of the term “spiritual”: “In the minds of many, spiritual implies otherworldliness. . . . A spiritual person, it is said, is someone who has escaped the concerns of this life, choosing instead otherworldly or ascetic ideals.” But for others, “spiritual means just the opposite: something very worldly, having to do with relating to the earth and sky and animals and people; and something very bodily, having to do with health, happiness, and feeling good . . .” Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 64.

In recognition of the lack of scholarly consensus regarding the precise meaning of the term spirituality—and with the concomitant awareness of the lack of helpfulness which explicit definitions of spirituality may provide—and while recognizing that spirituality is not a uniform phenomenon that can be easily defined or delimited, the working assumption of this article is that spirituality—while not necessarily a human universal that means the same thing in all places, times, and historical contexts—nonetheless contains certain basic features, all of which Emerson, Heschel, and Kook—writers who lived and wrote in different places, times and historical contexts—each sought in their own lives and that each was seeking to inspire in their readers’ lives. These features include the individualistic pursuit of transcendent experiences; practices designed to promote piety or devotion; emphases upon interiority, introspection, and prayer; views of the cosmos which may be monistic in nature; reflection upon the unity of all things; and the quest for a deeper understanding of the nature of the cosmos (what Stephen Hawking once termed “the mind of God”). (Emerson discusses some of these facets which are constitutive of spirituality in his essay *Nature* [1836].) At the same time, this is not to elide the differences regarding the meaning of spirituality in America—Emerson’s (and, to a debatable degree, the Eastern European émigré Heschel’s) context—and the meaning of spirituality in Europe and British Palestine (Kook’s context). It is to say, though, that these elemental constituents of spirituality noted here were held in common by the three writers upon whom this article focuses.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to adequately address the topic of what spirituality means in America, it should be noted that both Emerson and Heschel were prominent figures within—and important influencers of—American spirituality, a very diverse phenomenon in and of itself. Spirituality does not, and has not, always meant the same thing in America, as scholars of religion have observed. The work of scholars such as Nancy Ammerman have illustrated this fact forcefully and lucidly. Ammerman’s survey, for instance of

ninety-five Americans from across the religious spectrum—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Mormon, Wiccan—also adumbrates the requisite point that spirituality is not coterminous with religion; indeed, for the ninety-five Americans surveyed in her *Sacred Stories*, it was questionable whether in fact they were able to find spirituality within the religious traditions to which they belonged. (That religion in America could all too often be sorely lacking in spirituality—“dull, oppressive, insipid,” as Heschel memorably characterized it on the first page of *God in Search of Man*—was a fact about religious life in twentieth-century America which Heschel bemoaned and strove throughout his life and writings to counteract.)

Emerson’s individualistic, non-institutional religious and spiritual sensibility fits in fairly fluidly with Nancy Ammerman’s depiction of religion in America as a phenomenon that is not confined to houses of worship. So too, to a large extent, does Heschel’s spiritual sensibility; Heschel the ethical activist famously described his participation in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Selma march as prayer (“I felt my legs were praying”). Heschel’s and Emerson’s spiritual and ethical activism can also be said to be characteristic of a particularly American kind of spirituality: “engaged spirituality”; see Gregory C. Stanczak, *Engaged Spirituality: Social Change and American Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006). What is also particularly American about the spirituality of Emerson and Heschel is their liberal progressivism; Leigh Schmidt has documented the close connection between American spirituality and religious liberalism. See Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, xii, 6. (This is not to say that Heschel was a liberal in all respects; his theology is marked by a notable conservatism. It is to say, though, that on matters of politics and public policy, and concerning some matters of Jewish law and policy, Heschel can very well be described as a religious liberal.) Additionally, Emerson’s spirituality was reflective of—as well as a shaper of—certain features of American spirituality which can be said to be uniquely American, such as its congenital optimism, its emphasis upon personal transformation, and in its nonconformist, self-reliant nature; see Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 47. On the ways in which Emerson decisively impacted subsequent conceptions of spirituality in America, see *ibid.* at 256; on the ways in which Heschel influenced the course of spiritual seeking not only amongst American Jews but amongst American spiritual seekers more broadly, see Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 248.

The literature on religion and spirituality in America is considerable; for more on the meaning and historical construction of spirituality in America, see Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* (4 vols.; Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010); Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style*; Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysics: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Lynn Bridgers, *The American Religious Experience: A Concise History* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Gary Laderman and Luis León, eds., *Religion and American Cultures: Tradition, Diversity, and Popular Expression* (4 vols.; Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015); Robert Wuthnow, *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation’s Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jeanne Cortiel, Kornelia Freitag, Christine Gerhardt, and Michael Wala, eds.,

- Religion in the United States* (Heidelberg University Press, 2011); David Haugen and Susan Musser, eds., *Religion in the United States* (New Haven, CT: Greenhaven Press, 2011); and Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
2. Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Minds* (New York: Warner, 2002), 12.
  3. See, e.g., Michael Y. Barilan, "The Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace: Rabbi Kook on the Ethical Treatment of Animals," *History of the Human Sciences* 17, no. 4 (2004): 69–101, and Aaron S. Gross, "Jewish Animal Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, 419–432, at 426. There are also those who are beginning to turn to Rav Kook's thought as a source for contemporary environmental ethics; see, e.g., Lawrence Troster, "From Apologetics to New Spirituality: Trends in Jewish Environmental Theology," *Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life* (2004), at 11–12.
  4. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ch. 72.
  5. While the importance of ethics in the life and thought of Heschel has been well documented, the role of ethics in the thought of Emerson and Kook has been occasionally underappreciated. Certain ultra-Orthodox interpreters of Rav Kook—most prominent among them Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap, a disciple of Kook's and Rosh Yeshiva (Head of Academy) of the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva (a religious Zionist yeshiva in Jerusalem founded by Rav Kook in 1924)—have read Rav Kook in a highly particularist, religious Zionist fashion, downplaying the importance of ethics and of the universal love for all humankind that Rav Kook so eloquently advocated in his writings and in his life. Rav Kook's son Rabbi Tsevi Yehudah Kook, successor to R. Charlap as Rosh Yeshiva of the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva, took a more moderate approach to his father's thought than did R. Charlap; nonetheless, R. Tsevi Yehudah also frequently emphasized the particularist, religious Zionist strands of Rav Kook's thought while underemphasizing his father's ethical universalism. And regarding Emerson, in a somewhat ironic twist, one of the contemporary critics who has been guiltiest in downplaying the importance of ethics in Emerson's thought has been the critic who has done so much to elevate Emerson even further in the eyes of large segments of the literary community—Harold Bloom. Bloom pays homage to Emerson's genius, but claims it is solely a literary, not an ethical, genius; according to Bloom, "Emersonian genius" is "nonmoral" (Bloom, *Genius*, 340), a claim that simply cannot be borne out when one undertakes a perusal of Emerson's writings. Not being able to recognize that the Emerson who is the founder of American literature is also the same Emerson who "saw himself as a spiritual guide" and who "attempted to define the ethical dimension of human experience as the basis of the spiritual life" (Robinson, 3, 20) is to be guilty of the very hobgoblinism of small minds that Emerson himself counseled against. When interpreting Emerson, it is tempting to view Emerson as either a *littérateur* or a spiritual sage while professing that one of these Emersons is not the "real" Emerson; however, a more mature, broad-minded interpretation would be to view both of these aspects of Emerson as integral components of the "real" Emerson. For these and other reasons, few if any scholars have followed Bloom's interpretation of Emerson. For alternate cogent interpretations of Emerson, see Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind of Fire*

- (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), and Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
6. The American literary critic Harold Bloom points to Emerson's address "The American Scholar," delivered at Harvard Divinity School on August 31, 1837, as the American "declaration of literary independence" from the British and European literary tradition. Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Minds* (New York: Warner, 2002), 338. The address had nonliterary purposes as well; as David M. Robinson observes, the address "marked a break in the course of religious thinking in America, pointing to a universal, antisupernatural, and largely secular religion." David M. Robinson, "Introduction," in *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 12. Leigh Schmidt, however, has characterized the address as "infamous." Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, xi.
  7. Kabbalistic motifs such as "shells," light and dark, and *ha'alat nitzotzot* ("the raising of sparks") frequently occur in his writings. Even his more philosophical writings are suffused with this kind of language, and with an overriding sensibility of one in passionate pursuit of a relationship with God, and of a belief—strikingly similar to Emerson's mysticism—in the godliness of all things and of the interconnectedness of the divinity. Fascinatingly, though at first glance one would believe that Heschel and Kook share more affinities by dint of being Jewish, in certain respects Kook is more theologically similar to Emerson: though all three were mystically oriented, Heschel's biblical, personalistic conception of God is a far cry from Kook's kabbalistic, panentheistic conception of God, which is arguably more similar to Emerson's panentheistic, arguably pantheistic ("I behold with awe & delight many illustrations of the one Universal Mind. I see myself imbedded in it. As a plant in the earth so I grow in God. . . . I can even with a mountainous aspiring say, *I am God*"; *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 5:336–37) conception of the divine.
  8. Kook, for example—the most conservative thinker amongst these three—subscribed to a theology of continuous revelation, a highly progressive theological position for Orthodox Jews, and also maintained that a belief in evolution not only did not contradict a belief in the truth of the Bible but was also supported by the text of the Bible itself. See, e.g., Kook, "Fragments of Light: A View as to the Reason for the Commandments," in *Abraham Isaac Kook*, ed., Bokser, 306. See also Kook, *Pinkesei Ha'Ra'ayah*, vol. 4, ed. Z.M. Levin and B. Z. Kahana-Shapira (Jerusalem, 2017), *Pinkas ha-Dapim*, 1:34, 88, writing that "Kabbalah must bond with all the sciences" (translation courtesy of Bezalel Naor). Furthermore, Kook's support for secular Jews and his openness to modernity drew the ire of the conservative rabbinic establishment. See, e.g., *From the Depth of the Well: An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Ariel Evan Mayse (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014), 199–200. Kook—like Heschel—sought to renew Jewish theology through creative new readings and applications of ancient mystical texts; one of Kook's most well-known sayings—a saying whose memorable, terse aphoristic style evokes both Heschel and Emerson—includes the call to "renew the old and sanctify the new" (*HaYashan tit'chadesh, ve'haChadah titkadesh*); *Iggerot ha-Re'ayah* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 1:164, 124 (Hebrew; my translation). Among many of Heschel's doctrinally progressive formulations famously



include the belief that God is not necessarily perfect, complete, and self-sufficient but is actually in “need of man.” Heschel, “Jewish Theology,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 158. And Emerson’s radical free-thinking—a marked departure from the pious, conformist, culture of New England Puritanism and the Calvinist theology which undergirded it—culminated in his open questioning of the divinity of Christ and the historicity of parts of the Bible.

9. With the possible exception of Kook, whose readership even today does not typically extend beyond religious Zionist Jews in Israel and Modern Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora.
10. Emerson was the father of Transcendentalism and American romantic individualism; Kook was the founder of religious Zionism and Orthodox Jewish vegetarianism; and Heschel was the father of American Jewish mystical theology as well as the likely godfather of American neo-Hasidism. Emerson, whom Harold Bloom prefers to refer to not as a “discourse founder” but as a “reconceptualizer” (Bloom, *Genius*, 349), is also the writer referred to more provocatively by Bloom as the figure who “established our authentic [American] religion, which is post-Protestant while pretending otherwise.” *Ibid.*, 337. Kook, like Heschel, was also an innovator within Hasidism, and, like Heschel, can also be described as one of the fathers of Neo-Hasidism; see Bezalel Naor, “The Hasidism of Rav Kook,” *The Lehrhaus*, Dec. 25, 2017, <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-hasidism-of-rav-kook/>.
11. Comparable thinkers to Kook and Heschel include their contemporary Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the influential modern Yeshiva University Talmudist, thinker, and spiritual leader of American Modern Orthodoxy; Mordecai Kaplan, Heschel’s longtime colleague—and occasional sparring partner—at the Jewish Theological Seminary and eventual spiritual leader of Reconstructionist Judaism; and Shim’on Gershon Rosenberg (commonly referred to as “Rav Shagar”), the late-twentieth century Israeli postmodernist Orthodox theologian who, in many ways—as a theologically innovative thinker who utilized traditional rabbinic thought and Jewish mysticism in pursuit of a religious philosophy that was not necessarily orthodox in all respects, and who continued Kook’s legacy of lending mystical and philosophical heft to religious Zionists—was the spiritual and theological heir to Rav Kook. On Rav Shagar, see, e.g., Yair Dreyfuss, “Torah Study for Contemporary Times: Conservatism or Revolution?,” *Tradition* 45 (2012): 31–47; Alan Jotkowitz, “‘And Now the Child Will Ask’: The Post-modern theology of Rav Shagar,” *Tradition* 45 (2012): 49–66. Thinkers who are comparable to Emerson include fellow nineteenth-century Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau; the American spiritualist writer and rhapsodist of nature, John Muir—who, like Emerson, also attempted to fashion a religious sensibility that departed from organized, traditional Christianity; the twentieth-century spiritual and ethical writers Howard Thurman and Thomas Merton (thinkers who also share many affinities with Heschel); and, arguably—on account of his propensity for portraying the sublimity of the ethical and spiritual life through the beauty of his pen—the contemporary Kentucky poet Wendell Berry.

12. The methodology employed by this comparative study is predominantly a literary one: it is an examination of how each of these three prolific, spiritual, influential mystical writers employ literary craft in the service of ethical edification. There are ample reasons, as aforementioned, to engage in a comparative study of Emerson, Heschel, and Kook, and it is the belief of this article that plentiful benefits can be gleaned from such a study—foremost of such benefits being a greater insight into how literary artistry and linguistic creativity can be used to make the prospect of living an ethical life appealing. (Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [Bloomsbury, 2013], regarding how the experience of the literary art-form can create a sense of contemporaneity—of being deeply present—and can elicit the sense that the writer is speaking directly to the reader in a profound and personal way.) This comparative study, and the many similarities between these three thinkers, should not be taken as grounds for arguing that these three thinkers should be compared in all or even other respects. There are limits to a comparison between Emerson, Heschel, and Kook. Their approaches to ethics were quite different; Emerson, who was much closer to what we might term a new-age thinker than either Heschel or Kook, was much more individualistic, romantic, antinomian, and anthropocentric concerning ethics, breaking from Unitarian doctrine and Puritan piety to argue, for instance, in his essay “Circles,” that “no truth is so sublime that it will not be made trivial tomorrow by new thoughts,” and that “the only sin is limitation.” (*The Spiritual Emerson*, Robinson, ed., p. 155.) The approaches of Heschel and Kook to ethics, by contrast, were far more nomian and far more theocentric, profoundly informed (and constrained) by traditional rabbinic morality; one can thus be at pains to compare the anti-institutionalist Emerson, whom the anti-institutionalist Nietzsche cited as the most powerful writer he had ever read, to the profoundly institutionalist Kook and the rather nomian Heschel on matters related to religion and ethics. (Heschel’s approach to ethics has been described by Edward Kaplan as “sacred humanism”—an approach to ethics that “assumes that we are morally autonomous, responsible for our deeds, and needed by God and by all humanity.” Kaplan, *Holiness in Words*, 152.) There are also limits to comparing a thinker (Emerson) whose primary literary influence was Montaigne, and whose philosophy was marked by a form of new age idealism, with thinkers (Heschel and Kook) who were deeply influenced by their Hasidic forebears and who (especially Heschel) roundly rejected philosophic idealism. Furthermore, their theologies, though all mystically oriented, differ in several important respects. Emerson was a dissenting Unitarian, while Heschel and Kook, though both Jewish, differed in several significant theological matters; Kook was an Orthodox trailblazer in terms of his tolerance for atheism—Rav Kook wrote that “the providential pattern of building the world includes a place for atheism and its related notions” (Kook, “The Moral Principles,” in Bokser, ed., *Abraham Isaac Kook*, p. 148)—while Heschel, in somewhat surprising contrast to his typical tolerance, was startlingly unsympathetic to nonbelief, one of his few shortcomings as an ethical thinker. (Shai Held correctly criticizes Heschel for this shortcoming—see Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 125–27 [cf. *ibid.* at 127, citing Arthur Cohen’s critique of Heschel’s “deficient sympathy and compassion for those who are trapped in their unknowing



and disbelief”]; however, while it is fair to find fault with Heschel on this account, at the same time I also believe that Heschel needs to be understood on his own terms. As a theologian whose beliefs were deeply informed by the biblical prophets, Heschel could not be expected to countenance disbelief any more so than Elijah, Elisha, or the Psalmist could have been expected to understand theological doubt; to tolerate disbelief would be to repudiate the fundamental theological assumption of the Judaic prophets which Heschel was seeking to reintroduce and reintegrate within American Jewry.) Kook ascribed to a notion of continuous revelation, while Heschel rejected such a notion. (On Heschel’s rejection of the notion of progressive revelation, see Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, p. 130.) Heschel’s audience was, and still is, primarily American (though a small but significant amount of Heschel’s writings are in Hebrew, the bulk of his books were written in English); Kook’s audience was, and still is, primarily Israeli (though there are scholars such as Dror Bondi who have dedicated themselves to bringing Heschel’s thought to Israel and scholars such as Bezalel Naor who have dedicated themselves to bringing Kook’s thought to English-speaking audiences). The differences between Heschel and Kook, and between Emerson, Heschel, and Kook—some of which are irreconcilable—should not be minimized. However, despite their fundamental differences, the parallels between these three thinkers are nonetheless significant. Thus, this article, which refuses to entirely collapse the distinctions between these three thinkers, limits the comparison between Heschel, Kook, and Emerson to the realm of the literary craft employed by these three mystical thinkers in their ethical and spiritual writings.

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” *The North American Review* 126, no. 262 (1878): 404–20.
14. See, e.g., Peter S. Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 7 (noting Emerson’s “preoccupation with ethics”), 210 (“[i]n all of his published writings, public lectures, and occasional addresses, Emerson insisted on . . . the interconnection of ideas and action, of ethics and politics”), and 110 (“Emerson hoped to take the traditional somberness and bearing of the clergy, the eloquence of the pulpit . . . and create a secular *ministry of ethics*”)(Emphasis mine).
15. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 197: “Emerson had reserved for himself what he defined as the infinitely subtler task of envisioning and expressing the greater glory of a self-cultured and ethical nation of free citizens.”
16. As David M. Robinson writes, Emerson “attempted to define the ethical dimension of human experience as the basis of the spiritual life. . . . *Right action* must therefore be included among Emerson’s spiritual principles as a concept he eventually came to see as the fundamental principle of the spiritual life. . . . The texture of life was utterly and inescapably moral . . . Emerson was declaring that ‘religion’ was in fact only a somewhat superficial means of expressing the more fundamental principle of morals. ‘The progress of religion,’ he wrote in 1870, ‘is steadily to its identity with morals.’” David M. Robinson, “Introduction,” in *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 3 (emphasis in original).
17. *Ibid.*, at 43.

18. *Ibid.*, “Essential Principles of Religion,” at 240.
19. Ethics and morality, needless to say, are distinct terms within the discipline(s) of ethics and philosophy. It is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to explicate this difference; for the purposes of this paper, in which they are occasionally—and perhaps regrettably, from a technical point of view—used interchangeably, they connote an Emersonian conception of “right action” (viz., proper behavior, “good deeds,” *yashrut* [lit., “straightness”: fair treatment of, and concern for, the wellbeing of others], etc.).
20. B.T., *Eruvin* 100b. Cf. Rashi, *ad loc.*
21. Emerson, “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” 404.
22. Emerson, “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” 417. Emerson, in truth, believed that the purpose of religion had *always* been to identify with morality: “The Life of those once omnipotent traditions was really not in legend, but in the moral sentiment” (*ibid.*). In “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” though, he seemed to argue that the pace of this steady identification must be accelerated.
23. Emerson, “Worship,” in *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*, ed. David M. Robinson, 212. Emphasis mine. According to Robinson, in his essay “Worship,” Emerson was striving for “an expression of the moral sentiment that is the basis of human spirituality. He therefore cautions against ‘the divorce between religion and morality’. . . . Theology and worship must ultimately be judged by the standard of right action.”
24. Emerson, “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” 405.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Emerson, “Worship,” in *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*, 213. Emphasis mine.
27. Emerson, “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” 416.
28. A common critique of Heschel—that, in his lack of analytical rigor, he should be regarded as “[m]ore poet than philosopher,” is in fact the very descriptive that Peter S. Field applies to Emerson. Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual*, 7. Neither was Rav Kook—who had a “romantic, lyrical, and poetic soul”—a particularly subtilized “systematic thinker,” notes Lawrence Kaplan. Kaplan, “Ethical Theories of Abraham Isaac Kook and Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 166–87, at 167.
29. Many examples can be cited of Emersonian literary flourishes in Heschel’s writing; perhaps the most prominent example can be glimpsed in one of Heschel’s most memorable phrasings: that the Sabbaths are Judaism’s “great Cathedrals,” the apotheosis of “holiness in time” (Heschel, *The Sabbath* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951], 8, emphasis in original), resonant of Emerson’s similarly paradoxical—and equally memorable—aphorism concerning the “temple in the heart.” *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–1982), 9:323. The similarities between Emerson and Heschel, as this article discusses, extend beyond the literary and stylistic planes and encompass the thematic dimension as well; Heschel’s ethic

of “radical amazement,” for instance, is evocative of Emerson’s admonition “to look at the world with new eyes.” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–1904), 1:75. And, much as Emerson became one of the most prominent public intellectual voices in the anti-slavery movement in antebellum America, Heschel’s ethical activism, and his lifelong belief that mystical creeds must be translated into moral deeds, led him to become one of the most prominent rabbinic leaders to play an active role in the American civil rights movement in the 1960s.

30. See, e.g., Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), viii (discussing Heschel’s lifelong “ambition to write a systematic exposition of Jewish faith, prayer, and ethics”(emphasis mine), 124 (on Heschel’s contributions to the field of ethics), 169, 139 (“Public shaming, for Heschel, violated his reverence for each and every human being. In the United States, he often cited the following tenet of Talmudic ethics [in *Berakhot* 43b]: ‘One should throw oneself into a burning furnace rather than insult another person publicly’”), 17 (what Heschel most admired about his father was his “ethical sensitivity”), 188 (the foundations of Heschel’s religiosity were “the ethical and theological”), 95 (“Heschel absorbs the ethical into the sacred”), 138 (commenting upon “the ethical core of Heschel’s spiritual radicalism”), and 167 (for Heschel, “[t]heology is inseparable from ethics”). Cf. *ibid.* at 57, 261, and 38. Cf. Edward K. Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Poetics of Piety* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 102, 70, 26 (“[a]ll Heschel’s works interpret Jewish mysticism as a sacred ethics”), 27, 1, 118, 18 (alluding to Heschel’s “ethical radicalism”), 87, and 104 (referring to Heschel’s literary efforts to “mobilize a reader’s ethical consciousness”). Cf. Joseph Redfield Palmissano, *Beyond the Walls: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Edith Stein on the Significance of Empathy for Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 24 (remarking upon Heschel’s “distinctive blend of faith and ethical courage”), and Joseph Britton, “Piety and Moral Consciousness: Contributions from the Mystical Realism of Abraham Joshua Heschel,” *Anglican Theological Review* 81, no. 3 (1999): 391. For a brief overview of Heschel’s contribution to Jewish ethics, see Matthew LaGrone, “Ethical Theories of Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane, 152–65, at 168ff. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the role of ethics in Heschel’s life, or even in several of his writings; this paper, instead, confines itself to focusing on the place of ethics in Heschel’s *Man Is Not Alone*.
31. Susannah Heschel, “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Conservative Judaism* 50 (1998): 126–43, at 130, quoting from Arthur Green, “Three Warsaw Mystics,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996): 1–58, at 48.
32. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 119–20.
33. Cf. Heschel’s discussion of the problems of ethical theory in *ibid.*, 184.
34. *Ibid.*, 132.
35. *Ibid.*, 141.

36. Sifra, *Kedoshim* 4:12; Bereshit Rabbah 24:7.
37. I employ gendered theological language here to reflect Heschel's own use of masculine pronouns when writing and talking about God; it should not be taken as a reflection of my own belief as to whether this is appropriate theological language.
38. B.T., *Shabbat* 31a.
39. Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 23. Arthur Green's analysis of Heschel's theology, Held writes, showed that "whereas the kabbalists had focused on the heavenly consequences of ritual performances, Heschel shifts emphasis to the realm of divine concern for humanity. God's need is thus more centered on interpersonal actions like visiting the sick or feeding the hungry than on theurgic unifications of 'The Blessed Holy One and His Shekhinah' through actions like immersing in a ritual bath or blowing the ram's horn on the New Year." *Ibid.*, citing Green's "Abraham Joshua Heschel: Recasting Hasidism for Moderns," *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 1 (2009): 62–79. In Green's words, what Heschel's theology accomplished was that it "subtly turned around the order of priorities [of the kabbalists]. Yes, the *mitzvot* are indeed divine need, he says, but it is in the first case these commandments—the life of goodness and justice—that God needs of us." Green, 75–76, as quoted in Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 240n109.
40. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 144.
41. Psalms 89:2 (עֲזֹלָם קָסָף יִבְגִּינָה).
42. Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 48. Emphasis mine. Cf. *ibid.*, 237n37, remarking upon "the utter centrality of the ethical in Heschel's vision of the theological" (albeit cautioning that "the latter emphatically cannot simply be reduced to the former").
43. Lawrence Kaplan, "Ethical Theories of Abraham Isaac Kook and Joseph B. Soloveitchik," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, 166–187, at 168. As Rav Kook writes (quoted in *ibid.*): "The soul of the Jewish people is absolute justice which, in its realization encompasses all actualized ethical virtue."
44. Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: CT Yale University Press, 2014), 80. Lawrence Kaplan likewise emphasizes Rav Kook's belief in the "intrinsic link between ethics and holiness." Kaplan, "Ethical Theories of Abraham Isaac Kook and Joseph B. Soloveitchik," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, 170.
45. *Ibid.*, 21.
46. Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution*, 128.
47. *Ibid.*, 30.
48. *Ibid.*, 77.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Kook, "Lights of Holiness," in *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Moral Principles, Essays, Letters, and Poems* (Classics of Western Spirituality), trans. Ben Zion Bokser (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 235. Emphasis mine.
51. See, e.g., Kook, "The Moral Principles," in *ibid.*, 135, in which Rav Kook links the quality of compassion—the feeling of being "filled with love for every

- creature”—with “the flow of the light of God” which “shines in everything.” See also *ibid.* at 237, where Rav Kook links “higher holiness” with “love, compassion and tolerance.”
52. *Ibid.* Emphasis mine. See also *ibid.* at 171, where Rav Kook describes the ethical value of honoring the human dignity of all people as an “enlightened conception” (emphasis mine), and *ibid.* at 235, where Rav Kook ascribes a term often associated with intellectual virtues—“illumination” (motifs connected with light—“enlightenment,” “lucid,” “clarity,” “to see,” are commonly used to connote intellectual understanding)—to an ethical trait: “the longing to be good to all.”
  53. Bloom, *Genius*, 340.
  54. *Ibid.*, introduction to Rav Kook’s “The Moral Principles,” 131.
  55. Kook, *Igrot ha-Rayah*, vol. 2 (Hebrew)(Jerusalem, 1984), 153, adjacent to n3a; see also *ibid.* at 186, par. 2. Translation courtesy of R. Bezalel Naor. I am indebted to Rabbi Naor for these references.
  56. Kook, “The Lights of Penitence,” in *Abraham Isaac Kook*, 49.
  57. On repentance in traditional Jewish thought, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Repentance,” specifying that repentance—which, in the absence of the Temple, one must now perform in order to achieve atonement (1:3)—entails “*vidui*” [confession of sins] (1:1), remorse, and a resolve to not commit the sin again (2:1). Maimonides’ most complete explication of repentance comes in *ibid.*, 2:2: “What is repentance? A sinner should abandon his sin and remove it from his thought and resolve in his heart to not commit the sin again. . . . And so too should the sinner regret having sinned . . . to such an extent that the Almighty may testify that this individual will never commit the sin again. . . . And one must confess the sin with one’s lips.” (My translation.) Another medieval work of Jewish ethics, Rabbi Jonah of Gerona’s *Gates of Repentance*, contains a more elaborate specification of the process of repentance. In rabbinic thought, repentance is also believed to be effectuated through prayer, Torah study, charity, and acts of loving-kindness; on repentance in the Talmud and rabbinic thought, see, e.g., *b. Shabbat* 153a, *b. Sukkah* 49, *y. Berakhot* 2:1, and *Leviticus Rabbah* 7:2.
  58. *Ibid.*, 55.
  59. *Ibid.*
  60. *Ibid.*, 56.
  61. *Ibid.*, 88.
  62. *Ibid.*, 55.
  63. I interpret the “quest for the good” as “the quest for ethical excellence”; “good” can be synonymous with ethical behavior in Jewish texts, as in “and you shall do what is right and good in the eyes of God” (Deut. 6:18), which is traditionally interpreted as an ethical (rather than a ritual) imperative. (“The right and the good” often constitutes a merism in biblical poetics.)
  64. Kook, “The Lights of Penitence,” 69–70.
  65. Bokser, “Introduction,” in *Abraham Isaac Kook*, 2.
  66. *Ibid.*
  67. This is a rabbinic reading given by some of the medieval halakhic decisors, such as Maimonides and Rashbam (R. Shmuel ben Meir), to commandments in

- which terms like “*rey’akha*” [your neighbor] and “*akhicha*” [your brother] (e.g., “do not hate your brother in your heart” [Lev. 19:17]) appear.
68. Kook, “The Moral Principles,” in *Abraham Isaac Kook*, 136. Emphasis mine. (Rav Kook’s urging that our love for all peoples should be manifested in a wish for their material—and not just spiritual—wellbeing is resonant of Nachmanides’ interpretation to Lev. 19:18 [stating that the commandment “love thy neighbor as thyself” means that one should wish the same material success for one’s neighbor as one desires for oneself].)
  69. *Ibid.*, 137.
  70. See Mailer, *The Gospel According to the Son* (New York: Random House, 1997), 112–13.
  71. Kook, “The Moral Principles,” in *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence*, 138.
  72. The contemporary (Orthodox) Jewish thinker who appears to have most fervently embraced Rav Kook’s ethico-religious philosophy of universal embrace is Jonathan Sacks, who was written: “this too I know that goodness and virtue are widely distributed throughout humanity. . . . Equally, I value the moral force of many forms of secular humanism. . . . Experience has taught me the truth of the wise words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook:

The narrow-mindedness that leads one to see whatever is outside the bounds of one’s own people . . . as ugly and defiled is a terrible darkness that causes general destruction to the entire edifice of spiritual good, the light of which every refined soul hopes for.

Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 10, quoting from Kook, *Musar Avikha*, 96; English translation in Benjamin Ish Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg (eds.), *The World of Rav Kook’s Thought* (Jerusalem: Avi Chai, 1991), 212. Rabbi Sacks also echoes Rav Kook’s encomium to atheism, writing that “each culture has a contribution to make to the human heritage. Nor do you have to be religious to be good.” *Ibid.* For further reference on the thought of Rav Kook, see, e.g., *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York: NYU Press, 1995); *Essays on the Thought and Philosophy of Rabbi Kook*, ed. Ezra Gellman (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1991); and *The World of Rav Kook’s Thought*, ed. Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg, trans. Shalom Carmy and Bernard Casper (Jerusalem: Avi Chai, 1991).

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